

A young man and woman are walking outdoors, smiling. The woman is on the left, wearing a white t-shirt with red and black stripes, and holding a black clipboard. The man is on the right, wearing a grey tank top and a backpack. They are in front of a brick building with arched windows.

How to write a graduate school admission essay

The graduate school essay will show the admissions committee why you should be admitted to the program and what your long term plans are, following receipt of the degree. Details are important to personalize your graduate admissions essay. It is not difficult to think about writing the graduate admissions essay when you realize that you are writing from a very personal viewpoint. Who would know better what to include in the increasingly-important graduate admissions essay than you?! Before starting to write your graduate admissions essay, you should review why you have chosen to pursue this specific field. Think about why you want to earn a graduate degree. Will you be seeking a promotion? Looking to change careers? An inveterate student who likes to keep learning?

Once you have chosen the school and the degree program to which you will be applying, you should create an outline of ideas to be included in your graduate school essay. Think about describing your reasons for attending graduate school.



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Tips for Writing an Exceptional Graduate School Essay Introduction

The introduction is a very important part of your graduate school essay, as it draws in the reader right off the bat. The first sentence should hook the reader, and not necessarily serve to describe the focus of the essay. Many students make the mistake of over-explaining what the rest of the essay will be about in the introduction, when really this can be developed gradually throughout the essay. Instead, you should get straight to the point, and not waste space with introductory sentences that will be covered in the body of the essay.

In general, make sure that your most compelling experience is brought to the forefront. You want the reader to know what follows is worth the time.

See below for a list of approaches to your graduate school essay introduction.

Dive Right In

Some people will start with a compelling experience but will insist on prefacing that experience with a very generic statement such as: “From the first time I looked through a microscope, I knew that science was my calling.” Often, the reason people will open with such a statement is that they feel compelled to restate the question in some way. This is unnecessary and more than likely to bore your reader right out of the gate. You should be able to demonstrate your reasons without relying on such a bland summary sentence.

If, on the other hand, you are tempted to use the first sentence to explain context, you should respect the reader’s intelligence enough to save that context for later, once you have grabbed the reader’s attention. Consider the following example, taken from *this essay*:

Perhaps the most important influence that has shaped the person I am today is my upbringing in a traditional family-oriented Persian and Zoroastrian culture. My family has been an important source of support in all of the decisions I have made, and Zoroastrianism's three basic tenets—good words, good deeds, and good thoughts—have been my guiding principles in life.

Although the question asks the applicant to describe his influences, he need not restate that line. Moreover, he can delay explaining the context of his upbringing. Review the following restructure, which grabs the reader's attention more immediately and conveys the necessary context in time:

Good words, good deeds, and good thoughts—these are the three basic Zoroastrian tenets that have shaped my guiding principles. Indeed, my upbringing in a traditional Persian and Zoroastrian culture and all the family support that entails have come to define me more than any other influence.

The advice to jump right in also applies to anecdotes. Rather than set the stage for a story with boring exposition, beginning your essay with some interesting action is often an effective way to draw in your reader.

Be Original

Don't shy away from sharing a unique personal quality or experience. As a graduate school applicant, you need to stand out from the crowd, and this is how you'll do it. Obviously, anything unique about yourself needs to fit in with the overall context of your essay, but assuming it does, make sure you talk about it right at the beginning.

State a Problem

By stating a problem, you create instant curiosity because the reader will want to see how you address it. *This applicant* actually opens with a rhetorical question, wasting no time. The remainder of the essay explores the concept of “middleware” and its relevance to the applicant's career.

This applicant, on the other hand, deals with a more urgent social issue that has affected her personally. The remainder of the essay does not purport to solve the problem, but rather to demonstrate her in-depth understanding of it and the level of her commitment to her cause.

Instead of dealing with external issues, you can also discuss personal difficulties and how you have struggled through them. There are many possibilities here, but what unites them is the element of drama, and you should use that to your advantage in creating a strong lead.

Be Offbeat

This type of approach is risky, but because it has the potential to be so effective, it is worth considering. The same warnings apply here that we enumerated for humor in the Tone section. Try to be subtly and creatively clever rather than outrageous.

This applicant begins with a joke about his prospective institution: “You’d think I would have had my fill of Indiana winters. But, here I am, applying to go back, ready to dig my parka out of storage. It’s not like I’ve been gone long enough to forget the cold, either. In some ways, I feel as if that permacloud is still hanging over me.” The introduction goes on to make some jokes about the applicant’s potential concerns. These musings don’t serve much of a substantive purpose except to establish the writer’s familiarity with the school. On the other hand, they do make the reader more comfortable with the writer’s style as he goes on to make more serious points.

A photograph showing a person from the waist down, sitting on a grassy area. They are wearing a light blue denim jacket, dark shorts, and tan sneakers. They are using a silver laptop. To their right, there is a smartphone on a stack of papers.

“ The musings do make the reader more comfortable with the writer’s style as he goes on to make more serious points

Application Essay Help – Conclusions

The conclusion is the second most important part of your essay, after the introduction. Just as the introduction had the primary purpose of drawing the reader in, the conclusion's foremost function should be to leave the reader with a lasting impression. This section will offer guidelines on how to maximize the impact of that impression. These guidelines can be grouped into three categories, each of which encompasses a lesson of what not to do.

01.

Synthesize, Don't Summarize

The chief difference between these two tactics is that the former deals with themes while the latter deals with facts/experiences, though there is some overlap. You do not need to recap the essay paragraph-by-paragraph. You do not need to remind the reader of the experiences you discussed (except as individual experiences might be tied to certain themes you want to synthesize).

You do want to reiterate key themes, but preferably not in a way that merely repeats them. Ideally, the process of synthesizing them will add a fresh perspective. Try to tie themes together and demonstrate how they complement each other. Of course, you should stay away here as always from trite and clichéd generalizations.

If in the process of synthesizing you can invoke your introduction, that will add a strong sense of closure. There are a number of different ways this could be accomplished. You might complete a story you started in the introduction, or you might show how something has changed in your present since the timeframe of the introduction.

02.

Synthesize, Don't Summarize

One way to ensure that your last paragraph has something fresh to say is to tie your ideas to some broader implications, whether about yourself or your field. But don't get carried away: some applicants think they have to make reference to saving the world or derive some grand philosophical truths from their experiences. Stay grounded and focused on your personal details.

03.

Don't Add Entirely New Information, Except to Look Ahead

We have used the word “fresh” several times here, and we're thinking mainly of perspectives and ideas. You should avoid adding entirely new information about your experiences. In shorter essays, you might have to pack details in everywhere, but in general, if it's an important experience, it should come earlier.

That said, speaking of goals in your conclusion is a strong way to end. Some essays will be chiefly about the writers' qualifications and intentions, but they won't touch on specific goals until all of that has been established. The delineation of goals can be like a process of synthesizing, because you are trying to tie your themes together in the context of where you will go next.

You may also want to make reference to the specific schools to which you are applying (some questions will ask why you want to attend). This information can come earlier, but it's not unacceptable to bring it up in the conclusion.

Common Flaws in Graduate School Essays

Knowing what turns off admissions committees in an essay is as important as knowing what they find desirable.

Careless Errors

There is really no excuse for careless errors, and having even one in your application can affect the way you are perceived. You have more than enough time to proofread and have others look over your essay. If an error slips through, your readers may assume that you are careless, disorganized, or not serious enough about your application.

Remember that spell check does not catch all possible errors, and even grammar check is far from perfect. In addition to typographical errors such as repeated words, you have to read the essay carefully to catch mistakes in meaning that might come in the form of a grammatically correct sentence.

Let these humorous but unfortunate examples be a lesson to read your essay carefully for unintended meanings and meaningless sentences:

- It was like getting admitted to an Ivory League school.
- Berkeley has a reputation of breeding nationalists and communists.
- I'd like to attend a college where I can expose myself to many diverse people.
- I was totally free except for the rules.
- In a word, the experience taught me the importance of dedication, friendship, and goals.
- I have an extensive knowledge of the value of intelligence.
- I envy people with a lot of time in their hands.

Vague Generalities

The most egregious generalizations are the ones that have been used so many times that they have become clichés. For example, “I learned the value of hard work.” That statement doesn’t tell us anything insightful or interesting about the writer’s character, because it has been said so many times as to become meaningless.

Generalities come in the same form as clichés, except with different content. They are always superficial and usually unoriginal, but haven’t quite reached the level of predictability that would make them qualify as clichés. Consider this before-and-after set to learn how to evaluate this factor in your writing:

Before:

In the first project I managed, I learned many valuable lessons about the importance of teamwork.

After:

In the first project I managed, I made an effort to incorporate all my colleagues as equal members of a team, soliciting their feedback and deferring to their expertise as needed.

Terms like “valuable lessons” and “teamwork” are vague and do not really convey anything meaningful about the applicant’s experience. In contrast, the revised version explains the team dynamic in more detail, showing specifically how the applicant exercised teamwork principles. The passage should go on to include even more detail, perhaps by naming a particular colleague and discussing the applicant’s interaction with that person.

Sounding contrived is a problem related to overly general writing. Applicants often have preconceived notions about what they should be discussing, and they try to force those points onto the experiences they relate. The best way to counteract this tendency is to start with your experiences and let the insights flow from there. Think about your most meaningful experiences and describe them honestly. Often you will find that you don't need to impose conclusions because the personal qualities you're trying to demonstrate will be inherent in the details. If you decide that clarification is necessary, the transition should still be natural.

Summarizing Your Resume

Perhaps the most common personal statement blunder is to write an expository resume of your background and experience. This is not to say that the schools are not interested in your accomplishments. However, other portions of your application will provide this information, and the reader does not want to read your life story in narrative form. Strive for depth, not breadth. An effective personal statement will focus on one or two specific themes, incidents, or points. Trying to cram too much into your essay will end up in nothing meaningful being conveyed.

"A straight autobiography should be avoided, although interesting and pertinent autobiographical facts should be included. But the statement should be more future-oriented than past-oriented. I don't really want the story of a student's life but rather plans for and a vision of the future."

Graduate English Department, UCLA

Summarizing Your Resume

Don't get on a soapbox and preach to the reader; while expressing your values and opinions is fine, avoid coming across as fanatical or extreme. Avoid mentioning subjects that are potentially controversial; it is impossible for you to know the biases of members of various admissions committees. Religion and politics normally don't belong in these statements, although there may be exceptions (an applicant who has held an important office on campus or in the community would likely want to include this fact). Personal political views usually are not appropriate for personal statements. Any views that might be interpreted as strange or highly unconventional should also be omitted because you want to avoid the possibility of offending any of the individuals in whose hands the fate of your graduate school application rests.

Summarizing Your Resume

Don't use a gimmicky style or format. Your "clever" or "original" idea for style probably isn't, and it may not be appreciated.

"Avoid cuteness; we've had people who have done career statements in the form of a miniplay, for example. You want to sound like a professional."—The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International

Affairs, Princeton University

Long-Windedness

Sometimes the same writer who relies too heavily on generalizations will also provide too many irrelevant details. That's why most essays submitted to EssayEdge are returned with significantly reduced word counts and, conversely, suggestions for additions. The problem is that writers often don't consider what is actually necessary to include, or they repeat points freely.

Example of Irrelevant Detail:

"After a meeting with my adviser, I returned home to think over the matter more carefully. Ultimately, I came to the conclusion that my interests in physical properties and mental life would best be explored in a double major of biology and psychology."

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Example of Redundancy:

"The class taught me a great deal about the value of literature. I learned that literature can both instruct and inspire, and this understanding has changed the way I read every text."

The first sentence is unnecessary because the second sentence makes the same point with more specificity.

In addition to superfluous content, you also have to watch out for wordy writing. Wordiness not only takes up valuable space, but it also can confuse the important ideas you're trying to convey. Short sentences are more forceful because they are direct and to the point.

Before:

“My recognition of the fact that the project was finally over was a deeply satisfying moment that will forever linger in my memory.”

Before:

“Completing the project at last gave me an enduring sense of fulfillment.”

Certain phrases such as “the fact that” are usually unnecessary. Notice how the revised version focuses on active verbs rather than forms of “to be”, adverbs, and adjectives.

Big Words

Using longer, fancier words does not make you sound more intelligent, since anyone can consult a thesaurus. Simpler language is almost always preferable, as it demonstrates your ability to think and express yourself clearly.

Before:

“Although I did a plethora of activities in college, my assiduous efforts enabled me to succeed.”

After:

“Although I juggled many activities in college, I succeeded through persistent work.”

Graduate School Application Essay Tips and Advice

Completing your graduate school application can be overwhelming, especially the essay portion. You need to write so it sounds like there is a human being behind the essay, but you also need to balance that with a formality that shows you are taking the process seriously. There's also the matter of choosing which stories to focus on, and how to present them in a way that conveys your qualifications. It can be a lot to tackle, so heed some application advice from expert editors and consultants at EssayEdge.

Three of our expert editors and one of our professional admissions consultants weigh in on the best way to approach a college or graduate school application essay.

Best Advice

If you could give one piece of advice to college or graduate school applicants, what would it be?

“ If I could give one piece of advice to students who are applying to college or graduate school, I would say to be bold in your application. Schools are really looking for students who know who they are and know where they want to go, so the best thing you can do is really try to convey that on paper.

Ashley (Editor)

If I could give one piece of advice to someone applying to college or grad school, I would say do your research. It's incredibly clear to these institutions if you write an essay knowing nothing about them.

Kai (Editor)

The one piece of advice I would give to applicants is to complete your application with confidence. Write like you know you are going to be accepted.

Jessica (Editor)

Stories to Tell

If you could give one piece of advice to college or graduate school applicants, what would it be?

When you're applying to college, the kind of stories you want to tell show your passion, learning, drive, and growth. Even if you do something that you think is very commonplace like volunteer work or playing a high school sport, there is probably an angle you can take to show your leadership roles, or maybe a personal project that you took initiative on.

As a graduate school applicant, the most important thing is twofold. Number one, you want to show stories and experiences that demonstrate your credentials in your field of choice, and your interest in that field, because you're going to be pursuing it for the rest of your life. The second thing that you want to do is also demonstrate your experiences that show your potential to be a superstar in that field going forward.

Doris (Admissions Consultant)

Common Mistakes

What is the most common mistake you see applicants make?

I would say the most common mistake I see in personal statements is when students choose essays that are too generic. A lot of times, they forget that the topic is the foundation of the essay, and so you really need to choose something to write about that you feel passionately about.

Ashley (Editor)

Some of the most common mistakes that I come across in personal statements are either essays that are essentially a CV translated into text, or an essay that begins with some grand statement, and then completely forgets it and never mentions it again.

Kai (Editor)

I think the biggest mistake that people make with personal statements is that they are too generic. A personal statement is an opportunity for an individual to set themselves apart from a crowd, and make themselves different from other applicants.

Jessica (Editor)

Common Mistakes

How can you make sure you stand out from all the other applicants?

To stand out, use personal stories and experiences to illustrate why you are pursuing your particular academic path. You can also use creative writing techniques to make sure your reader is particularly engaged.

Jessica

Doris: It's really important to figure out your personal brand, because when you think about the hundreds or thousands of people you're going to be up against, many applicants have really perfect credentials. But the ones who really stand out are the ones who figure out what their story is, what their brand is. And if they communicate that through their entire application, that's going to make them stand out from the crowd.

Doris (Admissions Consultant)



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