

Graduate School Application Essays (a.k.a. Statement of Purpose, Personal Essay, Statement of Background and Goals)

Writing a personal essay will not be difficult if you address these rhetorical considerations:

1. Audience and purpose
2. Style
3. Content
 - a. Focus
 - b. Organization
 - c. Development
 - d. Clarity

Audience and Purpose

Your application will be read by a committee of academic professionals whose goal is to choose students for their programs based on written evidence of academic ability, personality, and potential to contribute to a learning community. Your transcripts and other documents will provide the evidence of your academic ability, and a well-written personal essay can provide insight into your background, motivation, attributes, goals, and other characteristics that will allow you to succeed in and augment their program. **Keep in mind that the committee wants to see you as a unique individual who has specific reasons for choosing a particular field of study, applying to their graduate program, and setting professional goals.**

Style

Your essay should reflect your personality in a mid-level style that is authentic and professional, but not "stuffy" or riddled with slang or clichés. You do not have to impress them with your diction, but you should showcase your ability to write clearly and concisely. Your essay should be memorable for its content, not its jargon. You should not exceed the specified length.

Content

a. Focus

Be sure that you understand the expectations of the committee before you begin writing. Graduate schools usually require one of two basic types of essays:

1. General statement (without specific guidelines for content)
2. Focused response to a specific question or questions

b. Organization

Pay attention to the structure of your essay. Your introduction should engage the interest of your readers and indicate the content of the essay. For a general statement, you could choose to tell a "story" in chronological order, or you may state a specific "thesis" that forecasts the main points in your essay. Either way, you should have a definite beginning, middle, and end to your paper, and you should avoid repeating ideas and rambling.

c. Development

Include personal stories, details, thoughts, and illustrations to set yourself above the other candidates. Do not write a long autobiography or a predictable, dry account, but include details and discussion that illustrate your reasons for choosing your field, your short-term and long-term goals, and the particular university and program. **If possible, mention specific aspects of the graduate program that interest you or "fit" your professional goals and abilities.**

d. Clarity

You must take very special care to polishing your document because your essay not only reflects your personality, but also it reflects your writing ability and attention to detail. Write your essay over

a period of days or weeks, so you can return to it periodically with fresh eyes. Read it aloud very slowly to catch grammatical and spelling errors and ask **several other people to review it** and offer advice. **Make certain that your final document is completely free from errors and easy to follow, so your readers will be able to focus on your ideas without being distracted by surface problems.**

Works Consulted

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