



Center for Writing and Speaking

W | NO. 37 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

Writing the Graduate School Application Essay

Writing an essay to accompany an application for graduate school, for professional school (law school or business school), for a Fulbright or Marshall scholarship, or for any one of a number of post-undergraduate programs, is a very different enterprise than writing an essay for admission to college. For one thing, at this level the application essay counts far more in the overall evaluation of your candidacy. For another, the goal here is not to tell stories that reveal your character but rather to account for your intellectual development during college and demonstrate your readiness for graduate study or other advanced work. Graduate schools and programs also use these essays to assess your writing ability and to see how you handle complex issues in your chosen field. Your goal should not be to impress the essay's audience, but to communicate your ideas and plans.

No matter how they phrase their essay questions or what they call the endeavor (application essay, statement of purpose, personal statement, research proposal), universities and scholarship-granting agencies want to analyze your interests, see how you handle complex ideas in a specific discipline or field, and gauge how serious and how thoughtful you are about your future course of study.

Start with the basic essay.

You are probably applying to more than one place, and each essay required will differ in focus and length. Begin with whichever essay question seems most universal. Once you've written that, you can modify it for the other schools or programs.

Determine the essay's purpose.

Read the essay prompt carefully and make notes on what the question seems to demand. If there are several essays to be written, be sure you respond specifically to what each one requires; don't let your answers overlap.

Focus on your current and future interests.

Keep the focus on the courses, projects, and experiences of your undergraduate years (don't tell stories from high school or earlier) and your future plans. The committee wants to hear about your adult interests and experiences.

Analyze the school or program to which you are applying.

Study the school or program to which you are applying. Make sure there are faculty whose work corresponds with your interests. Read the guidelines and advice provided for applicants. If possible, interview someone who went there (many graduate schools offer this service). While your essay should honestly and thoughtfully represent your intellectual experiences and plans, it should also respond to the context. For example, you might emphasize different aspects of your own experience when applying to an American studies program than you would when applying to an English and American literature program, or a modern thought and literature program.

Supplement (don't repeat) the application.

The personal statement or application essay expands on the lists of accomplishments and endeavors that you've listed elsewhere in the application or on your resume or curriculum vitae. The essay provides depth and context to the application, as well as demonstrating your best writing and thinking.

Talk about any teaching, tutoring, or community service you may have done.

Teaching, tutoring, and community service are obviously relevant to graduate study, especially to programs in which graduate students become teaching assistants. The intellectual and interpersonal skills associated with these activities also provide very relevant experience for many other kinds of professions. Use the essay to expand on these experiences and their relevance to your future plans.

(continued on reverse)

AGNES SCOTT



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Writing the Graduate School Application Essay, Continued

Focus on ideas, interests, research experiences, and plans for future research.

Write about concrete ideas and interests in your field and “reveal rather than proclaim” (to quote Steve Guthrie) their significance to you and in a larger context. What ideas, courses, books, subject matter, internships, significant moments, essays and projects, and thoughts of your own shaped you during college and brought you to the decision to apply to this school or program? What particular studies have you engaged in that shaped your thinking about your chosen field? If you have written a senior thesis, conducted research, or worked on some other kind of major project, you should write about the ways in which this experience confirmed and expanded your interest in the field and your desire to carry out further research, teach, etc. What did you discover? Why was it important? What questions are you interested in studying further? What kinds of original thinking have you brought and will you bring to the study of this field? For many fields, a focus on future research plans is the most important topic to cover in this essay. Explain what area(s) you hope to specialize in and why. You don’t have to have a dissertation thesis worked out, but you should have developed pertinent research questions and concrete plans for future study.

Discuss the program to which you are applying and why it’s right for you.

Show how your interests and previous work have prepared you for the particular program you are applying to. If applying to graduate school, in some fields it is a good idea to mention the names of several faculty members at the institution whose work you know and whom you might want to work with. Specific references to the strengths of the program, particular courses, facilities, etc. show that you are focused and know that the school is the right match for your interests. Don’t simply praise the program (they know they’re good!); instead you should make connections to what you have done and plan to do in the field.

Use specific language and provide examples; avoid generalities and clichés.

Vague terms and generalizations will do nothing to set your application apart from all the others. Good writing uses specific terms and provides illustrative examples, taking us deeper into the subject. Avoid grandiose claims. Don’t say you want to save the world through literature or chemistry or by opening young minds to . . .and so on. It may be true, but it’s been said before.

Show your best writing.

The essay and sometimes a writing sample provide the evaluators with opportunities to assess your writing ability. In some cases, good writing is even more important than knowing exactly what you want to do because they realize that plans may change. The first sentence and first paragraph are very important and should be constructed so as to capture and maintain readers’ interest. An opening anecdote that illustrates something important coming up in the essay is often a good way to begin. A concise essay with succinct ideas will be considerably more respected than a rambling one.

Follow the Rules Regarding Length, Font Size, etc. and PROOFREAD!

Consider the committee reading hundreds of applications. They made the rules for a reason! Proofread carefully, and get several other people to help you spot typos and other errors.

Ask an ASC faculty member—or several of us!—to review your essay.

Faculty generally have a lot of experience with these kinds of essays; they can provide helpful suggestions and keep you from making mistakes that might weaken your application. Ask one or two faculty members to help you, particularly someone in the field or close to the field you are pursuing. CWS tutors also have training in reading and critiquing these application essays. You may receive conflicting advice, so listen to what these readers say and use your own good sense to make the final decisions.

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