



Alabama Connection
ALABAMA GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL EXPO

Grad School Tips & Advice
ADMISSION ESSAY

TIPS ON HOW TO WRITE THE GRADUATE SCHOOL ADMISSION ESSAY

As part of the overall application packet, many institutions require a *Statement of Purpose* or *Statement of Professional Goals & Objectives*. This personal statement or letter of intent or essay is a written narrative through which the candidate provides a brief overview of his/her knowledge, experience, skills and credentials and promotes his/her qualifications and potential for success in the program.

The content of the essay may include: Reasons and Motivations, Career Goals and Objectives, Professional Background and Experience, Level of Preparedness, Education and Academics, Coursework, Identification of Interests, Skills and Values, Achievements, Awards, Accomplishments, Distinctions, Projects, Research, Publications, Extracurricular Activities, Memberships, Leadership, Community Involvement, Strengths, Personal Traits, Prospective Contributions to the Field

PURPOSE OF THE ESSAY

Your graduate school application provides the admissions committee with a great deal of information about you that cannot be found elsewhere in your graduate application. The other parts of your graduate school application tell the admissions committee about your grades (i.e., transcript), your academic promise (i.e., GRE scores), and what your professors think of you (i.e., recommendation letters). Despite all of this information, the admissions committee does not learn much about you as an individual. What are your goals? Why are you applying to graduate school?

With so many applicants and so few slots it's critical that graduate admissions committees learn as much as possible about applicants so as to ensure that they choose students who best fit their program and are most likely to succeed and complete a graduate degree. Your admissions essay explains who you are, your goals, and the ways in which you match the graduate program to which you are applying.

CONTENT OF ESSAY

Graduate applications often ask that applicants write in response to specific statements and prompts. Most prompts ask applicants to comment on how their backgrounds have shaped their goals, describe an influential person or experience, or discuss their ultimate career goals. Some graduate programs request that applicants write a more generic autobiographical statement, most often referred to as a personal statement.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

A personal statement is a general statement of your background, preparation, and goals. Many applicants find it challenging to write a personal statement because there is no clear prompt to guide their writing. An effective personal statement conveys how your background and experiences have shaped your career goals, how you are well matched to your chosen career, and provides insight about your character and maturity. No easy feat. If you are asked to write a generic personal statement, pretend that the prompt instead requires you to discuss how your experiences, interests, and abilities have led you to your chosen career.

TARGET YOUR AUDIENCE

Writing an effective graduate admissions essay requires knowing your audience. Consider the graduate program at hand. What specific training does it offer? What is its philosophy? How well do your interests and goals match the program? Discuss the ways in which your background and competencies overlap with the graduate program's requirements and training opportunities. If you're applying to a doctoral program, take a close look at the faculty. What are their research interests? Which labs are most productive? Pay attention to whether faculty take on students or appear to have openings in their labs. Peruse the department page, faculty pages, and lab pages.

WRITING THE ESSAY

By this time in your academic career you have likely written a great many essays for class assignments and exams. Your admissions essay is similar to any other essay you have written. It has an introduction, body, and conclusion. Your admissions essay presents an argument, just as any other essay does. Granted, the argument concerns your capacities for graduate study and the outcome can determine the fate of your application. Regardless, an essay is an essay.

Beginning is the hardest part of writing. I believe this holds true for all types of writing, but especially for drafting graduate admissions essays. Many writers stare at a blank screen and wonder how to begin. If you search for the perfect opening and delay writing until you find just the right angle, phrasing, or metaphor you may never write your graduate admissions essay. Writer's block is common among applicants writing admissions essays. The best way to avoid writer's block is to write something, anything. The trick to beginning your essay is to not start at the beginning. Write the parts that feel natural, such as how your experiences have driven your career choices. You will heavily edit whatever you write so don't worry about how you phrase your ideas. Simply get the ideas out. It is easier to edit than write so your goal as you begin your admissions essay is to simply write as much as you can.

THOROUGH EDITING

Your essay will require editing and proofreading. Once you have a rough draft of your admissions essay, keep in mind that it is a rough draft. Your task is to craft the argument, support your points, and construct an introduction and conclusion that guides readers. Perhaps the best piece of advice I can offer on writing your admissions essay is to solicit feedback from many sources, especially faculty. You may feel that you have made a good case and that your writing is clear, but if a reader cannot follow it, your writing isn't clear. As you write your final draft, check for common errors. Perfect your essay as best you can and once it's submitted congratulate yourself for completing one of the most challenging tasks entailed in applying to graduate school.

COMMON ERRORS

Spelling Errors - Some applicants believe that spelling is not very important. However from a graduate admission committee's perspective there is no excuse for misspelling a word. Admissions committees assume that applicants to graduate school can spell everyday words and, if not, know how to use spell check. Spelling errors are a mark of sloppiness.

Grammar Errors - Considering that grammar is part of the elementary school curriculum, poor grammar can send a graduate application straight to the trash. The misuse of contractions and the apostrophe s are particularly common. Ask a friend to proofread your essay because grammar errors, like spelling errors, signal laziness at best, ignorance at worst.

Misuse of Words - Many words are commonly misused. As an applicant, you're trying to present yourself as intelligent, well educated, and prepared for graduate study. Confusing words like your and you're, for example, will not impress the admissions committee. Learn more about commonly confused words to ensure that your essay does not include silly mistakes. Other often confused words include: loose/lose, affect/effect, lead/led, to/too, they're/there/their.

Informality - Sometimes admissions essays are too informal. For example, essays containing slang may turn off some readers. Others may dislike the use of contractions. Err on the side of formality to ensure that you don't offend the graduate admissions committee.

Sharing too Much - Perhaps the most important error that graduate school applicants can make in preparing their admissions essays is becoming too personal. The essay is not the place to unload frustrations or provide a detailed overview of your childhood, for example. Here's the test of what to include: If you would feel comfortable discussing the topic in a face-to-face interview with a member of the committee, then include it. If you're unsure whether to include something in your essay speak with a faculty member at your school. Better yet, ask him or her to read your essay.

Making Excuses - The admissions essay is a place where you can add a personal touch to your application. It is where you can provide context for your accomplishments. Some students use the essay as a place to explain poor grades. Take care in your decision to discuss your grades. Appropriate excuses to offer include serious illness, deaths, and major life stressors. If you choose to provide an excuse for poor grades keep your explanation succinct. Don't make your admissions essay an explanation. Admissions committees have heard it all. They may empathize with your situation, but ultimately their concern is locating applicants who will excel in their programs. Focus on your strengths rather than explaining your weaknesses.