

# The A+ Graduate Admissions Essay: Writing Your Personal Essay to Get into Graduate School **WITH** Funding.

---

**Karen Kelsky, Ph.D.**

McNair Advisor, UO  
[kelsky@uoregon.edu](mailto:kelsky@uoregon.edu)

## Part One: The Journey of a Graduate School Application

I want to begin by explaining the path of a graduate application.

By understanding this process, you (the applicant) will have a better sense of who is reading your application and what they are looking for.

Graduate admissions are handled by the faculty within a specific department, who each year select an extremely limited number of new graduate students to come pursue graduate training in their department. The admissions is handled by a sub-group of faculty, called the “Admissions Committee,” that usually is headed by the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS), who is one member of the faculty who

is given the job of being responsible for the graduate program for that year. The job of DGS rotates among the faculty, sometimes on an annual basis, sometimes over longer spans of time. The DGS is a regular faculty member, and is responsible for calling the meetings of the Admissions Committee and being in touch with the applicants who are admitted.

**\*\*\*When you have questions about a graduate program, contact the DGS, who will be listed as such on the department website.\*\*\***

Your application will initially go to the department secretary, who will assemble the files until they are complete. The files that are complete by the deadline will then be made available to the DGS and the members of the Admissions Committee.

Each of these members will go to the central office where they are stored and read through the files, making notes as they go. Each member will then come to an initial meeting, where they will share their list of top candidates.

**Those candidates who are listed as A+/definite/top tier by ALL of the admissions committee members will immediately constitute the top list of finalists for admission.**

Those candidates who are listed as A+ by, say, 4 out of 5 of the committee members may also automatically get put into the top list of finalists. If there are still additional open slots after that, then the members of the committee will go around and share any individual top candidates who are not shared across the committee. Committee members may make

passionate arguments for the qualifications of individual applicants based on their special background or area of interest (ie, "this person wants to do sexuality studies and we just launched a new Sexuality Studies concentration in our department, so although she is weak in areas, she's a good fit for this year" for example).

Once the committee has agreed on their top list of contenders, they make the files available to the faculty as a whole. They will particularly focus on matching applicants with potential advisors, to make sure that the potential advisor faculty member actually wants to work with the applicant and agrees that they are a good candidate. The faculty of the department as a whole, or the subfields, will make their recommendations. Then, the Admissions Committee and the

DGS will compile a final list of successful applicants, along with a waiting list.

This final list goes to the Department Head (or will remain with the DGS--different departments have different systems), to be cross-checked with the available funding. Applicants will be lined up with funding where available. The very best applicant files will be forwarded to external fellowship competitions on campus, which may be run by the Graduate College, or individual colleges or programs or centers on campus.

Finally, the DGS and/or the Department Head will contact the applicants and tell them, a) they've been admitted with funding; b) they've been admitted without funding; c) they have been wait listed; d) they've not been admitted.

## Part Two: You Always Want to Be On the A+ List

You always want to be in the first group of applicants: the ones who are ranked A+ by all the members of the admissions committee regardless of their subdiscipline or field of specialization (ie, you are a cultural anthropology applicant but even the primatologist on the committee recognizes the superb quality of your application and your potential).

Faculty members are generally speaking broad minded and ecumenical. They do not narrowly advocate for applicants just because they are clones of themselves or members of the same subdiscipline. Usually, faculty members across a range of subdisciplines will tend to agree-- to a remarkable degree-- on

which applicants are the strongest.

### *How and why do they do that?*

***Because strong applications always contain certain elements.***

\*It goes without saying that you must have the **strongest GPA possible**, particularly the GPA in your major.

\*You must have the **strongest recommendations possible** from the strongest/highest status individuals possible, which means tenure-line faculty (assistant professors, associate professors, or full professors) from your major.

**\*DO NOT EVER USE A LETTER FROM A TA/GTF/GRADUATE STUDENT**, even if they know you well and support you enthusiastically.

Graduate student letters are discounted almost entirely by admissions committees. There are good reasons for this which I will explain in person if you want to know (kelsky@uoregon.edu).

\*You must have the **strongest GRE scores possible**, regardless of how stupid you think the GRE is. Remember that different departments weight the scores differently. A literature department will not put weight on the quantitative score. A math department will give relatively less weight to the verbal score. Just make sure your score is as good as possible in your particular area of weight.

\*And finally, you must have an **A+ PERSONAL ESSAY**. That is what we will talk about now.

## Part Three: The A+ Personal Essay—Getting Ready

One of the frustrating and intimidating things about graduate admissions is that unlike the rest of the expectations of an A+ application, expectations for the essay can be subjective. What may strike one faculty admissions committee member as a brilliant creative meditation on existential truths may strike another as a woey waste of time.

How do you know what rules apply for which departments/disciplines? You educate yourself.

- 1) Do a google search: “best graduate school admissions essays for xxx.” You’ll be surprised what you find! As with all

internet “research,” take the results with a large grain of salt. Don’t assume they’re good. But don’t dismiss them till you’ve gained a broad sense of the different ways that people approach this task.

- 2) Ask any friends or acquaintances who are currently in graduate programs to share their essays with you. Again, don’t assume these are ideal, and never copy, but use them as guideposts on your path to knowledge.
- 3) Ask your professors who are in the field you are targeting to share with you their views of what makes an ideal admissions essay. Ask them what they look for when they are on the

Admissions Committee or asked for their feedback during their departmental admissions season.

- 4) Use references books such as Don Asher’s “Graduate Admissions Essays,” but with caution! Asher has lots of good information and suggestions, but then includes scores of essay samples that are way off base. Never take any sample or example as a model until you’ve had it vetted by other, reliable sources who know you personally.
- 5) Follow the advice below.

## Part Four: The A+ Personal Essay—Organizing and Writing

Finally, the nitty gritty: what I consider the best, most fool-proof, most cross-disciplinarily effective, most universally persuasive form of the graduate admissions essay—the essay that will convince both the feminist and the primatologist, both the postmodernist and the statistician, that you are the top candidate of the year.

Caveat: I spent a career in anthropology and East Asian Literatures. Therefore, my perspective is oriented toward the qualitative social sciences and the humanities. Readers who are going into the hard sciences, professional schools such as law or business, or the world of the MFA or Creative Writing should keep in mind that I am not an expert in those fields, and that my advice may not apply.

## RULE ONE

*The best essay must link your past, your present, and your future in a single cohesive, coherent, concise, and above all LINEAR package.*

You must show that **a)** your goals of study in graduate school **b)** derive in some way from your life experiences from youth to the present, which **c)** in turn are finding expression in your current undergraduate studies, which will **d)** find fruition in a career goal that is plausible, and allow you to achieve **e)** a larger societal contribution that is inspiring.

## RULE TWO

*Organize your essay, mentally, as an HOURGLASS.*

The top of the hourglass (the wide part) opens with a broad statement of goal: “I am applying to the Ph.D. program in xxx in order to pursue graduate training and research in the field of xxx, with a focus on xxx, with the goal of becoming an xxx.” In the next several sentences, become more specific about what your interests are and why (ie, what earlier experiences led you to this interest, including twists and turns in your progress).

At the narrowest point, clearly state where you are in the present—what coursework and research and/or professional experience you are currently pursuing that is building your knowledge and skills for your desired field, and qualifies you to move to the next step.

In the second half of the essay, begin to build outward again, as you articulate the

problems/issues you wish to address in your graduate research, how you hope to address/research them. Mention specific faculty members and areas of focus/concentration within the department BY NAME. Show that you have done your homework about the department!

Include a general timeline of your anticipated progress toward completion of the degree.

Clearly state your larger professional goal (being a professor, social worker, etc).

Finally, in your last 1 or 2 sentences, articulate a larger societal contribution that you hope/plan to make through your career: "I hope that my research on wetlands biology will contribute to the conservation of our vanishing

wetlands ecosystems in the United States and globally," or "I anticipate that my research on language adaptations among Hmong migrants in the U.S. Midwest will assist in the development of more culturally sensitive and effective K-12 curriculum in a time of intensifying diversification of our classrooms."

### **RULE THREE**

*Write freely and then edit over weeks and months.*

Don't censor yourself to start. Put down on paper your goals, your inspirations, what you believe to be your strengths and your challenges, particularly obstacles overcome, and how you see your past, present and future linking together.

### **RULE FOUR**

*Show, Don't Tell.*

Talk is cheap. Anyone can say "I am interested in Japanese culture." And there is no way to prove or disprove that.

Be the applicant who writes, "I took all the courses on Japanese history and society that my undergraduate institution offered, served as president of the campus Japan Club, and am currently enrolled in an independent study with Professor XXX of the Anthropology Department on recent changes in the Japanese family system as a result of Japan's extended recession."

## **RULE FIVE**

### ***Tailor, tailor, tailor!***

Show familiarity with the program to which you're applying. Mention specific programs, fields of focus, concentrations, and faculty members BY NAME.

Adapt your essay to speak to the orientation of each department.

## **RULE SIX**

### ***Zero tolerance for spelling and grammar mistakes.***

Professors notice, even if you don't! They WILL hold it against you! Have the essay read and edited by as many trusted advisors as you can find/twist the arms of.

## **RULE SEVEN**

### ***Take your ego out of it.***

This may seem contradictory, as it is a "personal essay." But, writing is hard, and even harder to do well. Transforming the complexity of your life to a one page essay can be brutally hard. Huge quantities of detail, enormous amounts of what makes you YOU, have to be left out.

After the initial work of getting your thoughts and background and goals on paper, you may not be the best judge of what version of that information actually speaks most effectively to OTHER PEOPLE. Your readers and editors and advisors and professors and TAs, etc. may have a more hard-eyed insight into what "works" and what

doesn't, in the effort to achieve your goals.

Listen to them, and take your ego out of it.

## **RULE EIGHT**

### ***Plan for 1-2 MONTHS of work and continual revisions***

Remember, this two months of grueling work could well yield you 5-10 years of \$30,000+ annual funding (TA stipends, tuition waivers, health insurance, and other benefits...you do the math).

## **Conclusion: DO'S AND DON'TS**

***Here's what faculty and admissions committees and potential advisors DON'T want to see:***

1) An applicant who is vaguely gesturing toward staying in school because they don't have any clear plan of what else to do with their life.

2) An applicant who has a reasonable idea for graduate study but can't articulate how or why it matters to them based on their own life and goals, and whose essay is vague, filled with empty phrases and content-less filler verbiage. (ie, "it has always been important to me to find ways to explore ideas and now that I'm in college I feel that I want to do that more and I hope that graduate school will allow me to have more opportunities to do that"—every word of this is wasted essay space)

3) An applicant who has a reasonable idea for graduate study but has taken no concrete steps to prepare themselves by research experience, or by thoroughly investigating the departments to which they're applying.

4) An applicant who is doctrinaire about some political, social, or intellectual agenda or another and appears to think they have "all the answers" and just need to have their brilliance and/or genius validated by a graduate program.

***Here's what faculty and admissions committees DO want to see:***

1) An applicant who is excited, curious and motivated. This applicant doesn't have all the answers, but does know the kinds of questions to ask.

2) An applicant who can explain their past, present, and future experiences and goals in a LINEAR and LOGICAL way, in which every word and sentence of the essay has meat on its bones.

3) An applicant who demonstrates a coherent life purpose. This purpose spans their personal influences from earlier in life and their academic background, and ties these together in a specific and concrete way with a graduate school field of study and a career path.