

Tips for Writing Graduate School Application Essays

Write like a scholar. Graduate programs are looking for real thinkers—people who get very excited about sometimes extremely esoteric little things. Write about what interests you and don't be afraid to be sophisticated, detailed, and enthusiastic about it.

Don't take "personal" too personally. Don't be fooled by request for a "Personal Essay." Grad school is serious business. Don't think of the essay as about you "as a person." Think of it as your history as an intellectual. This is not your biography; it is the story of your career as a scholar in your field. Choose for your personal essay those events which lead (apparently naturally) to your choice of graduate school and research plan.

What do they get out of it? Remember, no matter how important this step is for you, for the people reading this essay, it's really not about you. They are about to drop a bunch of time, effort, and (hopefully) money on you, so they need to be convinced that you're a good investment. The main thing you want to do with this essay is get them to picture you not only in their graduate program, but out in the world afterwards contributing to their reputation as an institution.

Write a research proposal. This is the best way to demonstrate your potential as a real scholar/researcher beyond the graduate level. Come up with the project you are burning to do during your time in graduate school. Convince them that it is exciting and important.

Talk about how you will accomplish it. Lay it out in steps. Do not worry about whether this is an accurate picture of the future; no one has actually figured out how to predict the future anyway. But a good research proposal shows the kind of interest, savvy, and independent thinking that grad schools look for.

Do not let them picture you as a child. Graduate schools and medical schools get a million essays about how "ever since I was a child, I have wanted..." laced with sentimental details about walking along sandy beaches arm in arm with grandparents, etc. This just gets them picturing you as a 3-year-old, which doesn't help your case. In fact, inasmuch as you can help it, you don't even want them picturing you as an undergraduate. You should even talk about your research here as *your* research—either in collaboration with or under the supervision of your advisor. Emphasize your ideas, your contributions, your independent efforts.

Brag. All this—your ideas, your contributions, your independent efforts—may feel a bit like bragging to you. So brag. We'll make sure you don't overdo it. Go on about all the exciting, scholarly work you have done. It will feel much more like bragging to you than it will to your reader.

Details! Details! Details! Generalizations are boring and all look the same. If you want your essay to stand out, provide lots of interesting details. If you don't know if the details are interesting, ask yourself whether they are interesting to you. Show in your writing why/that they are interesting to you. Then, check whether they are interesting to your test readers. Ask test readers what they'd like to know more about.

Be a nerd. Our culture sometimes encourages being self-deprecating about one's academic accomplishments and to hide what one finds interesting in academic life—often for fear of being tagged a “nerd.” Grad schools love nerds; those are the folks that really have something interesting going on upstairs. Be excited. Talk about what you've accomplished and how interesting and smart it is.

Don't worry about being a nice person. Chances are, you are more than nice enough already. Don't waste your time demonstrating it. Grad schools aren't that worried about how nice you are anyway, and it will probably come through even if you don't try.

Be interesting. Remember, the person reading the essay has to read hundreds. What makes yours stand out? Do you have interesting stories to tell, laced with vivid details? Do you have a hook at the beginning to draw your reader in? Are you interested in what you have to say?

Pick and choose. You will never get your whole life into 500 or even 1000 words. On the other hand, you want to write in real detail. So clearly, you will have to be selective.

Go through a lot of drafts. Writers know that writing is rewriting. Even if you follow all of these tips, it will take you several rounds to separate the wheat from the chaff. Start by writing out a long letter (or email) to a smart friend which includes all of the possibly relevant stories about how you came to pursue this career and what you want to do with it. Then, cut it down to your best examples.

Get others to read for you. Others will help you sort out what's interesting, what's too general, what's too personal, what to expand on in more detail, etc. Ask them. When you ask friends or parents or other folks who may not be in the grad school loop, give them an idea of what you are trying to accomplish. You could even give them this tip sheet.

Proofread. Leave this until later, but don't skip it. What may seem like stupid little things—poor spelling or run-on sentences—can really turn off a reader looking for ways to make his/her pile of work smaller.

Adapted from a piece by Dr. Barri Gold, Assistant Professor, English, August 2002.