

GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL APPLICATION ESSAY GUIDE

Prepared by Career Exploration Services, Iowa State University

Applications to graduate and professional school often require a personal or autobiographical statement. Although your grades and test scores are probably more important criteria for acceptance, your personal statement can influence whether you are considered a valuable candidate for the program.

A strong admissions essay can accomplish many goals. First, you can sell yourself by highlighting your unique qualifications for the academic program. Second, the essay may be used to supplement or expand on information included in the standard application forms for the program. For example, you may have one line to list "Philanthropy chair of sorority", and you may want to describe what that entailed further in the essay. Third, you may want to use the essay to explain special circumstances in your academic history (e.g., an unusually poor performance one quarter) if you believe those experiences may negatively affect your chances for admission. Furthermore, if you gain admission, your essay may be used to assign a faculty advisor with similar interests.

The Purpose of an Admissions Essay

In evaluating your application, admissions faculty are primarily trying to determine three things:

- 1) Could you meet the demands of an increase work (or course) load?
- 2) Will you have sufficient motivation to do the work and complete the degree?
- 3) Will you fit into the program?

Two critical aspects of successfully addressing these three objectives include self-awareness and connecting your skills and needs to the program features.

Self Awareness: This step includes being able to identify your interests, abilities, values, and personality characteristics. An excellent way to indicate your motivation or interest in the topic of study is to give a review of your career development (**e.g., how you discovered your interest in the topic, and what important experiences have inspired your decision to apply to graduate or professional school**). Overall, knowing yourself will enable you to articulate effectively to admissions faculty.

Connecting Your Skills: This step involves researching the program. Your efforts taken to learn about the program before writing will be beneficial to you in a number of ways. You can personalize your essay more effectively if you have understand what the program can offer. Making specific references to the program will demonstrate commitment. The more you know about the program, the more confident you can be that the program fits your goals.

Writing Your Essay

Getting Started

One of the hardest parts of writing admissions essays is getting started. We highly recommend you start with a general outline of your ideas to build upon.

Content

There are seven basic content areas which you might address in your admissions essay:

- 1) The history of your career interests
- 2) Coursework related to the program
- 3) Experiences or research related to the program
- 4) Research or specialization interests
- 5) Future career goals
- 6) Answers to any specific questions the application asks
- 7) Why that particular school or program fits you

Which area, or combination of areas, you decide to address will be based on the guidelines for the essay given by in the application, and the type of information you are trying to convey. It will be to your advantage to appear focused in your interests. Indicate potential research interests or specialization areas where you would focus your studies. Sometimes students are nervous about stating long term career goals. Remember, stating your future interests does not mean committing to that career path. It simply allows the committee to better understand your decisions. In addition, essays should be one to two pages long unless otherwise specified in the application. Make sure to pay attention to the requirement for the number of characters and/or words allowed.

Writing Style

Style is also an important element of your essay. The readers of your essay are not only looking to see **what** you communicate, but also **how** you communicate. You want to compose a well-thought out essay which uses strong, persuasive language, and gives clear, concrete examples.

Editing

Essays should be one to two pages long unless otherwise specified in the application, which means that you will have to write concisely to include important content. The following are some editing tips.

- 1) Circle all prepositions (to, of, in, with, etc...)
- 2) Underline all passive verbs (forms of "to have" or "to be")
- 3) Remove any unessential prepositional phrases
- 4) Rewrite with active verbs. Remember it is OKAY to use "I" in these essays. Try to think of active verbs that will communicate the skills valuable to the program.
- 5) Include proper use of commas to facilitate the reading process.

You may wish to consult Strunk and White's The Elements of Style, for more assistance.

Example:

Before: "It is my goal to continue past the master's degree and earn a doctorate so that I will be qualified to teach literature at a college or university."

After: "I plan to pursue a doctorate so that I may teach literature at a college or university."

Descriptions

Another style issue is how to describe your experiences. The essay should generally not be another listing of how you have kept yourself busy the past four or more years. However, if the application blank for the particular program does not ask for a lot of information, you may need to include more biographical data in the essay.

A well described, concrete incident can be a powerful component of an essay. For example, a student recalled that her admissions officer from college remembered her admissions essay three years later,

because she vividly described conversations she had with people in Sweden. Within or after your description, you can then state what the incident illustrates about your skills or qualities.

Polishing

Finally, your essay should be typed and flawless. Proofread, proofread, proofread. An effective way to proofread for misspellings is to review the essay backwards word by word. Then you can proofread backwards sentence by sentence. Do not rely solely on "spell checkers" -- they cannot catch when "form" should have been "from". It is very helpful to have friends, professors, career services professionals, and/or parents give feedback on your essay. Keep in mind, however, that this is YOUR essay. You will be evaluated on your writing ability, so your essay should reflect your work.

Conclusion Examples

1) Jeff Shapiro, School of Law:

"Finally given the opportunity , I will bring qualities of creativity, persistence, and a developed ability to work with my peers. Hopefully, I will be afforded the opportunity to go into a field, such as my father's, where I too will be able to make a difference."

2) Nancy Gill, Psychology Department:

"I am looking forward to continuing my education and pursuing my academic and professional goals in your graduate program. My self-initiative and motivation will enable me to work independently. My knowledge of the research processes, gained through these experiences, has given me the critical skills necessary to execute research in an effective and efficient manner. With my goals and qualifications, I am confident that I can be very successful in your program."

Additional Resources

For additional essay examples and other tips, you may want to consult *Graduate Admissions Essays* - by Donald Asher or *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School* by Richard J. Stelzer which has a special emphasis on admission to law, business and medical schools.

Additional resources about graduate and professional school programs are available in the Career Exploration Center, Student Services Building. There are career coaches available to help you find the information you need.

Iowa State University also has a [Writing and Media Center](#) to assist with your writing efforts. Their office is located in 1010 Student Services Building.