

UMD ARC/Writing & Reading Center
Graduate School Personal Statements

Applying To More than One School

As painful as that may seem

It's a very good idea. But you must tailor each personal statement to each individual school. Remember that you must be a match for each individual program.... Know what these colleges have to offer, who teaches, and so on, and show that you have done some research for your personal statement; this looks wonderfully expressive.

Reading & Answering The Questions

As simple as this sounds, many applicants fail or forget to answer the questions the Admissions Committee asks, and this omission can have a drastically negative effect on the evaluation of any application. So always read the application questions and use them as the focus of your essay.

Although different universities ask different questions, the goal is basically the same — the Admissions Committee wants to know who you are and why you want to attend their school. To give them this information, though, you must remember to answer the questions in the order the Committee has specified in the application. You want to show yourself as an organized, deliberate thinker.

Why Am I Writing This Essay?

Or...the purpose of Graduate School Admissions Essays

Personal statements are sometimes the most important part of your graduate school application. When a university has so many seats to fill in any program, it's not only going to be your grades, transcripts, GRE scores, or letters of recommendation that narrow down the choices.... It'll also be your essay. Sometimes, your essay can be a more powerful representation of who you are and can give you the upper hand over others who might have better grades, but who could not honestly and strongly express their motivation and commitment to that graduate program.

In so many ways, everything in your application says that you're just a number or statistic. However, your essay says that you're a person, an individual.

And universities want personalities who will commit to their program, who can endure, and who will take full advantage of the opportunity.

Personal statements give "life" to an application that would otherwise be just a collection of cold impersonal facts. Your essay is your chance to give the Admissions Committee a glimpse of you as a person, a glimpse of your personality, life experiences, and future goals. To succeed in this endeavor, you should:

- Show that you are different from other applicants
- Show serious intent to pursue graduate studies
- Show a match between you and the program
- Show that you can think and write clearly

If you notice, the operative here is "show," as in "show, don't tell." In other words, illustrate who you are through your essay; do not dictate and try never to start your essay with "I always wanted to be..." Showing is subtle and far more effective than telling. However, choosing the most effective means to show yourself and

your motivation can be the most challenging endeavor you'll undertake when trying to individualize your essay.

What Do I Write About?

For grad school essays, content is often more important than style. If specific questions are asked, answer them. Anticipate what your readers want to know, give them the information they ask for, and try to create a picture of yourself. Let them know who you are and what makes you tick.

Personal statements are often limited to a page or two, so it's important that you decide on your point and get to it quickly. You won't be able to tell your life story; instead, focus on one or two events or experiences that show who you are, what you want and how you came to that understanding.

You Might Write about Some of the Following:

Career Plans

If appropriate and if you know them, write about your professional goals. A student with clearly defined career plans often comes across as mature and directed. Do not, however, make up career plans just to impress the committee. Your language might give you away, or you might inadvertently show that you are unaware of realistic career options in your field.

Consider these questions:

- Why have you chosen the particular path you are now pursuing?
- What attracts you to this career?
- What do you hope to gain?

Finally, consider the future:

- What are your specific career plans?
- How will your graduate education facilitate those plans?
- What is your five-year goal? Your ten-year goal?
- Will you be pursuing additional education beyond the program you are applying to now?

Historical Overview of Your Career Choice

Ask yourself these questions:

- When did you first become interested in your current career direction? How has that interest evolved?
- When, as exactly as you can say, did you become sure of this career choice? What event or thought precipitated that certitude?

Also include notes on nonacademic experiences:

- What work experiences have led you to believe that you would like to pursue graduate education?
- What experiences from your family life have contributed to this choice?

General Interest Areas

Tell what you expect to accomplish, explain what your goals are, and be as specific and detail-oriented as possible. If you happen to have unique or unusual interests that distinguish you from other candidates, emphasize them. Again –don't make them up.

Academic Objectives

State how you'll be of value to the program by explaining the goals you hope to achieve at the graduate level. Then explain how the school's program will be of value to you.

Academic Background and Field Experience

Write about the academic achievements that have prepared you for graduate study in your field. Emphasize "real world" field experience as well.

Ask yourself,

- How have you prepared yourself to succeed in graduate school?
- What body of relevant knowledge will you take with you?
- What personal attributes or characteristics would make you particularly likely to succeed in your new career?

Motivation

As you already know, graduate school includes a lot of difficult, time-consuming work. The Admissions Committee will not accept someone who does not demonstrate an ability to succeed in this rigorous atmosphere. Show that you're a hard worker who likes challenges.

It is also a good idea to demonstrate that you understand the real challenges and drawbacks to both the course of study and the eventual career you have chosen. So if you have a real understanding of what your life will be like (a) as a graduate student, (b) as a trainee in this new profession, and/or (c) as a skilled practitioner, then you might choose to convey this to the Admissions Committee.

Personal Information

State what has influenced you to pursue graduate study in your field, and how your personality and life experiences make you a uniquely qualified candidate.

Personal Accomplishments

You should give a rich description of only one activity or accomplishment instead of cramming your essay with activities and accomplishments without even hinting at what they meant to you, your motivations for participating in them, what you learned from them, and what emotions they evoked in you during the process.

You can hint that there is more to you than you have room to discuss in this short essay. So tie in your essay with the rest of your application with notes like: "See letters of recommendation," "See résumé," "See bibliography for additional articles," or "See awards."

Your Intellectual Influences

Ask yourself these questions:

- What writers and which particular articles in your field of study have had the greatest influence on the development of your thought? How?
- Who were your favorite professors in college, and why? How has each professor influenced you and, most importantly, influenced your decision to pursue your graduate studies?
- What do you consider to be the most important book, play, article or film you have ever read/seen, and how it has influenced your career choices?
- What is the most important concept you have learned in college?

Research

Make a list of your major research projects and your role in them. If the research is published, look up the exact citation. If it is not published, devise a working title based on what it would have been named had you published it.

Be ready to describe your level of participation in the research. It is also a good idea to state the purpose and spell out the ramifications of that research.

Finally, list what you really learned from the research. Perhaps you gained more knowledge of a concept, a technique, how to work with others, or even an emotion.

Remember, you do not have to answer all these questions or include all these sections in your personal statement. Only include the ones that you think will concisely show the different aspects of what you can and will offer the program you are applying to.

Speaking of First Lines....

And the Law of Compelling Openers

Your opener is probably the most important line in the essay...it's the hook that gets your reader interested. Think about it this way: "If they don't read past the first few lines and with some degree of interest, all the work I've put in the rest of my essay will have been for nothing." So make your opening stand out and grab your reader!

Your purpose here is to set yourself apart from the bulk of applicants. You can turn something unusual about yourself into an interesting way to launch your essay.

Examples:

"I have received my bachelor of arts degree twenty years later than my high school peers..."

"As the natural mother of three children, ages 7-10, all born in my teenage years, I have had to mature at a faster rate than most of my peers. Parenting has been very frustrating at times, but it has also provided me with a strong foundation of values and the ability to organize myself and set priorities -- all skills which will serve me as a Yale MPPM candidate and as a business woman..."

"'Why in the world do you want to go to law school? Heaven knows we don't need any more lawyers.' Having worked for the large, prestigious law firm Bells & Motley since mid-July, it continues to surprise me how frequently I have been asked that particular question..."

The Successful Essay

But there's no one "best recipe"

Different people have different formats or recipes. But...admission committees agree that successful essays:

- answer the questions
- have great opening
- give a glimpse of the applicant's personality
- substantiate the applicant's academic background
- show the applicant's maturity, values, and stamina
- give a sense of the candidate's leadership potential, compassion, teamwork skills, and general likeability
- show that the applicant understands the big graduate school picture (and career)
- are clear and concise
- get to the point quickly; remain focused
- use first person
- use concrete details
- are grammatically impeccable
- are upbeat, positive; if you think you need to mention poor grades, think twice. If you have a good reason for mentioning them (i.e. death in the family), you might want to include this on a separate sheet. Remember that bringing up negatives may hurt more than help.

Avoid

- Factual errors and sloppiness
- Spelling errors, poor English
- Forgetting to answer one of the questions
- Writing what you think the Admissions Committee wants you to say
- Losing sight of your purpose

How Do I Start?

You should start writing at least one month in advance.

Before you begin to write, you should read the application questions carefully, several times. While many application questions may sound similar, be aware of subtle differences. (Each question is there for a specific purpose).

After you understand the essay topic, ask yourself these questions:

- What do my readers want to know?
- What do I want to tell them about myself?
- Why am I a unique candidate?

After you have answered these questions, brainstorm, free-write, or do whatever it takes to get ideas. Worry about organizing these ideas later. You just want to get your ideas on paper and form a first draft.

What to Do Now?

Don't forget that you want to write your personal statement over several times.

After finishing your first draft, you should start working on your second draft. Ask yourself these questions:

- Will my readers get my point?
- Did I answer all the required questions thoroughly and concisely?
- Does the essay represent the real me without being overly revealing?
- Is it focused, compelling, and grammatically perfect?
- Does it show my motivation?
- Is it visually appealing?
- Did I go over the word limit?

With these questions in mind, get feedback from as many people as possible. Make the suggested changes that make sense to you. Then leave your draft and come back to it after a while. Revise it again, and again...until you are sure that this is the best that you or anyone can do.

A Word about Style

Although the content of your essay is more important than the style, especially in the first stages of your drafts, style is more important in the final stages of your drafting and revision process. Your essay should be interesting to read.

Don't be too stuffy or formulaic, but on the other hand, don't be too informal. Too much informality suggests that you are not serious about your goals.

When You're Writing, Keep the Following Additional Style Tips in Mind:

- Avoid jargon and clichés.
- Avoid footnotes and quotes (unless you feel you absolutely want to use a quote by a famous thinker or writer).
- Avoid vague words such as beautiful, wonderful, meaningful, and so on.
- Make your essay visually appealing. Don't type single-space to cram as much as you can on the page. Make your pages as user friendly as possible. Use wide margins and double-spaced text.
- Use plain, simple English, not archaic, complicated words.
- Be as honest and as straightforward as possible.
- Stay positive. Don't bother to explain your flaws unless you have a compelling reason to do so.

Good Luck!

Sample Personal Statement

Ever since I was a child, becoming a researcher who can enrich and better the world with his scientific efforts has always been my ultimate goal. To realize this goal, I hope to be considered for the Civil Engineering Doctoral Program at the University of California at Berkley.

Getting my degree in civil engineering at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth has given me the initial tools to realize my life-long goal. During my undergraduate studies, I sought out every opportunity to learn new techniques and to read about every new discovery, every work of genius, and every success by engineers I could lay my hands on, aiming at developing my academic and research competence.

All through my undergraduate years, I successfully maintained a level of excellence. This step took me closer to realizing my dream of becoming a researcher in the field of soil engineering, which I became extremely fascinated with as an undergraduate.

After graduating with honors and in the top 20 in my class of 180 students, I seized every opportunity to put all the theories and applications I learned in college into action. In order to develop my skills in the work field, I worked at Motawie For Road Construction for over a year. As part of my work, I designed and constructed highways and inner roads in the ancient city of Cairo. I later worked as a junior engineer at Petrojet, the leading petrochemical company in Egypt, designing and supervising the construction of the new administration headquarters, buildings and roads for the company's housing district. Then in 1997, I worked at Style Design Consulting Office where I oversaw on site inspections.

My fascination with the richness in the field of soil engineering has encouraged me to join the graduate Civil Engineering Program with a concentration in soil mechanics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. As a student in the Master's program, I have managed to maintain a GPA of 4.0 and earn the respect of my professors and colleagues. For my thesis project, I am currently performing tests on the characterization of peat, organic and soft soil, a research project funded by the Mass Highway Department. Most of my research involves working with soil samples from the project site of Route 44 to find out and analyze the characteristics of the peat supporting the retaining wall along the route.

I am currently working as a teaching assistant at the University. I assist professors with grading students' work and exams. I also work as a research assistant conducting various lab tests on organic soil and soft clay. Committed to my work, I have always maintained the deadlines the professors have set for me and have managed to perform at peak efficiency, constantly aiming at exceeding their expectations.

Becoming a researcher who can contribute to the available body of knowledge in the field of soil engineering is my primary objective in pursuing my doctorate in civil engineering at the University of California at Berkeley in spring 2004. Joining your highly-esteemed program and working with the guidance of your devoted faculty will give me the necessary tools to develop my research skills and enhance my knowledge in the field of civil engineering.

References

Asher, Donald. Graduate Admissions Essays - What Works, What Doesn't, and Why. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1991.