

Writing the Graduate Admission Essay

GETTING STARTED

The best graduate essays go beyond another retelling of your resume/academic achievements and instead form a personal connection with the first admissions officer that reads your work. One purpose of the admissions essay is to learn more about you on the personal level, the other is to see how well you can read and follow directions.

DO- Avoid using a “formula” or referring to any guide that tells you exactly what content should be included.

DO- Read ALL the directions and answer the essay prompts completely.

DO- Tell some great stories and explain why the story is important and how it makes you an excellent candidate.

DON'T- Get stuck in the rut of simply repeating what could be found on your resume or in other areas of your application

DON'T- Try and sound like everyone else. The truth is your essay should not be like anyone else's. The best essays stand out and demonstrate how unique you are.

DON'T- Get stuck in the mindset that you have to tell EVERYTHING. Rank the things you want to say in order of importance!

SOME GENERAL CONTENT THEMES & HOW TO APPROACH THEM

EXPERIENCE- The questions will be along the lines of “Describe an experience from your past and how this event is important to you”

- Reflect on what kind of experience they are asking for (challenge, dilemma, failure or shaping event)
- Describe the event in extremely vivid terms
- Explain why the event is important to you

AN INFLUENTIAL PERSON, PLACE, OR THING- Prompts of this type are “magnets for clichés” Every year a disproportionate number of applicants focus their essays on Gandhi and Mother Teresa.

- Choose a topic that has been **truly influential** in your life.

AN ISSUE OF IMPORTANCE- This is another prompt that generates predictable, forgettable and cliché answer from applicants. Stay away from world peace, poverty, global warming, and world hunger (unless you have REAL experiences that have made this a passion of yours)

- After choosing your topic show how the issue you selected impacts your life firsthand.

- Write about something you see on a regular basis.

OTHER HOBBIES/INTERESTS- It's a mistake to think your interest must relate to academics, sports or music for it to be suitable material. This is another place you can shine as your unique self.

- Don't write about something covered elsewhere in the application
- Discuss how you will contribute to the school through this activity or hobby.

CREATIVE PROMPTS- These are completely unpredictable and have no "right or wrong" way of approaching them. The purpose is to see how the applicant thinks and learn more about his/her writing style.

- Examples might include, "Write page 264 of your autobiography" or, "How did you get caught? (or not caught) as the case may be.
- It's important to choose a unique topic that is significant to you and write in your own voice.
- Have fun with this one and create something original.

HOW TO CHOOSE STORIES/ANECDOTES FOR YOUR ESSAYS

1. ***Make sure you share something that will let the reader get to know you on a more intimate level.***
2. ***Make sure to connect to something YOU think is important (don't just tell the recruiters what you THINK they want to hear)***
3. ***Create a list of possible stories first.***
4. ***Avoid hyperbole and self glorification (don't forget there is nothing wrong with writing about a struggle, mistake or failure as long as you can show what you learned and how you grew from the experience.)***
5. ***Don't spend time discussing your GPA or academics. Doing so can make you seem superficial/conceited***

GETTING ORGANIZED

Even great writers rely on brainstorming and creating good outlines before beginning an essay. Organizing your thoughts before you begin the process is critically important. When choosing content remember there are no proven stories that will maximize your chances of admission.

Do- Ensure the content you decide to include is intimately connected to you.

Do- Be honest. Don't embellish, don't lie, and don't plagiarize.

Don't- Repeat information covered elsewhere in your application.

Writing the Essay

TIPS

- Have a “security plan” Save multiple copies of your essay in multiple locations (e-mailing it to yourself is a great way to have the most recent draft at your fingertips when needed). Grad schools will not grant extensions because your computer broke, got lost, or was stolen.
- Don’t write your essay the night before it’s due. Give yourself at least a week.
- Set due dates for yourself for when you want to have your first draft, revisions and final product done.
- Create an environment for yourself that is distraction free. Don’t sit at your computer with multiple windows up. Turn off your cell. Turn off the TV.
- If you get writer’s block don’t force it. Take a break and come back to your essay later. (Planning ahead gives you time to do this if needed!)
- Go with the flow. If you are inspired to write your essay draft from start to finish go ahead. If you want to attack separate sections and fit them together later, that’s okay too.
- Keep the length in mind but don’t let it constrain your creativity. You can always edit later.
- Write in your own voice. Don’t try to be someone you’re not. Avoid using big fancy words just because you think they sound big and fancy.
- **Avoid text language**, slang and contractions
- **Don’t get cute!** Stand out because your stories are great and relate to the question asked, not because you’re weird.

The Five Paragraph Structure

(One way of organizing the essay..not the ONLY way!)

Paragraph One- Compelling attention grabbing introduction

Paragraph Two- Story

Paragraph Three- Finish story. Begin connecting it to you.

Paragraph Four- Clearly explain how the story highlights something important about you

Paragraph Five- Wrap up

- Remember it’s the stories you choose not necessarily the organization that will make or break your essay

A Note about Drafts

Drafts help you to see your progression of ideas. Save each draft as a separate document on your computer so you can go back and see your own thought process. This also provides a backup if your work is lost.

The Three C's: Clear, Concise, Compelling

CLEAR

- Has a readily apparent purpose
- Reader should not have to puzzle over your words to interpret your meaning
- Clear writing does not equal simplistic writing. It can be complex in form, use large words, and take twists and turns
- Work in a story or writing device that demonstrates your creativity
- Adding clarity can be quick and easy. As you go back and reread your drafts you will find places you could improve by making your writing more clear

EXAMPLE:

Unclear: *My decision to go after international development studies as my professional career was because of two reasons, one being contributing to society of course and secondly I am always asking why things are the way they are so I research a lot.*

Clear: *I am pursuing international development as a career because of my desire to contribute to society and my penchant for always asking "why" things are the way they are, which has led to my research interests.*

CONCISE

- Concise writing says what it needs to say while using words economically
- Every word should contribute something to your story
- Concise writing does not mean boring writing, it should still be eloquent and expressive

EXAMPLE:

Not concise (too general and too long!): *After completing my general medical education I worked at the outset as a general practitioner for almost twenty years. During that time I obtained internal medicine as a second specialty and then worked as an internist in a hospital ward where I had the privilege and opportunity to see so many rare and unusual cases while working in my native country. My years spent as an internal medicine doctor were surely the most gratifying and rewarding times of my life and medical practice.*

Not Concise (too simplistic, mechanical and passionless): *I started my career in fashion design. The school had the best program in the country. I wanted to have my own firm. This is the goal I am pursuing.*

DON'T- Use clichés. Even if you want to cure cancer or have wanted to be a Dr. since childhood stay away of such commonly used stories for graduate admissions essays. Stories like this make your essay less original and they take up space you could use on content that sets you apart as an applicant.

DO- Minimize the verb “to be” in your writing, It is overused and boring. Stay clear of too many “is” “are” “were” and “was”

EXAMPLE OF “To Be” (too much!)

DON'T WRITE- I was rewarded with many scholarships

DO WRITE- I earned many scholarships

DON'T- Rely on adjectives and adverbs to spice up bland writing

DO- use dynamic nouns and active verbs to get your point across

COMPELLING

- Pretty words need to be describing great ideas or they are just a façade
- Admissions officers know the difference between something with substance and something without substance no matter how well it is written.
- Compelling writing makes an impression on the reader and draws him/her into the story
- Compelling writing will make reading your essay effortless and engaging
- Compelling writing is not overly dramatic or emotional

Tips for Compelling Content

1. Write with a purpose
2. Always ask yourself, “Why am I writing this?”
3. Ask yourself, “Has what I just written add something to my essay beyond length?”
4. Have you written things clearly and concisely?

Tips for Making Your Essay Perfect!!

- Go back and read the prompt you were initially given. Did you answer all parts of the question? Do all of the stories you have written in the essay relate to the questions they asked you to answer?
- Proof read by looking at sections first. Do you need that section? If it doesn't flow, is redundant or doesn't answer the prompts you've been asked you might want to edit/eliminate it.
- Proof read next by looking at each individual word. Spell check will not catch everything. Make sure autospell hasn't kicked in to make a sentence ridiculous!
- Read your essay backwards one sentence at a time.
- Take a break and proof it again.
- Give it to someone else to read over and provide feedback (remember though...no matter what they say this is YOUR essay and needs to cover what YOU think is important)