



## University of Montevallo | Career Development Center

# Grad School Essay Tips

### Admissions Essay

Writing a statement that tells a graduate admissions committee all about you and can potentially make or break your application is stressful. Take a different perspective, however, and you will find that your admissions essay is what ensures that you match up with a graduate program that will offer you the training you need for the career you desire. Let's take a closer look at the graduate admissions essay.

### What is its Purpose?

Your graduate school application provides the admissions committee with a great deal of information about you that cannot be found elsewhere in your graduate application. The other parts of your graduate school application tell the admissions committee about your grades (i.e., transcript), your academic promise (i.e., GRE scores), and what your professors think of you (i.e., recommendation letters). Despite all of this information, the admissions committee does not learn much about you as an individual. What are your goals? Why are you applying to graduate school?

With so many applicants and so few slots it's critical that graduate admissions committees learn as much as possible about applicants so as to ensure that they choose students who best fit their program and are most likely to succeed and complete a graduate degree. Your admissions essay explains who you are, your goals, and the ways in which you match the graduate program to which you are applying.

### What Do I Write About?

Graduate applications often ask that applicants write in response to specific statements and prompts. Most prompts ask applicants to comment on how their backgrounds have shaped their goals, describe an influential person or experience, or discuss their ultimate career goals. Some graduate programs request that applicants write a more generic autobiographical statement, most often referred to as a personal statement.

### What is a Personal Statement?

A personal statement is a general statement of your background, preparation, and goals. Many applicants find it challenging to write a personal statement because there is no clear prompt to guide their writing. An effective personal statement conveys how your background and experiences have shaped your career goals, how you are well matched to your chosen career, and provides insight about your character and maturity. No easy feat. If you are asked to write a generic personal statement, pretend that the prompt instead requires you to discuss how your experiences, interests, and abilities have lead you to your chosen career.

## **Begin Your Admissions Essay by Taking Notes About Yourself**

Before you write your admissions essay you must have an understanding of your goals and how your experiences to date prepare you for pursuing your goals. A self-assessment is critical to gathering the information you need to write a comprehensive essay. You likely will not (and should not) use all of the information that you gather. Evaluate all of the information you gather and determine your priorities. Most of us have many interests, for example. Decide which are most important to you. As you consider your essay, plan to discuss the information that supports your goals and what is most important to you.

## **Take Notes on the Graduate Program**

Writing an effective graduate admissions essay requires knowing your audience. Consider the graduate program at hand. What specific training does it offer? What is its philosophy? How well do your interests and goals match the program? Discuss the ways in which your background and competencies overlap with the graduate program's requirements and training opportunities. If you are applying to a doctoral program, take a close look at the faculty. What are their research interests? Which labs are most productive? Pay attention to whether faculty take on students or appear to have openings in their labs or as part of their research projects. Peruse the department page, faculty pages, and lab pages.

## **Remember That an Admissions Essay is Simply an Essay**

By this time in your academic career you have likely written a great many essays for class assignments and exams. Your admissions essay is similar to any other essay you have written. It has an introduction, body, and conclusion. Your admissions essay presents an argument, just as any other essay does. Granted, the argument concerns your capacities for graduate study and the outcome can determine the fate of your application. Regardless, an essay is an essay.

## **Beginning is the Hardest Part of Writing**

This holds true for all types of writing, but especially for drafting graduate admissions essays. Many writers stare at a blank screen and wonder how to begin. If you search for the perfect opening and delay writing until you find just the right angle, phrasing, or metaphor you may never write your graduate admissions essay. Writer's block is common among applicants writing admissions essays. The best way to avoid writer's block is to write something, anything. Or perhaps you simply jot down main ideas or outline your key points. The trick to beginning your essay is to not start at the beginning. Write the parts that feel natural, such as how your experiences have driven your career choices. You will heavily edit whatever you write so do not worry about how you phrase your ideas. Simply get the ideas out. It is easier to edit than write so your goal as you begin your admissions essay is to simply write as much as you can.

## **Edit, Proof, and Seek Feedback.**

Once you have a rough draft of your admissions essay, keep in mind that it is a rough draft. Your task is to craft the argument, support your points, and construct an introduction and conclusion that guides readers. Perhaps the best piece of advice I can offer on writing your admissions essay is to solicit feedback from many sources, especially faculty. You may feel that you have made a good case and that

your writing is clear, but if a reader cannot follow it, your writing isn't clear. As you write your final draft, check for common errors. Perfect your essay as best you can and once it's submitted congratulate yourself for completing one of the most challenging tasks entailed in applying to graduate school.

## Common Graduate School Admissions Essay Questions

Some graduate school applications do not specify the topic of the admissions essay; they simply request an autobiographical statement. Others provide more firm guidelines on what topics applicants are to compose their personal statements. Most programs ask general questions, like the following:

- **Career Plans:** What are your long-term career goals? Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
- **Motivations/Objectives:** Why did you choose this field of study? Why do you plan to attend graduate school? Explain how graduate school will contribute to your career goals. What do you plan to do with your degree?
- **Academic Interests:** What would you like to study? Describe your academic interests.
- **Institutional Connection:** What attracted you to this program? Which professors in the department would you like to work with?
- **Research Experiences:** Discuss your research experiences. What areas would you like to research?
- **Clinical and Field Experience:** Discuss your clinical and other applied experiences. How have these experiences shaped your career goals?
- **Academic Achievements:** Discuss your academic background and achievements.
- **Personal Experience:** Include relevant autobiographical information. Is there anything in your background that you think would be relevant to your application for admission to graduate school? Describe your life up to now: family, friends, home, school, work, and particularly those experiences most relevant to your field. What is your approach to life?

You will probably find that most of your applications require similar kinds of essays, but this does not mean that you should write a generic essay for all of the programs to which you're applying. Tailor your essay to match the program to which you are applying. Your goal is to show how your interests and abilities match the program and faculty.