

The Basics of Writing your Graduate School Personal Statement

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Grades are just letters. Standardized test scores are just numbers. What do they really tell you about a person, aside from how well they perform in school or on tests? Fortunately, when you're applying to grad school, you've got another opportunity to show admissions committees who you are: THE ESSAY.

Your essay highlights your personality, interests, and accomplishments. Stand out from the crowd by learning how to structure your statement, avoid common errors, and make your piece of writing striking and memorable.

How to Organize Your Graduate School Entrance Essay

Chances are, you learned this in high school, but in case you've spent the last few years of your life knee-deep in math or computer science, here's a refresher. All essays should include the following:

Introduction.

Anywhere from a sentence to a paragraph, the introduction creates context for the reader. Generally speaking, it should provide an overview of the topics you'll be discussing. But, depending upon the style of your essay, it could also serve as a dramatic lead-in, setting the stage for a story you'll be telling.

Body.

The body of a 500-word personal statement, the average requested length on most grad school applications, will likely consist of two to four paragraphs. These paragraphs should be sequenced logically – one should naturally flow from the next – and contain the bulk of the essay's important information. Usually, these



paragraphs will begin with a “topic sentence” summarizing the paragraph’s content, but again that may not apply if your statement has a more narrative style.

Conclusion.

This should be more than one sentence! Take time with your conclusion, using it to summarize your essay from a slightly new angle. Now’s not the time to introduce information, but rather to give a sense of winding down and completing the work.

Common Errors

Homonym mix-up.

Sometimes, words sound the same, but are spelled differently, and mean different things. Writing “there” when you mean “their”, or “your” when you mean “you’re” looks sloppy and may lead to a lower rating on your essay. If homonym recognition is not your strong suit, have a friend, tutor, or professor edit your essay. Remember, these mistakes might not show up on the spelling and grammar check in Microsoft Word; read your essay thoroughly, do not depend on the computer to catch all the mistakes.

Passive voice.

The academic world uses the passive voice often, which is unfortunate because it tricks us into thinking it sounds scholarly. Occasional use of the passive voice is not a problem, but make sure it doesn’t pervade your whole essay.

Hasty exit.

People tend to neglect conclusions. Perusing a lovely, well-written essay only to stumble on an abrupt ending leaves a bad taste in the reader’s mouth. Take some time to craft a thoughtful conclusion revisiting your previous statements in a slightly new way.

Make It Stand Out

Strong verbs.

When people are trying to make their writing more interesting, they tend to default to adjectives. Nothing’s wrong with a few adjectives, but it’s really the verbs that will help your essay pack a punch.

As you write, try not to repeat the same verb throughout your essay. Instead, choose verbs that might be used less frequently, or create vivid images in the reader’s mind. For instance, “writing” can also be “crafting” or “creating”. “Studying” can be “exploring” or “learning”.

Vivid images.

Speaking of the aforementioned “vivid images”, good writing has the effect of creating pictures that remain in the reader’s mind long after the essay has been put away. This can be done using strong and unusual verbs and adjectives. It can also be done via simile and metaphor.

As you might recall from high school English class, a simile is a comparison containing “like” or “as”. For example: “The snow on the tree looks like dandruff on an elderly person’s head”. A metaphor is a figure of speech providing a comparison between two things that appear to be unlike. For example: “When I think of enrolling at your school, my heart becomes an eagle, joyously soaring and dipping through the air.” (NOTE: please don’t actually use either of these examples.)

Remember, the best essays are well-organized, grammatically correct, and intriguing. Using the pointers we listed above will help you create an essay that delights an admissions committee.