

“How to Write Your Grad School Personal Statement” by Jessica Tomer

Essay requirements will vary from school to school, but you’ll likely be asked to write 250-750 words. Common graduate application essay prompts include the following:

- Describe a situation where you overcame adversity, exhibited leadership, learned from failure, or experienced an ethical dilemma
- Why do you need this degree at this juncture in your life?
- What are your short- and long- term career goals?
- What are you most proud of?
- And the big one: Why this school?

Regardless of the prompt you choose, the graduate admission committee should walk away from your application essay **knowing these three things**:

1. What you want to study in grad school
2. Why you want to study it
3. Why their institution is the best place for you

Dedicate a paragraph to each one of those ideas, add an attention grabbing opener and a tidy conclusion, and you’re almost there! The following best practices will take you the rest of the way to a winning grad school application essay.

Personal statement DON'TS

- **Don’t repeat other parts of your application.** Your GPA, test scores, and most activities will be covered sufficiently in your basic application
- **Don’t be negative.** You want the admission committee to see you as an enthusiastic addition to their program, not a grouch.
- **Don’t write about controversial topics.** You don’t want to risk offending the admission committee. And they rarely make for good personal statements anyway.
- **Don’t go for gimmicks.** Even though you want to stand out, a gimmicky essay isn’t the way to do it (for example, submitting a song instead of a personal statement when you’re not even pursuing music).
- **Don’t stuff your essay with smart-sounding words**, and don’t use flowery language either.
- **Don’t lift your personal statement from an existing academic essay** or- worse- from someone else entirely.

Be specific

Stay focused on your academic field and use specific, discrete examples. Was there a clear moment when you knew you had found your calling? Did a particular class assignment,

volunteer experience, or work project solidify your interest? How will grad school help you achieve your goals?

Demonstrate passion

You're trying to give the graduate admission committee a sense of who you are and what you value. Show them your passion for your field of study. Why do you love it? Why do you want to contribute to it? What about it challenges and excites you?

Know your audience

Thoroughly research your potential graduate programs (if you haven't already!) and tailor your essay to each school. Admission counselors want to know *why* you want to enroll in their program, and you can't speak to the merits of their program if you don't know what it's all about!

What specifically attracted you to this school? What would you contribute to the program as a graduate student and eventual alumnus? Take a look at press releases, blog posts, and big events on campus to get to know the school's personality and what it values.

Stand out

In a crowd of candidates who also love this field (presumably), what sets you apart? As you consider possible graduate admission essay topics, look for the story only *you* can tell. Just remember, even some personally meaningful experiences, like the loss of a loved one or a life-changing volunteer experience, don't really stand out in graduate admission- they're too common. So if you're considering a potentially well-trodden topic, try to approach it in a unique way.

Show, don't tell

Whenever possible, use stories to illustrate your interest. You shouldn't fill your personal statement with anecdotes, but you can be straightforward and still infuse some personality into your writing. After all, what's more engaging: "I frequently left the campus CAD lab just as the sun was rising- and long after I had completed my architecture assignments. I got hooked on experimenting with laser cutting and hardly noticed as the hours passed," or "I really love working with Auto CAD"? No contest.

Be relevant

You can talk about special skills, like a foreign language, computer programming, and especially research in your essay. And you can talk about your academic achievements, internships, published work, and even study abroad experiences. They all make great graduate personal statement fodder. But relevancy is also key.

Before stuffing your essay with every accomplishment and experience from your time as an undergrad, make sure you're only highlighting those that pertain to your intended graduate studies and future goals.

Explain any gaps

Your grad school application essay is also an opportunity to explain anything in your academic record that might raise an eyebrow among the admission committee: a semester of poor grades, time off in your schooling, a less-than-perfect GRE score. For example, if you worked part or full time to help fund your undergrad education, that lends some important context to your experience and achievements: your GPA might not be as high as it would have been otherwise, but graduate admission counselors will likely still appreciate your hard work and dedication.

Strike the right tone

By the time you apply to grad school, you'll have four (or more) years of collegiate writing under your belt, and your essay needs to reflect that. Use active language, smooth transitions, and attention-grabbing opening, and a strong conclusion.

And even though your graduate personal statement should be focused on your academic goals, it's not a research paper- and it shouldn't be full of jargon. Your essay's tone will ultimately depend on the prompt you choose, but don't be afraid to infuse it with personality, even humor. People relate to stories, so find one that highlights what you're trying to capture.

Edit- and have others edit too

Set aside time to edit your graduate application essay, checking for style, tone, and clarity as well as grammatical mistakes. Is your writing clear, concise, and well organized? Also revisit the prompt to make doubly sure you've answered it fully and accurately. Then have other people read your essay to check for these things too. Undergrad professors or mentors are great for this, but you can also ask trusted friends. And don't forget about any career, writing, and/or tutoring centers or your undergraduate institution; they may be able to review your essay and application, and their services are often available long after you graduate.

Final tips

For a truly polished graduate essay, remember the little things too, like making sure your files have easily identifiable names. And it might go without saying, but make sure you follow directions! If the essay's word limit is 600, don't send 750.

And last but never least: don't forget that the essay is about *you*! Any examples or experiences you cite should relate back to *you* and why *you* want to go to grad school.