

Graduate School Application Essays

The Writing Center
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Introduction

Admission to graduate school is highly competitive. Writing an essay, or personal statement, is often the most difficult part of the application process. Requirements vary widely, with some programs requesting only one or two paragraphs about why you want to pursue graduate study, and others requiring five or six separate essays in which you are expected to write at length about your motivation for graduate study, your strengths and weaknesses, your greatest achievements, and solutions to hypothetical problems. Business schools are notorious for requiring several time-consuming essays.

This handout is designed to provide some general guidance on how to write a successful essay.

Essay Checklist:

- ❑ Start early enough to allow for several rewritings.
- ❑ Carefully review the instructions and prepare an outline of what you are to include.
- ❑ Write concisely. Demonstrate your ability to think and express ideas clearly.
- ❑ Articulate your motivation and capacity to succeed, and why you and this program are a good match.
- ❑ Use first person (“I”) and active voice. This essay is about you.
- ❑ Be unique and creative while still writing in a scholarly fashion.
- ❑ Keep the length to one or two pages.

Purpose and Audience

Your aim should be a clear, succinct statement showing that you have a definite sense of what you want to do and enthusiasm for the field of study you have chosen. Your essay should reflect your writing abilities; more important, it should reveal the clarity, the focus, and the depth of your knowledge about your chosen field of study.

Before writing anything, stop and consider what your reader might be looking for; the general directions or other parts of the application may indicate this. Additionally, you should research the school, department and faculty to which you are applying. Your audience for this essay will consist of faculty and staff members of the department to which you are applying, and perhaps, members of the university's graduate school department. These readers will often have varying levels of knowledge in your field; therefore, keep your readers in mind when explaining any technical work or research you have done.

Admissions committees may be trying to evaluate a number of things from your statement, including the following things about you:

- Motivation and commitment to a field of study
- Expectations with regard to the program and career opportunities
- Writing ability
- Major areas of interest
- Research and/or work experience
- Educational background
- Immediate and long-term goals
- Reasons for deciding to pursue graduate education in a particular field and at a particular institution
- Maturity
- Personal uniqueness – what you would add to the diversity of the entering class

Content and Format

An essay or personal statement for an application should be essentially a statement of your ideas and goals. Usually it includes a certain amount of personal history, but, unless an institution specifically requests autobiographical information, you do not have to supply any. Even when the requirement is a “personal statement,” the possibilities are almost unlimited. There is no set formula to follow, and, if you do write an autobiographical piece, it does not have to be arranged chronologically. The following areas are typically addressed in a graduate school essay, but pay attention to the specific content requested by your school.

Background & Abilities

- ❑ Correlate your personal information with the degree program you wish to enter.
- ❑ Highlight your unique skills, abilities and character traits, focusing on those that correlate with success in graduate school.
- ❑ Show a logical transition from your experience in school/work to graduate school. **How has that experience cultivated your interest in this degree program?**

- ❑ Feature your relevant experience. Balance content between academic and work-related experience.

Goals & Motivation

- ❑ Discuss your motivation for pursuing graduate education. **Demonstrate how the degree program can help you achieve the goals you have set for yourself.**
- ❑ Relate your qualifications, experiences and skills to your goals and to your school's resources.
- ❑ **Ensure that your goals are a logical extension of your qualifications, experiences and abilities.**
- ❑ **Spell out your short- and long-term goals, including proposed areas of research and professional interests.**
- ❑ Answer the question, **"Why this school/program and why now?"**

In every cases, make sure that you:

- ❑ Convey that you know what you want to do and why. Sound enthusiastic about it.
- ❑ Be concise. Choose what's most important rather than trying to mention everything.
- ❑ Don't ramble on or be self-indulgent in your presentation. Avoid redundancies.
- ❑ Avoid unnecessarily large words, trite expressions and cuteness.

Essays should be typed. Attach pages to your application if the space provided is insufficient; however, **limit your essay to 2 pages maximum**. Depth is more important than breadth; do not try to cover everything. Neatness, spelling, and grammar are also important. Be sure you have someone read it over your draft, and use the Writing Center at any stage of the process.

Dealing with Problems Areas in Your Academic Record

If there is information in your application that might reflect badly on you, such as poor grades or low admission test scores, **it is better not to deal with it in your essay unless you are asked to**. Keep your essay positive. However, you will need to explain anything that could be construed as negative in your application because failing to do so may eliminate you from consideration. The best way to do this is on a separate sheet entitled "Addendum," which you attach to the application, or in a cover letter that you enclose.

In either form, your explanation of these shortcomings should be short and to the point, avoiding long, tedious excuses. In addition to supplying your own explanation, you may find it appropriate to ask one or more of your recommenders to address the issue in their recommendation letter. Ask them to do this only if they are already familiar with your problem and could talk about it from a positive perspective.

Process

There are two main approaches to organizing an essay.

- You can outline the points you want to cover and then expand on them
- OR
- You can put your ideas down on paper as they come to you, going over them, eliminating certain sentences, and moving others around until you achieve a logical sequence.

Making an outline will probably lead to a well-organized essay, whereas writing spontaneously may yield a more inspired piece of writing. Use the approach you feel most comfortable with.

Whichever approach you use, you will want someone to critique your essay. Your adviser and those who write your letters of recommendation may be very helpful to you in this regard. If they are in the field you plan to pursue, they will be able to tell you what things to stress and what things to keep brief.

Do not be surprised if you get differing opinions on the content of your essay. These diverse reactions are important, as your essay will most likely be read by more than one person. However, in the end, only you can decide on the best way of presenting yourself.

Sample Application Essay 1

As a senior biomedical engineering student at RPI, I am receiving a particularly well-rounded education in engineering, complemented by studies in the sciences and humanities. During my sophomore year, I became interested in dentistry and began to select courses that would prepare me for dental school. While this meant additional work, I improved my study skills, and I have earned a grade point average of 3.4 over the last three years. Because of this rigorous course load, I will be graduating this August instead of last May. I had planned on applying to dental school this fall for the 2002-03 entering class, but after receiving your letter earlier this month and subsequently speaking with the admissions office, I found that it was still possible to apply for the September 2001 entering class.

My interest in the health care field began while I was in high school. I was first introduced to many different aspects of the medical field as a member of the Medical Explorers. My further research experience in college has inspired me to enter the dental profession.

My background in biomedical engineering has introduced me to some of the practical applications of biomaterials in dentistry. Dentistry is a challenging field that would enable me to provide health care to many people. Oral health is a crucial part of well-being, and I believe that I can make a significant contribution to dental medicine. Though I anticipate that much of my time as a professional will be spent providing clinical care, I am determined to continue with researching new techniques for improved treatment.

My career goal is to specialize in the area of oral surgery. I am encouraged in this aspiration when I consider the achievements of the 2000 SDOS graduating class, where both the number and percentage of students admitted to post-graduate residency programs were higher than those for any other dental school in the country. Another thing that appeals to me about SDOS is the favorable ratio of staff to students, which undoubtedly enhances both individual instruction and the development of close relationships between students and instructors.

This summer, at RPI, I will be assisting Dr. Joan Smith, DDS, and Dr. Robert Adams, PhD, in determining the effect of magnesium on the crystal development of dental enamel in newborn rats. The rationale for this research is that magnesium is closely associated with acid solubility and, thus, potentially with the tooth-decay process. As a result of this research, I am already co-author of a poster presentation entitled "The Detection of Magnesium According to Developmental Age," which was shown at the March 2000 meeting of the International Association of Dental Research. By the end of the summer, I should be co-author of at least two journal publications.

I would be pleased to join the distinguished class enrolling at SDOS in September 2001. Overall, I feel that SDOS can help me achieve my goals by preparing me to fulfill my obligation to myself, to society, and to the dental profession.

Sample Application Essay 2

As the science of theoretical chemistry has matured, its focus has shifted from analytically solvable problems, such as the atomic structure of hydrogen, to more complex problems for which analytical solutions are difficult or impossible to specify. Important questions about the behavior of condensed phases of matter, the electronic structure of heavy atoms and the in vivo conformation of biological macromolecules fall into this class. The powerful, highly parallel supercomputers that have evolved from recent advances in computing technology are ideally suited to the mathematical modeling of these complex chemical phenomena. Simulations in which the trajectories of a large number of interacting bodies must be computed simultaneously, such as statistical-mechanical Monte Carlo studies or molecular dynamics simulations, are particularly appropriate for implementation on parallel machines. I plan to devote my graduate and postgraduate work to the theoretical study and computational modeling of these many-body systems.

In preparation for this work, I have developed a strong background in mathematics and computer science in addition to my coursework in chemistry. Given the current demand for increased computing capacity, this background should prove beneficial. For example, while recent advances in computer hardware alone promise potential tenfold increases in speed, truly significant jumps in computing power (speedups of, say, a thousand-fold) will require changes in currently available programming environments and the reformulation of popular simulation algorithms. Furthermore, until highly parallel machines become widely available, even modest increases in capacity will depend in part upon the innovative use of existing hardware through the continued modification of available software and the development of new algorithms. My elective work in computer science and mathematics should prove useful for both the revision of existing programs and the eventual development of new programs and languages specifically designed for the parallel architecture of tomorrow's supercomputers.

After completing my doctoral work, I plan to seek employment as a university professor. I believe the rewards of such a position far outweigh the greater monetary compensation available in industry. For example, academic scientists are generally allowed a greater degree of freedom in their choice of research areas. They also benefit from exposure to co-workers who have a broad range of experiences. Finally, the satisfaction I have derived from my undergraduate tutoring and consulting experience has convinced me that I would enjoy a career in teaching.