



# Selling Yourself to a Graduate School: The Application

Writing for admission to a graduate school is likely the hardest writing assignment you will ever receive. How much is enough to say about yourself? How much is too much? What makes it boasting, and what makes it good? A good application essay can play a major role in your admission, especially if your grades and test scores are on the edge of the program's requirements.

## What do Graduate Schools Like?

Graduate schools typically like organized, clear-thinking students who can express themselves well. If your essay can show these qualities, then you're already meeting the demand.

## What to Write (Diagnose the Question):

Diagnosing the question should be your first step. Each school will be looking for something a little different from its applicants, and *the questions they ask are designed to pull that information from you*. In response to these types of questions, you should pay careful attention to the language.

A prompt like, "Choose one incident from your life experiences that crystallizes why you want to become a doctor" is *not* asking you for your whole life story. Instead, it wants one story that sums up your dreams of a career in medicine. *The admissions staff at the school is looking for your ability to pick a specific example and focus on it* – they will then broaden the experience you've provided to predict your future as a doctor.

However, a prompt like this one wants to see how you organize and arrange a lot of information: "Explain how your life experiences have led you to apply for law school." While you'll want to avoid saying things like "when I was 3," answering a prompt like this means that *you must cover a lot of information in a small space*. You'll need to use a lot of sweeping statements like "my ambitions didn't change throughout high school and serving as the president of the Student Council sharpened my desire to present viewpoints and debate key ideas."

Even still, some prompts are extremely general. For example, Winthrop's Graduate School asks you to "Write a brief statement of your personal and professional objectives. Be sure to include information that will be helpful in the evaluation of your application credentials." This is asking you to talk about your goals – not just for getting into graduate school but for your life beyond – but also, it's asking you to explain anything unusual or unexpected in your transcript (like that D in Educational Psychology).

## What Next? Revise, Revise, Revise

Once you figure out what the prompt is asking you, don't start writing. This isn't like the essays you write the day before they're due. The potential of your future is at stake, so you'll want to take time outlining what you want to talk about. Concrete details are important; showing is more persuasive than telling. What you write will be the only thing the committee members know about you other than your scores, so make it count.

After you've gotten your thoughts together, it's time to draft a working prototype of your essay.

Once you have it drafted, you should probably spend two-three times longer revising it. It's important to be totally honest in your essay. Don't make false claims about yourself; however, you should focus on the good things. For example, if your first year in college was a disaster, don't dwell on it. You can say "My work suffered in my first year because I had some difficulties adapting to life away from home; however, my academic work has improved every semester, and I am now on the Dean's List." This plays to your strengths, but it also answers questions an application committee will have about that first year.

Talk honestly about your achievements but with some humility: "I was honored to receive the SC Accounting Association Scholarship" shows the committee how good you are, but also that you are modest about your skills. Writing something like "I won every award offered by the College of Business, much to the dismay of my classmates" tells the committee that you are egocentric.

Use language that comes naturally to you; this is not the place to use pretentious language. Phrases like "the significant factors and circumstances impacting my long-range developmental growth" suggests you are trying too hard. *Honesty, clarity, and specific examples will strengthen your admission essay.*

### **Lastly, Edit**

It is very important to know the difference between revising and editing. Revising focuses on content; editing focuses on organization, grammar, concision, coherence, etc.

Essentially, your essay represents to the admissions committee the quality of work that you will do as a student in that school. Get a trusted friend, teacher, or a tutor in the Writing Center to look over the essay and make suggestions. The essay creates that very important first impression. If you spell "financial" as "finanical," it suggests carelessness. You want to create the impression of someone who can express her- or himself in a clear, straightforward, organized way—someone with both intelligence and self-discipline. A few words can go a long way to convey that impression, so choose them carefully!

If you have any questions, schedule an appointment with the Writing Center! We're always happy to help!