

Graduate School Personal Essay Pointers*

(Always remember that you can get invaluable insight from talking to people in the program to which you're applying!)

THE BIG PICTURE

- ☞ **Purpose** of essay: explain personal, educational, and professional history (through narrative, example, and analysis)
- ☞ **Goal:** demonstrate your ability to make connections between experience, education, and the program you have chosen; display your individual qualification/experiences by discussing the people and events that shaped you
- ☞ Detail, specificity, and concrete examples are crucial – you want to produce an essay that **ONLY** you could write. Avoid falling into cliché – you will sound exactly like hundreds of other applicants.
- ☞ Communication skills are important for field – each essay you submit can provide evidence you have those skills.

STURCTURAL SUGGESTIONS

☞ LEAD, THESIS, BODY, CONCLUSION

- ☞ The lead can be an attention-grabbing story, quote, or question. **WARNING:** this gets cheesy very easily, so use with caution.
 - ☞ The thesis is the main idea that unites your essay and gives it a point. You can imagine it as “I want to go to graduate school in _____ because _____ and I am a good candidate for it because _____” This is a pretty necessary component. Organizing your essay around a theme keeps you from just listing accomplishments.
 - ☞ The body is where you back up the thesis with lots of concrete, specific detail. It's the section that makes this essay mostly uniquely yours. Avoid including information that doesn't relate to your thesis (this may mean revising the thesis as well as cutting out information). Use your own experiences to **SHOW** your commitment to the field and your preparedness rather than just saying you have it.
 - ☞ A conclusion that ties back into the opening of the essay can help create a more polished feel. Don't go overboard, but avoid ending with “and that's all, folks.”
- ☞ Don't forget transitions to help move your reader through the essay!
 - ☞ Make the most of the space you have; write concisely.
 - ☞ Less is more; don't just list everything you can.

PROCESS TIPS

- ☞ Start by brainstorming as many ideas as you can and see which excites you most. That is the one you can really sell. Questions to play with:
 - ✓ What experiences and/or educational opportunities have made you want to pursue this degree?
 - ✓ When did you first become interested in this field? How have you pursued it so far (education, volunteer work, professional experience)?
 - ✓ What most appeals to you about this program (the field in general or a specific school)? What makes you and your interests a good fit?
 - ✓ What do you plan to do with the education you receive?

* The information on these pages is gratefully compiled from the University of Wisconsin Writing Center Web Site and Accepted.com

- ✓ What do you think is the most interesting or notable thing about you? How might it relate to your chosen field?
- ✓ Describe one or more shaping experiences in detail. What happened? What did you learn from the experience – about medicine or about yourself?
- ☞ Take the brainstormed list and weed/organize to begin to figure out the order of your paper. Which items overlap? Do any themes emerge you could use to unify them? Try grouping them – what do they seem to illustrate about you?
- ☞ Draft, revise, revise, revise. Seriously, most tips recommend three full scale revisions beyond proofreading, so you can hone details, weed out tangents, and sharpen your point. Don't be afraid to start over if it just isn't working. Each assertion you make about yourself should have an example or illustration to back it up – that will keep it specific to you.
- ☞ In between revision stages, have someone else (me, other students, other faculty, **especially those in the field you are pursuing**) read your essay and give you feedback. Try to get both objective and subjective feedback.
- ☞ Be willing to leave your introduction till last. Sometimes you need to figure out all of the ideas in your essay before you can effectively introduce them. Also, while catchy intros are nice, sometimes a straightforward one is most effective. The most important thing is that it set the tone and direction for the rest of the essay.
- ☞ Proofread as though your life depends on it. Try reading your essay into a tape recorder to hear mistakes you don't see, or read it sentence by sentence backwards. Don't trust the spellchecker alone.

WORDS TO THE WISE

- ☞ Though this is an essay about you, it is not an autobiography. Avoid beginning with “I was born in . . .” or “My parents came from . . .” unless it is relevant to the point you want to make.
- ☞ Many schools will ask questions that are similar, but not all. Make sure that you read each prompt carefully, and tailor your basic statement as needed to really respond to what you're being asked. This may occasionally mean writing a separate essay altogether. And if it's your first choice, it can be worth it to research the faculty a bit and show you know their work.
- ☞ Being different is good, but don't go overboard. An attempt at standing out can easily look like someone who isn't serious.
- ☞ Personal statements are just that: statements of who you are as a person. Show your thoughtfulness, sincerity, and seriousness. Don't gripe or complain.
- ☞ Don't go for fifty-cent words just to be impressive. The point is to communicate who you are, which means using your real vocabulary.
- ☞ Be exactly honest.
- ☞ Offering explanations for anomalies in other parts of your application is acceptable, but don't make lame excuses or offer apologies. (Talk to me more if this applies to you.)
- ☞ If you have a double-major or a minor in a non-related field, that can be emphasized in a beneficial way. Don't hide the fact that you are a well-rounded person.
- ☞ Make sure to be very explicit about any relevant practical experience you have. This counts not only as experience, but also demonstrates that you are serious because you know what you're getting into.
- ☞ Be modest, but confident.
- ☞ Avoid specializing yourself too soon – realistically, you still have a lot to learn. An area of potential interest is good, but don't sound close-minded.
- ☞ Be technically correct and BRIEF.