

HOW TO WRITE A GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION ESSAY

Applying to graduate school? You may be asked to include a personal statement or some other piece of writing expressing your interest in the field and in the school to which you are applying. Here are some things to keep in mind.

1. Explain what you can contribute. What unique perspective can you bring to the college, and what work do you hope to do in the world? Colleges want to know that their graduates will go out into the world to make a difference. No one will expect you to adhere rigidly to this initial plan, but it will show that you are thinking beyond yourself and your own interests and desires, and that you are capable of planning and big-picture thinking. Instead of writing about how this education will benefit *you*, write about how it will benefit the discipline, or a particular community, or the wider world.

2. Follow the requirements. If the college you are applying to asks you to discuss something, be sure to discuss it. Applications can get thrown out when applicants do not follow the instructions. So if the instructions say “Describe your research experience,” make sure you do. Use the list of requirements as a checklist. If suggestions are given, take them seriously. The instructions will usually clue you in as to how personal (versus how academic) your statement should be.

3. Be specific. Spend some time researching the institution, the professors who work there, and the research those professors do. Your application materials should be extremely specific. For example: “My interest in groundwater hydrology has led me to follow the work of Dr. Smith and her research in sinkhole mapping and mitigation.” You may be thinking that you don’t know for certain you want to spend time studying sinkholes. That’s okay! You can change your mind once you are admitted to the school and something else excites you more. This is often a difficult concept for students to grasp, but the fact is that colleges want to know you have a specific, concrete plan—something more specific and concrete than “I love environmental science so much because I want to save the planet!”—and *they will not hold you to the plan*. They will just use it to determine if you are a good fit for their school and if you are capable of realistic, actionable plans for success.

4. Be relevant. You may have a passion for snowboarding, but unless it somehow directly relates to your wish to obtain a graduate degree in, say, biochemistry, it’s best not to discuss it in this essay.

5. Rethink flattery. You want to go to Stellar University because they have a fantastic reputation in your field and a degree from them will launch your career with a bang. However, Stellar University already knows they have a great program or a great reputation. They don’t want you to use up valuable space by telling them how great they are, because they already know it.

6. Be humble. Yes, you are selling yourself as a candidate for admission, but beware of sounding braggy. Instead of writing that you are a great fit for a program and leaving it there, explain how your research interests fit with theirs so that they can *see* that you are a great fit. Allow your academic and nonacademic activities to speak for you by using them to illustrate your intelligence, interests, and work ethic.

7. Address shortcomings. If you have a low grade or took some time off school and you worry about how an admissions team will interpret this, use your personal statement as an opportunity to briefly and professionally provide context for this gap. If you took time off from your studies due to

illness or a personal loss, state that. If you struggled with a course one semester, put a positive spin on it by focusing on what you *did* learn, rather than what you struggled with. How did you actively work to overcome the problem? Be careful not to give excuses or shift blame, but instead take responsibility and illustrate how you have grown as a person and a student.

7. Think of your personal statement as an essay. An essay should have an interesting opening, a supportive middle, and a logical conclusion. It should be very carefully proofread for errors. In fact, it is best to have someone else check it for you. The Keuka College Writing Center can provide you with professional feedback on the content, grammar, punctuation, and tone of your application.