

Tips for writing a Graduate School Essay

Many, if not most graduate school programs require you to write at least one essay about why you want to join their program. This essay may be called a “statement of purpose,” “personal statement,” etc.

Getting started on this essay is the scariest part, but it’s all about asking yourself the right questions and getting down to the writing! You probably already have all the answers – this is the right time to bring them together and structure them effectively.



To begin, get in the mindset of decision makers by asking yourself the following questions:

- Are you an academic fit for this program? Why?
- How sincere are you? Have you considered how this program will fit in with your values?
- Does the program fit with your career plan? Why?

You can use the framework below to get started.

Don’t worry – this will not make you seem less ‘unique.’

Rather, it will give a clear, organized, and effective structure to the things you have to say.

Suggested Essay Framework:

• Introduction

- Who you are (briefly) and why you are applying?
- What is your professional or academic goal? Why will this program help you get there?

• Body

- Address the experiences you have that have prepared you for success in a graduate program:
 - Undergraduate research, co-curricular activities, professional experience, etc.
- Address the specific reasons why this program is the program for you:
 - Program structure/elements, faculty, institution (resources such as a research center, student organizations), location of the school, etc.

Suggestions:

- You may want to tell a story in which you challenged or discovered something about yourself.
- Depending on the type of application, that challenge could be an academic one or a personal one.
- A memorable story helps your essay stand out to the reader and sets you apart from other candidates.

• Conclusion

- Summarize what you bring to the program and why you are a good fit for them.
- Briefly bring it back to your future:
 - Where do you see yourself a few years from now with this degree in hand?
 - How did the program prepare you for this future? What will you contribute to the field?

Remember...

Your first draft is probably going to be WAY too long, and that’s okay. It is important that you get your ideas out at first. Then, you can shorten and tailor your essay according to the guidelines and highlight the most relevant information.

Focus on your strengths, not on your weaknesses. This is not a job application, it is an application to attend school – a place where you will learn. You do not have to be perfect.

Graduate programs want to see that you have the academic ability to succeed (which will be evident on your transcript) and that you have a vision for your professional future that is relatively clear. They also want to see that you can articulate how their institution and the program in question fit within your vision and plans.

Use a STAR story to help your essay stand out!

Are you able to write about your notable moments, achievements, and experiences with confidence? The **STAR** technique is an effective way to quickly share a story or anecdote. It ensures that you tell a well-rounded fleshed-out story that piques the interest of your reader and allows them to visualize you at your best. This technique is also a useful tool in focusing on quality over quantity. Any accomplishment, big or small, can be told using the **STAR** technique.

STAR stands for Situation or Task, Action you took, and Result.



Situation or Task: What is the context of your story? Try to be brief, sharing the contextual details needed for your reader to understand the circumstances of your experience.



Action you took: What did you do? What was your unique contribution to the team effort? What was your singular or exceptional take on how to approach and solve the problem?



Result: Results can be quantitative or qualitative. Most of us leave out results when describing our experience, which is really unfortunate, because your reader will be interested in how your action led to a positive result.

Sample STAR Story:

My editorial experience makes me a strong fit for the Master's in Creative Arts program. As editor-in-chief of my university's student-led literary journal, I coordinated all aspects of the journal, including selecting the issue's theme. Last year, after brainstorming ideas for issues with members of our editorial team, we decided we wanted to attract new contributors from the visual arts. To do so, I established an interdisciplinary committee to develop a call for submissions with a theme that encouraged both literary and artistic submissions.

The interdisciplinary call for submissions was well-received by the university community and we received a record number of submissions. As a result, we ended up printing a two-part series to feature more submissions and we expanded the journal's readership to students outside the literature department.



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