

Selling Yourself to Graduate School: The Application Essay

One of the most difficult assignments students face is writing an application to graduate school. How much is enough to say about yourself? How much is too much? What is just boasting? A good application can play a major role in getting you admitted, especially if your grades and test scores are borderline. Graduate schools value organized, clear-thinking students who can express themselves well, so if your essay shows these qualities, you are helping your cause considerably.

First step: diagnose the question. Each school looks for something a bit different and the questions are designed to garner that information. So careful attention to the wording of the question pays off. A prompt like “Choose one incident from your life experiences that explains why you want to be a doctor” is not asking for your whole life story, but for one *particular* story that sums up your dreams for a career in medicine. The admissions school will be examining your ability to pick a specific episode, focus on it, and then expand on it to predict your potential future as a doctor.

On the other hand, a prompt can be open-ended and ask you to organize and arrange a lot of information: “Explain how your life experiences to this point led you to apply for law school.” Avoid lines like “I started out as a child,” but be aware that you need to cover a lot of information in a small space. Use helpful statements like “My ambitions did not change throughout high school, and serving as president of the Student Council sharpened my desire to present viewpoints and debate key ideas.” Note that this covers four years and adds a significant detail about your past.

Some prompts are very general, allowing lots of room to maneuver. For example, “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 materials.” This asks you to talk about your goals—not just for graduate school but for your life beyond that—but it’s also asking you to explain anything unusual in your transcript (like that “D” in physics).

Second step: brainstorm a page or so of notes, phrases, words, and dates that might be included.

Don’t just start writing. Jotting down notes will help you to come up with concrete details so that you can show the admissions committee something about yourself, not just report surface facts. Usually the committee members won’t know you, beyond some numbers (your GPA, test scores, class rank), so the details in the essay provide the first picture of you. First impressions count, so take the time to think of good details to include.

Third step: make a scratch outline of the essay. Look over this for the best logical order and then begin writing, making sure you are responding to the question you were asked. Use details, examples, names, and places to make a vivid word picture of the person you are and why you are applying to this specific school. Be sure to use transitional words and phrases to give a strong sense of organization to your readers.

Fourth step: revise carefully; this involves careful consideration of what you’ve said. It’s important to be totally honest in your essay. Don’t make false claims about yourself. But 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 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.

Finally, edit carefully and aim for perfection. 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 “financal,” 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!