

Lesson One: Preparation

The purpose of this section is to get you acquainted with the task that confronts you. The first step is to understand your audience and what your readers will be expecting. You should view this knowledge as a foundation from which to build your own creative composition, not as a set of limiting factors. Once you understand the context of your assignment, you must approach the brainstorming process with a free and open mind. Allow yourself to reflect without the interference of preconceived notions. Create a long and varied list of possible topics, and then narrow down that list using the criteria we provide.

The preparation process is essential here as it is for any important project. If you don't identify and develop the optimal set of ideas, then no degree of effective structuring or engaging language will make the essay as strong as it could have been.

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EssayEdge Extra: The Potential Impact of the Personal Statement-Good and Bad

"It's possible to redeem yourself or to kill your chances of admission with the personal statement. What's most important to me is for the candidate to make a compelling case for himself or herself. I want to be persuaded that I should admit this person."

-The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University

"If I sense that a candidate is just filling out half a page cursorily - just doing the personal statement pro forma - and has not put much time or imagination into it, that's the kiss of death."

-Graduate English Department, UCLA

The Audience

Unlike undergraduate admissions committees, which usually are comprised of full-time administrative staff, a graduate admissions committee consists of professors in the specific program to which you are applying. Occasionally, the committee will also invite a small number of students currently enrolled in the program to participate in the process.

An applicant's file consists of transcripts, GRE or other test scores, letters of recommendation, and one or more essays. Admissions committees read the essays within the larger context of a candidate's application. The essays are your chance to tell the personal story that the other pieces of the application cannot.

Admissions committees for programs in different fields evaluate personal statements according to vastly different criteria. Professors reading applications for programs in language-intensive fields such as literature and philosophy examine the originality and elegance of the applicant's thoughts as well as fine points of style. In engineering or scientific fields, on the other hand, admissions committees seek to gain more basic insight into the applicant's goals and to confirm a baseline of competency in written English. In fact, for many applicants to graduate programs in the sciences, English is not even their primary language.

As the committee members make their way through stack after stack of applications, they often place the applications they have already reviewed into a hierarchy of admission. The particular aspects of this process vary, but according to an admissions officer at the University of Washington, their hierarchy of admission is as follows, in decreasing order of applicant attractiveness: "Admit with guaranteed funding, Admit with potential funding, Tabled (a sort of admissions purgatory), and Reject." It is in the case of "Tabled" and "Admit with potential funding" applications, the admissions officer reports, that the personal statement can make a real difference: "If there is a good match between the applicant's research interests and the particular strengths of the school, this can bump them up a level or two in the hierarchy of admission."

Among the schools whose admissions officers we consulted, the minimum number of readers who look at an applicant's essay(s) ranged from two to ten, with an average of twenty minutes spent on essays for laboratory and computational science programs, and thirty minutes on those for all other programs.

Key Attributes

To a large degree, the particular graduate program you are applying to will dictate the content of a successful application essay. However, certain qualities of these essays apply equally to all fields. Admissions committee members are looking for interesting, insightful, revealing, and

non-generic essays that suggest you have successfully gone through a process of careful reflection and self-examination. Your essay should offer a very thorough, probing, and analytical look at yourself and your objectives.

Insight Into Your Character

When we say "non-generic" above, we mean a personal statement that only you could have written, one that does not closely resemble what other applicants are likely writing. You achieve this type of statement by being personal and analytical. Don't waste space on superficial generalizations about your life. Instead, give the reader specific, personal details so that he or she will be able to understand your character and motivation. Then analyze those details in a way that drives home clear, illuminating points.

Sincerity

Don't focus too heavily on what you think admissions officers want to see, at the expense of conveying your own message in your unique way. Be yourself rather than pretending to be the "ideal" applicant. Inundated with countless cliché-ridden essays, admissions committees respond very favorably to honesty. Don't be afraid to reveal yourself. Admissions officers are interested in finding out about who you are, and they appreciate candor.

Sincerity is important to stress because it's hard for most of us to achieve, despite the fact that it seems so simple. The pressures and anxieties of the situation have locked us into a mindset that prevents us from writing honestly. Further, because we are not used to writing about ourselves and being so close to the subject, we cannot assess the sincerity of our own writing. Thousands of students every year will read this same advice, whether in a guidebook or even in the application instructions themselves, but they simply will not be able to put it into practice. If you can be one of the few who truly understand what it means to be sincere, then you will already have separated yourself from the pack in a crucial way.

You might question how a reader who doesn't know you can judge your statement's sincerity. The basis for judgment usually lies in the context your reader has developed from reading hundreds or thousands of other essays. Assessing your essay against others is one essential area in which EssayEdge can offer a more critical eye than your friends, relatives, or teachers who have not accumulated the expertise specific to the personal statement. Moreover, our perspective in reading your essay is just as objective as your admissions reader's perspective will be.

Background and Motivation

Detail your interest in and exposure to your particular discipline in a thoughtful way. You are aspiring to become a professional in your field; therefore, you should express an interest in contributing something novel to it. Make clear that you have a realistic perception of what this field entails. Refer to experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other sources of specific

information about the career you want and why you're suited for it. Remember not to make this a laundry list in which you rattle off impressive names or theories. **Any specific people or ideas you mention should be thoughtfully addressed and seamlessly interwoven into the essay as a whole.**

Goals

When you were applying to colleges, no one expected you to be certain about your future. At the graduate level, however, you need to demonstrate a more mature sense of what you want to do, and how the program you're applying to fits in with that intended path. Although admissions officers are well aware that people's goals will change, they at least want to see some sense of direction so they can evaluate your self-awareness and commitment.

"I seek a sense of commitment, a sense of discipline, and a sense specifically of what the student wants to do. I don't think it's advisable for anyone to write that he or she just loves English literature and wants to read and write. People have to know what field they want or are most likely to work in, or what specific kinds of projects they want to pursue in a field."

-Graduate English Department, UCLA

"I think the main thing is to see whether the student is aware of and has thought about the field to which he or she is applying."

-Graduate Engineering Program, California Institute of Technology

Attributes of the Program

Explain why the particular school's unique features attract you. Again, graduate study is much more focused than undergraduate work; it's not a time for unbounded exploration. For your own sake, you need to determine whether a specific program meets your needs, and sharing what you discover with the schools can show them why you're a good fit. Do the research necessary to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs.

Do not, however, waste space on empty praise. For example, don't cite the "world-renowned faculty" and "diverse student body" as your main reasons, because these are trite, obviously prepackaged points that you could say about any school. Instead, refer to specific courses or unique aspects of the curriculum, and show an interest in specific clubs or organizations.

"You really have to let the admissions committee know what it is about this program in particular that interests you."

-The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University

"It helps for the student to have done some research on the university being applied to. It is easy to differentiate an applicant who really wants to come here because of our special

resources from someone whose knowledge of the program comes simply by way of the brochure we send to all interested applicants."

-Graduate English Department, UCLA

Writing Ability

Again, the importance of writing ability varies according to different programs. A great flair for language will not get you admitted into a biochemistry program, but it's still essential to demonstrate strong written communication skills. On the other hand, you should also keep in mind that a well-written essay makes its points clearly and forcefully, so your content benefits as well.

Good writing means more than the ability to construct grammatical sentences. You also must create a coherent structure and ensure proper flow as the piece progresses. Because the process of developing ideas and putting them down on paper is so intimate and personal, all writers end up needing editors to assess the effectiveness of their product. You should consult people whose writing you respect for advice or even more hands-on help. Having been trained specifically in the nuances of admissions essay writing, EssayEdge editors are the best equipped to provide assistance in this crucial area.



Common Flaws

Knowing what turns off admissions committees in an essay is as important as knowing what they find desirable.

Careless Errors

There is really no excuse for careless errors, and having even one in your application can affect the way you are perceived. You have more than enough time to proofread and have others look over your essay. If an error slips through, your readers may assume that you are careless, disorganized, or not serious enough about your application.

Remember that spell check does not catch all possible errors, and even grammar check is far from perfect. In addition to typographical errors such as repeated words, you have to read the essay carefully to catch mistakes in meaning that might come in the form of a grammatically correct sentence.

Let these humorous but unfortunate examples be a lesson to read your essay carefully for unintended meanings and meaningless sentences:

It was like getting admitted to an Ivory League school.

Berkeley has a reputation of breeding nationalists and communists.

I'd like to attend a college where I can expose myself to many diverse people.

I was totally free except for the rules.

In a word, the experience taught me the importance of dedication, friendship, and goals.

I have an extensive knowledge of the value of intelligence.

I envy people with a lot of time in their hands.

Vague Generalities

The most egregious generalizations are the ones that have been used so many times that they have become clichés. For example, "I learned the value of hard work." That statement doesn't tell us anything insightful or interesting about the writer's character, because it has been said so many times as to become meaningless.

Generalities come in the same form as clichés, except with different content. They are always superficial and usually unoriginal, but haven't quite reached the level of predictability that would make them qualify as clichés. Consider this before-and-after set to learn how to evaluate this factor in your writing:

Before: In the first project I managed, I learned many valuable lessons about the importance of teamwork.

After: In the first project I managed, I made an effort to incorporate all my colleagues as equal members of a team, soliciting their feedback and deferring to their expertise as needed.

Terms like "valuable lessons" and "teamwork" are vague and do not really convey anything meaningful about the applicant's experience. In contrast, the revised version explains the team dynamic in more detail, showing specifically how the applicant exercised teamwork principles. The passage should go on to include even more detail, perhaps by naming a particular colleague and discussing his interaction with that person.

Sounding contrived is a problem related to overly general writing. Applicants often have preconceived notions about what they should be discussing, and they try to force those points onto the experiences they relate. The best way to counteract this tendency is to start with your experiences and let the insights flow from there. Think about your most meaningful experiences and describe them honestly. Often you will find that you don't need to impose conclusions because the personal qualities you're trying to demonstrate will be inherent in the details. If you decide that clarification is necessary, the transition should still be natural.

Summarizing Your Resume

Perhaps the most common personal statement blunder is to write an expository resume of your background and experience. This is not to say that the schools are not interested in your accomplishments. However, other portions of your application will provide this information, and the reader does not want to read your life story in narrative form. Strive for depth, not breadth. An effective personal statement will focus on one or two specific themes, incidents, or points. Trying to cram too much into your essay will end up in nothing meaningful being conveyed.

"A straight autobiography should be avoided, although interesting and pertinent autobiographical facts should be included. But the statement should be more future-oriented than past-oriented. I don't really want the story of a student's life but rather plans for and a vision of the future."

-Graduate English Department, UCLA

Sensitive Topics

Don't get on a soapbox and preach to the reader; while expressing your values and opinions is fine, avoid coming across as fanatical or extreme. Avoid mentioning subjects that are potentially controversial; it is impossible for you to know the biases of members of various admissions committees. Religion and politics normally don't belong in these statements, although there may be exceptions (an applicant who has held an important office on campus or in the community would likely want to include this fact). Personal political views usually are not appropriate for personal statements. Any views that might be interpreted as strange or highly unconventional should also be omitted because you want to avoid the possibility of offending any of the individuals in whose hands the fate of your graduate school application rests.

Gimmicks

Don't use a gimmicky style or format. Your "clever" or "original" idea for style probably isn't, and it may not be appreciated.

"Avoid cuteness; we've had people who have done career statements in the form of a miniplay, for example. You want to sound like a professional."

-The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University

Long-Windedness

Sometimes the same writer who relies too heavily on generalizations will also provide too many irrelevant details. That's why most essays submitted to EssayEdge are returned with significantly reduced word counts and, conversely, suggestions for additions. The problem is that writers often don't consider what is actually necessary to include, or they repeat points freely.

Example of Irrelevant Detail: "After a meeting with my adviser, I returned home to think over the matter more carefully. Ultimately, I came to the conclusion that my interests in physical

properties and mental life would best be explored in a double major of biology and psychology."

In this example, we learn nothing about the applicant from the mention of his meeting with an adviser. What's relevant are his interests and the decision he made based on them. The details about how he arrived at the decision are not illustrative of his character in any way and are therefore superfluous.

Example of Redundancy: "The class taught me a great deal about the value of literature. I learned that literature can both instruct and inspire, and this understanding has changed the way I read every text."

The first sentence is unnecessary because the second sentence makes the same point with more specificity.

In addition to superfluous content, you also have to watch out for wordy writing. Wordiness not only takes up valuable space, but it also can confuse the important ideas you're trying to convey. Short sentences are more forceful because they are direct and to the point.

Before: "My recognition of the fact that the project was finally over was a deeply satisfying moment that will forever linger in my memory."

After: "Completing the project at last gave me an enduring sense of fulfillment."

Certain phrases such as "the fact that" are usually unnecessary. Notice how the revised version focuses on active verbs rather than forms of "to be" and adverbs and adjectives.

Big Words

Using longer, fancier words does not make you sound more intelligent, since anyone can consult a thesaurus. Simpler language is almost always preferable, as it demonstrates your ability to think and express yourself clearly.

Before: "Although I did a plethora of activities in college, my assiduous efforts enabled me to succeed."

After: "Although I juggled many activities in college, I succeeded through persistent work."

Brainstorming

Writing an effective personal statement requires a bit of soul searching and reflection. The schools want to gain from your essay some insight into your character and personality. It's difficult for most people to write about themselves, especially something personal or

introspective. If thoughtfully observed and answered, the following suggestions and questions will yield material from which you can draw upon in writing your essay. Although the questions are presented in categories, your responses will inevitably straddle the various groupings. This is as it should be, since brainstorming is a very lateral process. **Most important while completing these questions is that you be sincere and enjoy yourself.**

1. Perform a Self-Inventory of Your Unique Experiences, Major Influences, and Abilities

Long- and Short-Term Goals

- i. What attracts you to this particular school?
- ii. Are there any specific faculty members at this academic institution whose work interests you? With whom would you most like to study?
- iii. What specifically do you hope to gain from the academic program to which you are applying?
- iv. What are your career aspirations, and how can this academic program help you to reach them?
- v. What is your dream job? What would you ideally like to be doing in 5 years? 10? 20?

Skills and Characteristics

vi. What **personal characteristics** (integrity, compassion, persistence, for example) do you possess that would enhance your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics? This is an area where it is far better to "show" the reader how you embody these qualities, rather than simply "tell" him or her that you possess them. **You need to make strong connections between your experiences and the qualities you wish to convey.** The ideal is to recount personal experiences in such a way that your "compassion" or "persistence" or whatever else is fully evident without your having to mention those qualities by name. Here is a list of the qualities that admissions committees find most desirable in applicants:

- **Seriousness of Purpose** (to pursue graduate education)
- **Intellectual Ability** (to handle graduate study)
- **Intellectual Curiosity** (about the field you wish to enter)
- **Creativity** (as reflected in the way your mind addresses issues in the field of your choice)
- **Open-Mindedness** (to ideas, people, and circumstances different from your own)
- **Maturity** (as demonstrated by being responsible and trustworthy)
- **Concern for Others** (either by devoting time to social service activities such as tutoring or by being considerate and empathetic to others' feelings; the latter is more difficult to pull off in an application essay)

- **Initiative** (as in the ability to start a project or take on a responsibility on your own)
- **Enthusiasm** (as demonstrated by your eagerness to engage in activities)
- **Confidence** (in your ability to handle difficult situations and novel challenges)
- **Being Organized** (as in the ability to stay on top of multiple tasks)
- **Sense of Humor** (as in your ability to find humor in difficult situations; in many ways this is an index of maturity)
- **Diligence/Persistence** (as demonstrated by your ability to stay with a task until you complete it; this is particularly relevant for programs requiring a dissertation)
- **Leadership** (as shown in your ability to inspire others to work together to reach a mutual goal)
- **Risk Taking** (as shown in your ability to deal with uncertainty in order to reach your goal)
- **Insight** (as reflected in your ability to use introspection to understand aspects of yourself, such as your preferences and your motivations)
- **Optimism** (as reflected in your ability to find positive aspects in seemingly negative situations)
- **Compromise** (as in your ability to be flexible in negotiating with others; at a more abstract level this can mean the ability to reconcile ideological opposites or dialectical pairs among others or within yourself)
- **Overcoming Adversity** (as demonstrated by your resourcefulness in dealing with serious problems such as divorce, death, illness, etc.)

vii. What skills (leadership, communicative, analytical, for example) do you possess? As in the previous question, strive to "show" rather than "tell." However, you can invoke these qualities by name with less chance of appearing insincere or conceited than if you attribute to yourself more personal, subjective qualities such as compassion and integrity.

viii. Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school--and more successful and effective in the profession or field--than other applicants?

ix. What do you have to offer the school--to your fellow students, to the faculty, to the broader community?

x. Why do you think you will succeed in this academic program?

xi. What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

xii. Why do you think you will be successful in your chosen career?

Background/Accomplishments: Personal

xiii. What's special, unique, distinctive, or impressive about you or your life story? What details of your life (personal or family problems/history, any genuinely notable accomplishments, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?

xiv. Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (e.g., economic, familial, physical) in your life?

xv. Have you borne significant care-giving responsibilities for family members? For an ailing parent, a sibling, a disabled or aging relative, a child? How has this impacted your academics? Your professional life? Your goals and values?

xvi. (If you live in U.S. but are not a native-born American) How did you deal with the challenges of moving to the U.S. from your home? Did you experience culture shock? How did you adapt? What was most difficult for you? What aspects of your new home did you enjoy the most?

xvii. If work experiences have consumed significant periods of time during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has the work contributed to your personal growth?

Background/Accomplishments: Academic

xviii. When did you originally become interested in this field? What have you since learned about it-and about yourself-that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?

xix. How have you learned about this field-through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?

xx. Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain? Click [here](#) for more on this topic.

xxi. Can you recall a specific incident that convinced you that you had chosen the right career path?

2. Consult Friends, Relatives, Colleagues, or Professors for Ideas

Others see us differently from the way we see ourselves. You may be overlooking some theme, angle, or aspect of your personality that might be obvious to others who know you well. Good ideas are good ideas, whatever their source. Here is a questionnaire that will give these people a structured format in which to help you come up with ideas:

Preparatory Questionnaire

I am applying to _____ and must prepare a personal statement as a part of that process. I want to be sure to include all relevant data about myself and my background, so I am soliciting information from various individuals who know me and whose judgment I value. Thank you for your help.

1. What do you think is most important for the admissions committee to know about me?
2. What do you regard as most unusual, distinctive, unique, and/or impressive about me (based on our association)?
3. Are you aware of any events or experiences in my background that might be of particular interest to those considering my application to graduate school?
4. Are there any special qualities or skills that I possess that tend to make you think I would be successful in graduate school and in the field to which I aspire to become a part?

3. Write An Experimental Creative Essay In Which You Are the Main Character

Pretend that you are enrolled in a creative writing class and that your assignment is to write a moving and inspiring short story (a couple of pages) about some experience in your life and its impact on you. Pretend you will be reading the story aloud during class and that your goal is to have your classmates approach you afterwards with the following sorts of reactions: "I feel as if I know you, even though I've never talked to you before," or "I was really moved; thanks for taking a risk and giving us a glimpse into what makes you tick." Although you will not be submitting your personal statement in the form of a short story, this exercise will help you to achieve a level of sincerity, even vulnerability, in your writing that might prove elusive if you plunge directly into a first draft of your application essay.

You should devote substantial time, at least 4-5 hours, to the questions and exercises above before proceeding to [Topic Selection](#).



Topic Selection

After brainstorming, you should have a lengthy list of potential topics to cover. Some essays that answer specific questions will require only one topic, but for most general personal statements, you will want to discuss two to four subjects. Occasionally, you can discuss a single experience at length if you're confident that the material touches on the entire range of themes you need to convey. If you try to tackle more than four subjects, you are probably treating each one in insufficient depth.

Use the following guide to help narrow down your topics.

Finding the Pattern That Connects

Selecting the topic of your personal statement can be a process akin to reverse engineering: You begin with conclusions and work your way back to a premise and overarching theme.

What you are seeking at this point is a pattern that connects the very best of the material generated through brainstorming directly to your chosen field. All those piquant ideas and vividly rendered anecdotes you include in your essay should be entertaining to read but at the same time must make a coherent and compelling case for your admission.

Conveying Something Meaningful

Does your topic convey something meaningful about your personality? Will the reader walk away with an enriched understanding of who you are? If you can't answer "yes" to these questions, then you have probably chosen a topic that's too generic. Search harder to find a subject for which you can take a more personal, original approach.

Painting a Complete Portrait

You can't write a comprehensive essay that discusses everything you've ever done, but you can aim to offer an argument that details the full range of what you have to offer. If you choose only one topic, that topic should be broad enough in scope to allow you to discuss layers of your skills and characteristics. If you choose multiple topics, they should not be redundant, but build on and supplement each other.

Standing Out

Is your topic unique? It's hard to have something entirely new to say, but you should at least have a fresh take on your topic. If you recognize a lack of originality in your ideas, try to be more specific and personal. The more specific you get, the less likely that you will blend in with the essays of your competition.

Keeping Your Reader's Interest

Will your topic be able to sustain your reader's interest for the entire length of the essay? It's true that good writing can make any topic fascinating to read about, but there's no need to start yourself off with a handicap. Choose a topic that will naturally be of interest to any reader. For this criterion, it's necessary to step back and view your topic objectively, or else consult the opinion of others. If someone described the basic idea to you, would you care enough to ask for more details?

Staying Grounded in Detail

You should make sure ahead of time that your topic is fundamentally based on concrete evidence. If you're choosing specific experiences or events, then the relevant details should be clearly available. If your topic is more abstract, then you must be prepared to back up any claims with concrete examples and illustrative details.

Answering the Question

Applicants often overlook the very basic necessity of actually answering the question posed. They think they can get away with a loosely adapted essay from another application, or they simply don't take the time to review the question carefully. Make sure the topic you choose gives you room to address all parts of the question fully. Your readers could perceive an irrelevant response as an indication of your carelessness or lack of interest in their school.

What to Avoid

After you've determined that your topic meets the above criteria, you should check that it also avoids the following pitfalls:

- 1. Resorting to gimmicks:** While creativity is encouraged, there must be substance to make your tactics worthwhile. Don't expect mere novelty to win you any points, and realize that you risk coming across as frivolous. Also, there's a good chance that any gimmicks you come up with-writing a poem, writing in the third person-have been done already.
- 2. Focusing on the negative:** There is a separate section of this course dealing with how to address negative aspects of your application. As far as your topic is concerned, the main idea should be focused on your positive attributes. This does not mean, of course, that you shouldn't mention past weaknesses that you have learned to overcome, as the emphasis there is still on the strength you demonstrated.
- 3. Repeating information that's listed elsewhere in the application:** We have already mentioned this point, but it's worth making abundantly clear. Your topic should not merely be a list of activities or synthesis of your resume. Rather, it should offer the kind of insight that only you can provide in a personal manner.
- 4. Being too controversial:** If you get a sympathetic reader, a controversial topic might help you to stand out, but you risk offending others and severely hurting your chances. You would do better to search for a topic that makes you unique without resorting to cheap shots or obvious cries for attention.
- 5. Seeking pity:** You can describe misfortunes or a disadvantaged background, but do not use them as an excuse for bad performances or to seek pity. Doing so not only could sound manipulative, but also means that you haven't emphasized your strengths sufficiently. Thus, as in the case of weaknesses, you should bring up obstacles in your past only to show how you have overcome them.