

# Graduate & Professional School Essay Writing

Global Education & Career Development

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<http://gecd.mit.edu>

# Purpose of Workshop

- Review role of essay in the application process
- Clarify content of the essay
- Review structure and style of the essay
- Discuss how to start writing
- Provide writing resources

# What is a personal essay?

A personal essay is a brief (1-2 page) narrative that describes your past experiences and future goals. It provides the opportunity to:

- Make a positive first impression
- Highlight strong points and abilities
- Present goals and values
  - Ex. Why are you pursuing this profession?
- Show you have desired qualities
  - logical in your reasoning, ability to defend your viewpoint, organized, etc.)

# Basics about Graduate Essays

- Length varies from school to school. Typically 1-2 pages.
- Important writing sample. Committees often look at your score on the writing portion of the GRE and compare it to your essay.
- Serves as the personal portion of the application process. Many graduate schools do not interview, so this is one of their only ways of seeing “you”.
- For PhD/MS essays, often the focus is on your research and the research you want to do. **ASK THE PROGRAM WHAT THEY ARE LOOKING FOR!**

# What goes into the essay?

- Describe your goals, aspirations, experiences, and motivations for wanting to pursue a graduate degree.
- Present yourself as a person; schools want to find out more about your personality and any unique characteristics you might bring to their program.
- Tailor the essay to the program you are applying to—what do they expect their graduates to go into? What do they look for in the statement?
- Read the question carefully!

# How to convey your message

A personal story is a powerful technique to convey a message.

- Stories:
  - Capture the audience's attention.
  - Reveal personal characteristics.
  - Allow the reader to make a personal connection with the author.
- Actual experiences that illustrate your skills and abilities.

# Possible Topics...

- Life events and changes
- Achievements
- Significant people in your life (but...)
- MIT experience
- Influential books
- Extracurricular activities
- Employment experiences
- Travel experience
- Exposure to [fill in the blank] field (if applicable and appropriate)

# Writing Tips

- **Keep it simple:**
  - Focus on 2-3 experiences only.
  - Avoid writing the same information about an experience you already provide in your resume or application.
  - Make sure that the organization is clear
- **“Show” instead of “tell” the reader:**
  - Use action verbs and descriptive words.
  - Convey your thoughts and feelings about what you have learned from your experiences.

# The Opening

Your opening should draw the reader in to your essay and be compelling enough to make people want more.

If it helps, write the rest of the essay first and come back to the opening later. Expect to do many drafts before you come up with the right one.

# Be cautious of...

- Providing more information about someone else than about yourself
- Delicate/emotional experiences in your life. (ex. death, personal illness or disabilities, etc.)
- Writing about what you will do in the future. Instead focus on what you have already done/accomplished.

# Be cautious of....

- Not answering the question or not following the format of the schools to which you are applying
- Overusing “I” to start sentences
- Being negative about your experiences or individuals
- Use of profanity or racial slurs
- Taking a strong position without showing an understanding for the opposing view.
- Delivering statements as facts without making an effort to substantiate them.

# Be cautious of...

- Trying too hard, essay is not about creative writing
- Rewriting your resume/being overly biographical
- Using highly technical language
- Using jargon
- Discussing why you didn't think this career path was for you
- Starting your essay with or focusing solely on "I want to be a lawyer because..." (depends on program)
- Focusing on weaknesses (grades, scores, etc.)
  - Weaknesses/Special circumstances can be best addressed in an addendum. However, be brief.

# To get you started...

Question to ask yourself as you begin to write:

- What are your 3 biggest accomplishments?"
- Why did you choose this career path?
- What were some turning points in your life?
- What were some of the biggest challenges in your life, and how did you handle them?
- What person or event influenced you the most, and how?
- What were the reasons for the major decisions in your life?
- What are your future goals, and why?
- What is the thing that is most important to you?

# Next Steps: Solicit Feedback

- Review your essay with the Writing Center staff
- Bring your essay to Career Services drop-in hours for review
- Ask for feedback from someone who knows you well
  - Does this essay sound like you?
- Ask for feedback from someone who does not know you well
  - What did the person learn about you through the essay?  
Does their image of you match what you were hoping to portray in the essay?
- Someone who went through the program you are applying for could be an ideal reader

# Additional Resources

- GECD Website: [http://gecd.mit.edu/grad\\_school](http://gecd.mit.edu/grad_school)
- Writing Center: 12-132, <http://humanistic.mit.edu/wcc>
- Virtual Grad School Fair:  
<http://gradschools.careereco.net>
- GECD Career Services Drop in Hours: M-F, 12-3pm