

## STEP 1: Brainstorming

### Actions:

- Devote time to reflect on the following questions.
- Discuss them with friends or family members.
- Jot down notes. In some cases write sentences.
- Think about the flip side of each question. For example, why are you really committed to the field of biology despite pressure from your parents to become a lawyer or to get a job?

### Your answers to some of these questions will form the heart of your personal statement.

1. How did your pre-college education influence your decision to pursue graduate study in your field?

*Think about:* High school courses, teachers, special programs, student organizations, and community or volunteer work.

2. How has your college experience influenced your decision?

*Think about:* College courses, professors, academic interests, research, special programs, student organizations, and the decision-making process you went through to choose your major.

3. How has your work experience influenced your decision?

*Think about:* Internships, externships, part-time jobs, summer jobs, and volunteer or community work.

4. Who has had the most influence on your decision to pursue graduate study? In what ways?

*Think about:* Parents, relatives, teachers, professors, clergy, friends of the family, college friends, parents of friends, local merchants, supervisors, coaches, doctors, dentists, lawyers, etc.

5. What situation has had the most influence on your decision?

*Think about:* Family, academic, work or athletic situations. Think about happy, sad, traumatic, moving, or memorable situations.

6. What personally motivates you to pursue graduate study in this field?

*Think about:* Your personal skills, interests, and values.

## STEP 2: Writing Your Personal Statement

### Actions:

Incorporate your responses to the above questions. Begin writing your first draft:

1. Develop an outline of your statement prior to writing. It doesn't have to be detailed. It can be three or four main points in the order you want to make them.

2. Accentuate your strengths and what makes you unique.

3. Explain your weaknesses in positive ways. For example, refer to them not as weaknesses but as areas for improvement or growth.

4. Paint pictures and tell stories about what makes you special. In this way the admissions readers will remember you. The story can be happy or sad. The more feeling you can inject into your statement, the more you will stand out.

5. Find out the specific orientation and philosophy of the graduate program. Adapt and refine your statement to fit. This will make you stand out from other applicants who recycle the same personal statement with each application.

### Suggested Outline

The typical personal statement should be 2-3 double-spaced pages or 500-700 words. Here is a suggested outline. You should select the paragraphs you wish to include and adjust each paragraph length depending on what you wish to emphasize.

- Paragraph 1: A personal human-interest story
- Paragraph 2: Your academic interests and achievements
- Paragraph 3: Your relevant work and/or research experiences
- Paragraph 4: Your career interests
- Paragraph 5: Why you are interested in this particular school
- Paragraph 6: The qualities you will bring to this school

## 5 Tips for Writing Your Grad School Essay

1. **Remember your audience.** Don't use slang these people can decide if you are accepted or rejected.
2. **Eliminate Passive Voice** and starting every sentence with "I..."
3. **Flow.** Make sure your writing is easy to read and makes sense.
4. **Express your ideas clearly and concisely** to keep readers **interested**, remember they have to read a lot of essays.
5. **Include uniqueness and personality** within your descriptions and stories to make you stand apart; however, be careful not to scare them away.

## Letters of Recommendation

Recommendation letters from professors and faculty members are very important, because they are in the best position to assess your academic abilities and how you might perform in an advanced academic setting. Check out our handout for tips on successful letters of recommendation.

## Include a Resume?

If you find that you cannot fit all the information you want in your essay, or find some information is not quite as relevant but still an achievement you might want to include a resume or curriculum vitae. Items to include might be work experience, publications, presentations, volunteer work, activities, and computer and language skills.

## Answering "Why should we let you into our school?"

- State your short and long term goals and motivations, and how the university can help you meet them.
- Describe your areas of research, professional interest and involvement experiences in connection to the program and university. List your research in order of relevance to the program.
- Give specific reasons why you are interested in your particular field, why you are applying to this particular school, and what you seek in a professional program. Show them you know about their faculty, curriculum, expectations and opportunities.
- Include factors that influenced your decision making.
- Refer to past experiences, both academic and "real world," that are relevant to graduate study.
- Articulate why you are valuable to the school and department and what perspective you will bring.
- Show motivation and your capability to succeed in a graduate school setting.

## Reasons to Apply Early and to Several Programs

- Beat out late applicants for limited space.
- Resend misplaced portfolios or lost paperwork so you are not rejected.
- Able to review paperwork and correct errors or mistakes.
- Ensure all your letters of recommendation are sent.
- Guarantee all transcripts are sent on time and arrive at the proper location or you could be rejected.
- Even if a graduate school office sounds interested in you, you may still be rejected because the department often has more authority.