

How to write a Good Personal Statement?

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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.

Select One:

- [Assess Your Audience](#)
- [Key Attributes](#)
- [Common Flaws](#)
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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.

Lesson Two: Graduate Statement Themes

The best way to approach your personal statement is to imagine that you have five minutes with someone from the admissions committee. How would you go about making the best case for yourself while holding the listener's interest? What would you include and omit in your story? Figuring out the answer to these questions is critical to successfully preparing an effective statement.

To arrive at these answers, you should begin by asking yourself some more specific questions:

- Why have I chosen to attend graduate school in this specific field, and why did I choose to apply to this particular school's program?
- What are my qualifications for admission?
- What is special, unique, or impressive about my life story?

The answers will not necessarily come easily to you, but this exercise will have great practical benefit in readying you to write an outstanding personal statement. By answering each question thoroughly, you will have given much thought to yourself, your experiences, and your goals, thereby laying the groundwork for formulating an interesting and persuasive presentation of your own personal story.

Select One:

- [Why Graduate School?](#)
- [Why Qualified?](#)
- [Why Unique?](#)
- [Explain Blemishes](#)

EssayEdge Extra: The Future Over the Past

"First, they should tell me where they're coming from--what it is in their background that leads them to apply to a program like ours. Second, they should tell me what it is they want to get out of our program. Third, I want to know where they hope our program will eventually take them in their career."

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

"Usually 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 (although there are exceptions) but rather plans for and a vision of the future."

- Graduate English Department, UCLA

"Mistakes? Dwelling on past accomplishments as opposed to describing future interests. The recitation of past accomplishments, prizes won and scores gotten--all that kind of stuff--is helpful but at the stage when we're reading the statement, we know all the applicants are highly qualified; that is almost beside the point. What we're looking for at that stage is, again, some insight into how the student thinks, what sort of clarity of purpose he has into one or more research areas."

- Graduate Admissions Committee, Applied Mechanics, Civil Engineering & Mechanical Engineering, California Institute of Technology

Whereas some professional programs, particularly law schools, give applicants more freedom to discuss any past experiences that may help them to stand out, graduate schools are chiefly interested in your past only as it relates to your future. That said, if there are aspects of your background that would make you stand out, you should still try to incorporate them into your discussion. Just be prepared to put in a little more thought and analysis.

Why Graduate School?

Because people do not make career decisions based purely on reason, it can be difficult to explain why you have chosen a particular field of study. What follows are some categories into which your ideas may fall, but your focus should be on your unique, personal details. Also, keep in mind that you are not limited to any one of the following, but should develop multiple reasons as you see fit--so long as your points are focused and coherent.

Early Exposure to Your Field

Graduate school is a serious commitment, and it may have been your goal for a long time. Describing your early exposure to a field can offer effective insight into your core objectives. Watch out, however, for these two potential problems:

1. Avoid offering your point in such a clichéd, prepackaged way as to make your reader cringe. For example, you should not start your essay, "I have always wanted to...." or "I have always known that [X field] was my calling." Instead, you should discuss specific events that led to your interest in the field.
2. Do not rely solely on your initial reason and forget to justify your choice with more recent experiences. Think about what you have learned about your chosen field--and yourself--that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to that course of study.

[This applicant](#) traces his interest in photojournalism to his collection of baseball cards and sports pictures at a young age. The youthful sense of curiosity and passion he conveys is sincere and draws the reader in to his individual mindset. The writer goes on to describe the evolution of his hobby, which becomes a vocation after he earns some publishing credits and enrolls in a BFA program.

Sample Essay

A tale from your childhood can pique the reader's interest along with underscoring the earnestness of your intended academic pursuits, as this essay illustrates.

My interest in photojournalism began when I was nine years old. After a couple of years of collecting baseball picture-cards and accumulating more than ten-thousand treasured images, my interest in acquiring posed mug shots and static faces decreased, so I liquidated my assets and discovered a new hobby: reading the sports sections of my father's newspapers. I became captivated by the genuine, timely and action-packed pictures of the 1964 Phillies appearing regularly in the Philadelphia Daily News and Inquirer. A short time later, I began a nightly ritual of clipping and collecting the grainy black-and-white photos accompanying detailed descriptions of our home team's performances.

In 1979, I resumed the practice of clipping tear-sheets, when my byline started appearing under photos and short concert reviews published in several South Philadelphia community newspapers. After some success selling articles and pictures to local, small circulation publications, I enrolled in college, determined to pursue a career in photojournalism, and became the only member of my family to graduate from an academic institution of higher education when I received a BFA in documentary photography. Although I am extremely satisfied with my current employment as a photographer for a world-renowned eye hospital and will continue to write articles and to photograph events on a free-lance basis, I would also eventually like to teach. With my previous experience in photojournalism, travel, politics, medicine, sports and entertainment, and as the overseer of our department's medical

photography internship program, I feel that I will make a significant contribution to the learning environment.

Goals

Graduate school is, of course, a means to an end, and admissions committees prefer students who know where they're going and to what use they'll put their education (though the occasional soul-searcher, who may exhibit exceptional raw potential, is welcomed). For many people, the long-term goal is to work in academia, and to differentiate yourself in such cases, you can stress more specific objectives such as your research interests (see the following section).

Other degrees can lead to work outside the academic setting. [This applicant](#) describes his reasons for pursuing a degree in public policy: "Providing health care to 44 million uninsured Americans, while keeping insurance affordable, is one of the most difficult challenges facing policymakers. I want to work in state or local government to resolve this health care crisis and ensure that the disadvantaged get the care they need and deserve." Rather than offering a clichéd sentiment about wanting to "help people" or "change society," he identifies a specific issue and explains the origin and evolution of his interest.

Sample Essay

"To be nobody but yourself--in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else--means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting." When I first read this passage by E.E. Cummings, I realized I have been fighting the same battle my whole life. When choosing the direction for my future, I have often accepted jobs based on a compromise between my own dreams and what others thought my dreams should be. This, of course, has led to an unfulfilling career.

Looking back, I always knew that I wanted to work in public service; but I also knew my staunchly conservative father would not be pleased. To him, the government is too big, too intrusive and too wasteful. I see things differently. And yet, his approval means a lot to me and his opinion has certainly influenced my the direction of my career. But I have finally come to understand that I must pursue my own path. After careful deliberation, I am confident that public service is, without a doubt, the right career for me.

Ever since my childhood I have detected in myself a certain compassion and innate desire to help others. I was the kid that dragged in every stray cat or dog I came across--and I still do. When I was eight years old, I rescued a rat from my sister's psychology lab and brought her home. I even coaxed my father into taking Alice--I called her Alice--to the vet when she became ill. But aside from my humanitarian kindness to animals, as a child I learned first-hand about America's need to reform and improve medical care. I spent years of my childhood on

crutches and in hospitals because of a tumor that hindered the growth of my leg. Without adequate health insurance and proper care, I might still be on crutches, but I was fortunate. Today, as a public servant, I still desire to help others who are not so fortunate. Providing health care to 44 million uninsured Americans, while keeping insurance affordable, is one of the most difficult challenges facing policymakers. I want to work in state or local government to resolve this health care crisis and ensure that the disadvantaged get the care they need and deserve.

In order to succeed in my endeavors toward public service, I now realize that a master's degree in public policy is essential. But when I graduated from college in 1990, I didn't know how to continue my education, only that I should. For a while, I considered such options as law school or international relations, but I always returned to my desire to impact public life. My career in public policy began as a legislative assistant at the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a non-profit educational organization that couples voices from the state legislature and the private sector to work on salient policy issues. My enthusiasm for ALEC's mission was evident, as I quickly moved up from legislative assistant to the director of two task forces. As manager of ALEC's task force on federalism and its tax and fiscal policy task force, I explored these issues thoroughly, never quite satiating my appetite for more information and knowledge. I found my integral role in the legislative process to be the most valuable and worthwhile experience I've had in my career to date.

Following ALEC, I took a position as a junior lobbyist for the Automotive Parts and Accessories Association (APAA). As a lobbyist, I voiced the APAA's concern over regulatory and environmental issues affecting the automotive aftermarket. Although I was able to help small automotive parts manufacturers battle the "Big Three" automakers, I quickly realized that being an advocate for the automotive aftermarket was not my calling in life. I wanted to promote policies which had the potential to improve life for the greater public, for I could not see myself spending a lifetime working within an isolated industry.

With that frame of mind, I accepted employment as a policy analyst in the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB) research department in Washington, D.C. Helping small business owners is a cause close to my heart. For nearly 30 years, my family has owned a barbecue restaurant in the Washington, D.C. area. I've worked in the business at several different times, since the age of 14. Because of my involvement in my family's business, I understand the unique problems facing small business owners. At the NFIB, I valued my contributions because I know small businesses have a huge economic impact on our country and they are unquestionably an important constituency. Nevertheless, I felt uncomfortable working for a special interest group--even for one I deeply cared about.

From my experiences at the APAA and the NFIB, I have learned how I want to shape my future. My goals are now clear: I want to develop and advocate policy decisions that will benefit society as a whole, not just a few influential special interest groups. I want to uncover the objective truth of issues and tackle them in the best interests of the nation, not distort the facts for the benefit of a small group. I know I am able to look beyond partisan politics to solve problems for this country. Because of these unbending desires to reveal truth and to remain

committed to fair and equal advancement for all citizens, I think of myself as an ideal candidate for public service.

Additionally, I consider my active interest in politics to aid my pursuit of a career in public policy. I've always found my interest in politics exceptional, ever since my college roommates used to tease me for faithfully watching C-SPAN. However, my faith in the political process began to wane as I witnessed sensible public policy proposals torn apart by partisan conflict. I saw advocacy groups distort facts, and provide extreme, over-blown examples, jeopardizing prudent policy decisions. I observed how powerful elected officials, ensnared in their own partisan rancor, would block fair and balanced legislation which offered the most practical solution for their constituents. But I also encountered many thoughtful and wise people who devote their lives to public service. These devoted individuals inspired me. Like them, I want to be actively involved in the design and delivery of essential government services that improve the lives of the citizens in our society today. I am positive that by avoiding partisanship and urging the private industry, the public sector and non-profit groups to collaborate, many difficult problems can be resolved.

In order to be an effective public servant, I recognize the indispensability of an advanced degree. I've gained a lot of "real world" experience, but I need more training in the fundamentals of economics and statistics, as well as direction in sharpening my analytical and quantitative skills. I also want to devote time to studying the ethical dimensions of policy decisions. In graduate school, I'll have the opportunity to truly understand and appreciate the competing interests surrounding so many complex issues like health care reform, environmental protection and economic policy.

I've chosen Duke's public policy program for several reasons. Duke's program stands out because there is an emphasis on quantitative and analytical skills, which are so critical to policy analysis. As I mentioned, I feel that if I can strengthen my ability to approach problems logically and systematically, I will have succeeded in sharpening skills I consider necessary to succeed in the public realm. And possibly even more importantly, Duke's program bridges the gap between abstract principles and reality. This interdisciplinary approach is essential for responding to today's policy problems. I am excited by the possibility of combining the MPP program with the Health Policy Certificate Program. I am particularly interested in studying the problem of reforming state health to reduce the number of uninsured, and I believe Duke's curriculum will offer me a chance to do just that. From my own research into Duke, I feel confident in my knowledge of the public policy program and its potential to teach me. And after meeting with Helen Ladd, the Director of Graduate Studies, I'm even more convinced that Duke's program is right for me.

On the road "to be nobody but" myself, I've encountered twists and turns, and some detours--it is unquestionably the hardest battle I could fight. However, in the process, I've accumulated a tremendous amount of valuable experience and knowledge. My diversity of experience is my biggest asset. Because I can relate a Duke education to concrete examples from my own past, it is the perfect time for me to join the public policy program. I know that my past can be used

to prepare myself for the promises of the future. At Duke, I hope to synthesize the two and truly learn what it means to become myself.

Research Interests

Read the instructions carefully: Sometimes schools will ask for a statement of purpose describing your specific research interests in lieu of, or in addition to, a personal statement that emphasizes your character and qualities. For these types of essays, you can assume that a faculty member will be reading your statement, but it should still be accessible enough for a non-specialist to understand. Remember that such essays should also still aim to engage the reader, in a way that conveys your own enthusiasm for the subject matter.

[This applicant](#) demonstrates the depth of her knowledge about her subject. To engage the reader, she identifies specific problems that she hopes to investigate: "My junior year and private studies of Anglo-Saxon language and literature have caused me to consider the question of where the divisions between folklore, folk literature, and high literature lie. Should I attend your school, I would like to resume my studies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with special attention to its folk elements." The essay is not scholarly, but it offers a glimpse of her intellectual character and proves the maturity of her goals.

Sample Essay

Having majored in literary studies (world literature) as an undergraduate, I would now like to concentrate on English and American literature.

I am especially interested in nineteenth-century literature, women's literature, Anglo-Saxon poetry, and folklore and folk literature. My personal literary projects have involved some combination of these subjects. For the oral section of my comprehensive exams, I specialized in nineteenth-century novels by and about women. The relationship between "high" and folk literature became the subject for my honors essay, which examined Toni Morrison's use of classical, biblical, African, and Afro-American folk tradition in her novel. I plan to work further on this essay, treating Morrison's other novels and perhaps preparing a paper suitable for publication.

In my studies toward a doctoral degree, I hope to examine more closely the relationship between high and folk literature. My junior year and private studies of Anglo-Saxon language and literature have caused me to consider the question of where the divisions between folklore, folk literature, and high literature lie. Should I attend your school, I would like to resume my studies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with special attention to its folk elements.

Writing poetry also figures prominently in my academic and professional goals. I have just begun submitting to the smaller journals with some success and am gradually building a

working manuscript for a collection. The dominant theme of this collection relies on poems that draw from classical, biblical, and folk traditions, as well as everyday experience, in order to celebrate the process of giving and taking life, whether literal or figurative. My poetry both draws from and influences my academic studies. Much of what I read and study finds a place in my creative work as subject. At the same time, I study the art of literature by taking part in the creative process, experimenting with the tools used by other authors in the past.

In terms of a career, I see myself teaching literature, writing criticism, and going into editing or publishing poetry. Doctoral studies would be valuable to me in several ways. First, your teaching assistantship program would provide me with the practical teaching experience I am eager to acquire. Further, earning a Ph.D. in English and American literature would advance my other two career goals by adding to my skills, both critical and creative, in working with language. Ultimately, however, I see the Ph.D. as an end in itself, as well as a professional stepping-stone; I enjoy studying literature for its own sake and would like to continue my studies on the level demanded by the Ph.D. program.

Addressing the School

While professional schools tend to have similar curricula, the differences between graduate programs abound. The highest ranked institution in your basic subject might not be strong in the particular areas that you want to pursue. Moreover, graduate school involves more direct faculty relationships, so you want to evaluate your potential mentors carefully.

You should do this research for your own sake, of course, but discussing your discoveries in your personal statement can help convince the admissions committee that you are a good fit. Avoid mistakes like discussing the school's rank or prestige, or simply offering generic praise. Instead, mention faculty members by name and indicate some knowledge of their work. Discuss your interest in becoming involved in a particular student organization or activity. Consider contacting faculty members first and discussing their current research projects and your interest in studying under them. Then refer to these contacts in your essay. You may also want to discuss your interest in becoming involved in a particular student organization or activity.

[This applicant](#) demonstrates a carefully considered interest in the school's program in paragraphs 7 and 8. She explains, for example, that this particular university's cross-disciplinary focus holds a specific appeal for her. Additionally, she reveals an in-depth understanding of the work of one of the school's faculty members, mentioning Akhil Gupta by name and expounding upon Dr. Gupta's influence upon her own work.

My freshman year at Harvard, I was sitting in a Postcolonial African Literature class when Professor Ngugi wa Thiong'o (the influential Kenyan author) succeeded in attracting me to the study of African literature through nothing more than a single sentence. He argued that, when a civilization adopts reading and writing as the chief form of social communication, it frees itself to forget its own values, because those values no longer have to be part of a lived reality in order to have significance. I was immediately fascinated by the idea that the written word can alter individual lives, affect one's identity, and perhaps even shape national identity.

Professor Ngugi's proposal forced me to think in a radically new way: I was finally confronted with the notion of literature not as an agent of vital change, but as a potential instrument of stasis and social stagnancy. I began to question the basic assumptions with which I had, until then, approached the field. How does "literature" function away from the written page, in the lives of individuals and societies? What is the significance of the written word in a society where the construction of history is not necessarily recorded or even linear?

I soon discovered that the general scope of comparative literature fell short of my expectations because it didn't allow students to question the inherent integrity or subjectivity of their discourse. We were being told to approach Asian, African, European, and American texts with the same analytical tools, ignoring the fact that, within each culture, literature may function in a different capacity, and with a completely different sense of urgency. Seeking out ways in which literature tangibly impacted societies, I began to explore other fields, including history, philosophy, anthropology, language, and performance studies.

The interdisciplinary nature of my work is best illustrated by my senior thesis ("Time Out of Joint: Issues of Temporality in the Songs of Okot p'Bitek"). In addition to my literary interpretations, the thesis drew heavily on both the Ugandan author's own cultural treatises and other anthropological, psychological, and philosophical texts. By using tools from other disciplines, I was able to interpret the literary works while developing insight into the Ugandan society and popular psychology that gave birth to the horrific Idi Amin regime. In addition, I was able to further understand how people interacted with the works and incorporated (or failed to incorporate) them into their individual, social, and political realities.

On a more practical level, writing the thesis also confirmed my suspicion that I would like to pursue an academic career. When I finished my undergraduate career, I felt that a couple of years of professional work would give me a better perspective of graduate school. I decided to secure a position which would grant me experiences far removed from the academic world, yet which would also permit me to continue developing the research and writing skills I needed to tackle the challenges of graduate school. I have fulfilled this goal by working as a content developer at a Silicon Alley web start-up for two years. The experience has been both enjoyable and invaluable -- to the point where colleagues glance at me with a puzzled look when I tell them I am leaving the job to return to school. In fact, my willingness to leave such a dynamic, high-paying job to pursue my passion for literature only reflects my keen determination to continue along the academic path.

Through a Masters program, I plan to further explore the issues I confronted during my undergraduate years by integrating the study of social, cultural, and linguistic anthropology into the realm of literature. I believe that, by adopting tools used in such disciplines, methods of inquiry can be formulated that allow for the interpretation of works that are both technically sound and sociologically insightful. Thus far, my studies have concentrated largely on African and Caribbean literatures, and I am particularly interested in studying these geographic areas in more specific historical and cultural contexts. I also seek to increase my knowledge of African languages, which will allow me to study the lingering cultural impact of colonialism in modern-day African literature. Eventually, I would like to secure an academic post in a Comparative Literature department, devoting myself to both research and teaching at the college level.

I believe the Modern Thought and Literature program at NAME is uniquely equipped to guide me toward these objectives. While searching for a graduate school that would accommodate my interdisciplinary approach, I was thrilled to find a program that approaches world literature with a cross-disciplinary focus, recognizing that the written word has the potential to be an entry point for social and cultural inquiry.

The level of scholarly research produced by the department also attracts me. Akhil Gupta's "Culture, Power, Place", for instance, was one of my first and most influential experiences with the field of cultural anthropology. Professor Gupta's analysis of the local, national, and foreign realms, achieved through a discussion of post-colonial displacement and mixed identifications, has led me to believe that -- given the complexity of modern societies -- comparative literature's focus on borders (national and linguistic) has been excessively arbitrary. Even more significant is the accurate rendering of individually-lived realities that may then be synthesized with other experiences. I believe that I could greatly benefit from Professor Gupta's teaching and guidance in applying these ideas to the literary arena, and I believe that his work is representative of the rigorous yet creative approach I would pursue upon joining the department.

Similarly, [this applicant](#), after describing how her laboratory experience has led to a heightened interest in neurological diseases and their underlying causes, demonstrates in detail how Mt. Sinai's Ph.D. program is an excellent fit for her. She is clearly familiar with Mt. Sinai's faculty, which includes many experts in her field of interest, several of whom she mentions by name. Note, however, that mentioning several professors is not as effective as describing one in further depth. The previous applicant left no doubt that she knew Dr. Gupta's work well, while it's not clear that this applicant did anything more than superficially research the areas of specialization of four professors.

 **Sample Essay**

My long-term goal is to dedicate myself to the research field of neuroscience. In order to achieve this goal, I hope to acquire my Ph.D. at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine starting in the fall of 2000.

In 1992, I obtained my MA degree in Molecular Microbiology from Indiana University, Bloomington. At I.U., I received intensive training by Dr. Roger Innes in experimental design, logical thinking, and molecular genetics techniques. After I graduated from I.U., I became a lab supervisor in the clinical cytogenetic laboratory at Tzu Chi College of Medicine, Taiwan. The lab is part of TCCM's newly established genetic research team directed by Dr. Ming-Liang Lee. My responsibilities at the lab included training lab technicians, improving testing accuracy by consistently improving technical skills and knowledge, and managing the lab's day-to-day operations. At TCCM, I also taught several fundamental biology courses, including general biology, cell biology, and medical genetics laboratory.

After five years of working, I decided to pursue more advanced research training in the latest techniques of microbiology. Since the fall of 1998, I have been taking several Ph.D.-level courses at New York University. I have performed very well in my studies there, which have been supported by a fellowship from Taiwan's National Science Council. My courses at NYU are Biochemistry I and II, Molecular Principles of Evolution, Cell Biology, Molecular Controls of Organism Form and Function, Neuroimmunology Journal Club, and Physiology Basis of Behavior. I am also researching in Dr. Joseph LeDoux's lab for credit. At this lab, I have been using immunohistochemistry to detect the activation of track receptors in rat brains after fear conditioning. One of the tracks, *trkB*, responds to BDNF, which is related to synaptogenesis and LTP induction in the processes of learning and memory. My results have shown that the phosphorylation peak of *trk* appears in the hippocampal CA1 area 24 hours after fear conditioning. Further blocking experiments using *trk* antagonist need to be performed in order to confirm this result.

My laboratory experience has triggered my strong interest in studying cellular and molecular mechanisms underlying neurological diseases. The majority of patients with these diseases have chromosomal and genetic abnormalities. Most genetic diseases lead to neurological symptoms, and several neurological diseases are associated with strong genetic predispositions. The genetic defects associated with Alzheimer's Disease, alcoholism, Fragile-X Syndrome, Neurofibromatosis, and Parkinson's Disease have already been mapped. However, the links between genes, gene products, neuronal circuits, brain functions, and diseases are still unclear. I am eager to help uncover these links.

I think that Mt. Sinai's Ph.D. program perfectly suits my interests. The faculty includes experts in several divisions of neuroscience. There is an especially large group studying neurological diseases. The group uses various approaches, animal models, and behavioral paradigms to search for the causes of diseases on the molecular, cellular, physiological, and system levels. I am particularly interested in working in Dr. John Morrison's lab, which studies cortical organizations, glutamate receptors, and neurodegenerative disorders; Dr. Patrick Hof's lab, which uses comparative neuroanatomy to study aging; Dr. Giulio Pasinetti's lab, which studies cyclooxygenase and inflammation in Alzheimer's Disease; and Dr. Charles Mobbs's lab, which

uses molecular, histological, behavioral, and electrophysiological methods to study basic mechanisms underlying metabolic diseases and aging.

Mt. Sinai School of Medicine also attracts me because of its location in an extremely nice area of Manhattan. In addition, the strong collaboration between its neuroscience program and its other departments, its affiliated hospital, and many other outstanding New York laboratories will enable me to receive much technical and academic support.

In order to sponsor my Ph.D. education, I have obtained a competitive Ph.D. fellowship from the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu-Chi Foundation, the largest nonprofit organization in Taiwan. The foundation is dedicated to helping needy all over the world, regardless of age, sex, race, and religion. Over the past decades, it has provided worldwide relief and assistance. Its missions focus on charity, medical care, education, and international relief. The founder, Master Chang Yang, was once nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The foundation will support my Ph.D. education for at least four years.

After completing my Ph.D. education, I plan to continue my research and teaching in neuroscience. Thus far, most of the detailed work in studying neurological disease has of necessity been performed in experimental animal systems. However, the progress of human genome mapping might eventually make it possible to test whether the disease mechanisms discovered in animals function in comparable ways in humans. Consequently, in the future, I hope to apply my knowledge of the genes and proteins involved in neurological diseases to develop pharmacological treatment or genetic therapies. I am confident that one day we will have effective drugs to prevent memory loss or aging. We may even be able to cure currently intractable neurological diseases through gene therapies, either in utero or in live humans.

I am confident that Mount Sinai School of Medicine's graduate program will enable me to successfully meet my goals. I also believe that if I am accepted to your Ph.D. program, I will contribute greatly to Mount Sinai's learning environment.

Why Qualified?

Your academic performance will play the most significant role in exhibiting to the admissions committee your qualification for admission. However, the personal statement gives you the opportunity to analyze your background and offer the insight and interpretation that you want your readers to take away from your application.

The best way to prove your qualification is to discuss concrete experiences that show your abilities and qualities. **Details about the process are paramount.** What we mean by the "process" is the path to achievement. The rest of the application has already summarized your accomplishments and activities. Show the reader what you did in concrete terms, and most importantly, **highlight your active roles.**

The experiences that demonstrate your qualification are not necessarily distinct from those that explain your motivation. You shouldn't plan on dividing the essay into two separate sections for each, but rather organize the structure by topic and extrapolate insights as they develop. We will cover structure in greater depth in its own section, but it is important that you begin thinking in terms of an integrated essay.

Research Experience

The best way to demonstrate your qualification for graduate school is to focus on research experience, since research will be your main job for the duration of your studies. Be specific about what you did. If you worked for a year under a professor, you might consider emphasizing one particular project and exploring that in depth. The experience does not have to have been a major undertaking: Any practical experience can be used as long as you demonstrate your enthusiasm and aptitude for the field of study.

Remember to keep the discussion personal. Do not become bogged down in minute details and jargon. Ultimately, the focus of the story should remain on you and your growth or success.

[This applicant](#) cites specific projects to demonstrate both the growth of his interest in psychology research and the skills he has honed in the process. Note, in the third paragraph, that he does not jump to the end result of presenting his paper at a conference. Rather, he shows the work he did--the active role he played--to make that accomplishment possible. Moreover, he concludes this paragraph not with a final word about his research, but with an explanation of what he has gained: "Again, I was involved in all aspects of the experiment, from typing the protocol and administering it to the subjects, to analyzing the data and finally presenting my results."

Sample Essay

Ever since my first psychology lecture, I have been fascinated by the nature of human memory. Indeed, human memory is one of the most tenacious and enigmatic problems ever faced by philosophers and psychologists. The discussion of memory dates back to the early Greeks when Plato and Aristotle originally likened it to a "wax tablet." In 1890, pioneer William James adopted the metaphorical framework and equated memory to a "house" to which thirty years later Sigmund Freud chimed that memory was closer to "rooms in a house." In 1968, Atkinson and Shrifren retained the metaphorical framework but referred to memory as "stores". The fact that the controversy surrounding human memory has been marked more by analogy than definition suggests, however, that memory is a far more complex phenomenon than has been uncovered thus far. I intend to spend the rest of my professional life researching the nature of human memory and solving the riddle posed yet cunningly dodged by generations of philosophers and psychologists.

When I first came to psychology, however, I wanted to be a clinical psychologist. Only upon enrolling in Dr. Helga Noice's Cognitive Psychology course, did I discover the excitement of doing research. The course required us to test our own autobiographical memory by conducting an experiment similar to the one run in 1986 by W. Wagenaar. Over the course of the term, I recorded events from my personal life on event cards and set them aside without reviewing them. After studying the effect serial position on the recollection of autobiographical memories, I hypothesized that events that, when I sat down at the end of term to recall those same events I had described on the event cards, that events that had occurred later in the term would be recalled with greater frequency than events that had occurred earlier. Although the experiment was of simple design and predictable results, I found the processes incredibly exciting. Autobiographical memory in particular fascinated me because I realized how crucial, yet fragile, memory is. Why was my memory of even ten weeks so imperfect? What factors contributed to that imperfection? Could such factors be controlled?

I had ignited my passion for experimental psychology. Suddenly, I had many pressing questions about memory that I wanted to research. Under the guidance of Dr. Noice, I continued to study human memory. I worked closely with Dr. Noice on several research experiments involving expert memory, specifically the memory of professional actors. Dr. Noice would select a scene from a play and then a professional actor would score it for beats, that is, go through the scene grouping sections of dialogue together according to the intent of the character. Some actors use this method to learn dialogue rather than rote memorization. After they were finished, I would type up the scene and the cued recall test. Next, I would moderate the experimental sessions by scoring the actor's cued recall for accuracy and then helping with the statistical analysis. My work culminated with my paper, "Teaching Students to Remember Complex Material Through the Use of Professional Actors' Learning Strategies." My paper accompanied a poster presentation at the Third Annual Tri-State Undergraduate Psychology

Conference. In addition, I presented a related paper entitled "Type of Learning Strategy and Verbatim Retention of Complex Material" at the ILLOWA (Illinois-Iowa) Conference the following year. Again, I was involved in all aspects of the experiment, from typing the protocol and administering it to the subjects, to analyzing the data and finally presenting my results.

The opportunity to perform this research was invaluable, particularly as I began taking independent research seminars in my senior year. For the seminars, I was required to write an extensive review of the literature and then design a research proposal on any topic of my choice. Although I had participated in all aspects of research previously, this was my first opportunity to select my own topic. I was immediately certain that I wanted to explore human memory. But I spent a long time considering what aspect of memory I found most intriguing and possible to tackle within the confines of the research seminar. I had always been interested in the legal implications of memory, so I to investigate eyewitness memory.

In retrospect, my choice was also informed by my recollection about an experiment I had read about several years earlier. In the experiment, subjects read about Helen Keller. Later they were given a recall test. Still later they were given an additional test to determine the source of

their knowledge about Helen Keller. The authors discovered that subjects could not determine the source of their knowledge, that is, they could not distinguish whether specific details of their knowledge about Helen Keller came from the information provided by the experimenters or if the details came from another source at an earlier time. Once their new knowledge about Helen Keller had been assimilated into their previous knowledge about Helen Keller, there was no way to separate the information according to the source it came from.

I wondered what the implications of that conclusion would be for eyewitnesses. I wondered if an eyewitness account could be corrupted by misleading post-event information. My research proposal was entitled "The Rate of Memory Trace Decay and its Effect on Eyewitness Accuracy." While I was not able to complete the experiment in its entirety, I was excited by the fact that I created a possible research protocol. Immediately, I knew I wanted to pursue the field of experimental psychology. My success in course work and my passion for research demonstrated to me that I had both the interest and ability to enter this challenging and rewording field.

I have dedicated my undergraduate years to preparing myself for graduate work in experimental psychology. Once receive my doctorate, I intend to pursue research on human memory while teaching psychology to undergraduates at a small, liberal arts college, similar to the one I attended. It was, after all, my undergraduate research experience that gave me the opportunity to come to psychology with an interest in counseling people, but to leave with a passion for investigating the nature of human thinking. Undergraduates at smaller liberal arts colleges are often left out of research, which makes my desire to provide such experiences that much stronger. In the years ahead, I look forward to teaching as well as continuing my research. In the company of such greats as Aristotle, James, and Freud, I endeavor to leave behind my own contribution on the nature of human memory.

Field Experience

If the program you're applying to is more practice-oriented, then demonstrating real-world experience can be just as important as academic pursuits.

[This applicant](#) is applying to a computer science program, and he has a couple years of work experience. He explains one specific achievement as follows: "As an MS student at DePaul University, I worked as a network support technician and project manager for Information Services. My most significant accomplishment in this capacity involved the re-wiring of over a thousand dormitory rooms to enable the students to have Internet access with a link to the other four campuses. In doing so, I had to investigate the existing needs of a high-speed Internet network, as well as the transport of bandwidth to support future demands, which are almost impossible to determine." He starts by describing the end result, which in this case is acceptable because he poses it almost as a challenge that he faced, and then he proceeds to explain the concrete tasks he had to perform. In this applicant's case, it's clear that citing

academic work could not prove the same level of skill that he has done by drawing on real-world experiences.

Sample Essay

For the past two and a half years, I have been a professional in the technology field, but now I am preparing to become a professional corporate information officer. Although my work has introduced me to specific areas of information technology, (including telecommunications, network wiring and databases) I have recently become intrigued with the field of information security. I am concerned about the vulnerability of the company I work for, particularly with regard to employee and client information. The specialty phase of your Professional program appears to be well endowed with the resources needed to address such concerns.

While my undergraduate and MS curriculum exposed me to a wide variety of computer science topics, I have gained extensive knowledge in the area of network infrastructure development. As an MS student at DePaul University, I worked as a network support technician and project manager for Information Services. My most significant accomplishment in this capacity involved the re-wiring of over a thousand dormitory rooms to enable the students to have Internet access with a link to the other four campuses. In doing so, I had to investigate the existing needs of a high-speed Internet network, as well as the transport of bandwidth to support future demands, which are almost impossible to determine.

As a result of my experiences in the dormitory project, I was well prepared for the challenges that awaited me as the manager of Information Services at the Transportation Center at Northwestern University. My primary task was to build a state-of-the-art network infrastructure that would support a leading graduate research center in the transportation field. In a succinct and convincing manner, I had to demonstrate my vision in building the foundation and developing the budget, as well as managing the project, purchasing, installation and finally, deployment of my plan. My success in leading this project and utilizing the newly installed technical tools to empower the Center's goals led to the realization of similar goals and projects in a corporate environment.

Currently, I am the manager of Information Systems at Active Screw and Fastener, where I am responsible for the entire IT unit. Although my strengths are concentrated in the area of Information Technology, I do not want to limit myself to building and maintaining data networks. Through a focused program of study, my goal is to develop expertise in information security, an area that is becoming more and more critical to all information systems managers. As my company grows, I must also be capable of providing the necessary growth in its IT functions to enable people to share information with confidence. It is imperative that sensitive data assets, be it personal or corporate, will not be vulnerable to Cybercrime or compromised by unauthorized users.

The key to becoming a successful Tech manager and future CIO is the ability to demonstrate that a company's secret information resources are in alignment with corporate priorities. The

Chicago Professional Programs in Computer Science will give me extensive exposure to information security, and will allow me to take a step toward securing the infrastructures that I have already built. With its strong cadre of experienced faculty, Chicago will prepare me to become a solid senior technical manager and partner with an enlightened vision towards the new directions manifesting in the information security field.

Unrelated Work Experience

The skill sets needed to thrive in various fields often overlap, and some qualities are essential everywhere. If you have a strong record in an unrelated field, you should not hesitate to discuss this, though the more you can tie the discussion in with your current objectives, the better.

[This applicant](#) is applying to a graduate program in geology, but he devotes some space to his work experience in computers: "During the past 18 months I have had firsthand experience with computers in a wide array of business applications. This has stimulated me to think about ways in which computers could be used for scientific research. One idea that particularly fascinates me is mathematical modeling of natural systems, and I think those kinds of techniques could be put to good use in geological science." This particular link is not only relevant, but also offers a unique angle, since few geology students would think to emphasize computers and mathematical modeling. Note, however, that the applicant could have described his work in computers in further depth before returning to geology. You should explore experiences on their own terms before trying to force connections.

Sample Essay

I have been planning a career in geological sciences for several years, but as an undergraduate I concentrated on getting a solid background in math and science. After graduation, I took a job to allow myself time to thoroughly think through my plans and to expose myself to a variety of work situations. This strategy has been very valuable to me in rounding out my career plans.

During the past 18 months I have had firsthand experience with computers in a wide array of business applications. This has stimulated me to think about ways in which computers could be used for scientific research. One idea that particularly fascinates me is mathematical modeling of natural systems, and I think those kinds of techniques could be put to good use in geological science. I have always enjoyed and been strong in areas that require logical, analytical thought, and I am anxious to combine my interest in earth science with my knowledge of, and aptitude for, computer-related work. There are several specific areas that I have already studied that I think would lend themselves to research based on computing techniques, including mineral phase relations in igneous petrology and several topics in structural geology.

I have had both lecture/lab and field courses in structural geology, as well as a short module dealing with plate tectonics, and I am very interested in the whole area. I would like to explore structural geology and tectonics further at the graduate level. I am also interested in learning more about geophysics. I plan to focus on all these areas in graduate school while at the same time continuing to build up my overall knowledge of geology.

My ultimate academic goal is to earn a Ph.D., but enrolling first in a master's program will enable me to explore my various interests and make a more informed decision about which specific discipline I will want to study in depth.

As far as long-term plans, I hope to get a position at a university or other institution where I can indulge my primary impulse, which is to be involved in scientific research, and also try my hand at teaching.

The links provided by [this applicant](#) are far broader, but still effective. Though she is applying to a Master of Library Service program, she discusses volunteer experience in a nonprofit organization: "My work for the organization has taken a number of forms over the years, but can be summed up as gathering information, both practical and technical, and using human relations skills to make it accessible to others." Basic qualities such as "human relations skills" could have a wide variety of applications, but that fact doesn't diminish their relevance to the applicant's future in library service.

Sample Essay

Notice how this successful applicant avoids the expository-resume approach by focusing on two or three particular experiences and evaluating them in terms of her current outlook and educational goals. Also notice how the discussion about her children's activities, while seemingly unnecessary to make her central point, helps to bring the essay down to a more personal level.

My first employment in a library was in a work-study project during college. My duties included some shelving and a lot of typing of catalog cards. I remember the sturdy metal stacks, with so many captivating books tempting me as I tried to reshelve all that were on the carts. Mostly I remember the typing; agonizingly laborious since I was not a skilled typist, and formatting was so important. I came to understand much about the way the cataloguing system worked, and was grateful in the years to come when I needed to locate things for my own studies . . . or for my children.

For more than fifteen years now I have been working as a volunteer for La Leche League International, a grass roots, non-profit, self-help organization supporting and promoting breastfeeding. My work for the organization has taken a number of forms over the years, but can be summed up as gathering information, both practical and technical, and using human

relations skills to make it accessible to others. My experience helping women access breast-feeding information and empowering them to use that information has convinced me that information alone is not nearly as useful as information plus a skilled guide.

One of my greatest pleasures in recent years has been writing a regular column-"Keeping Up-to-Date"-for La Leche League's bimonthly international newsletter. Through this experience I have seen a vivid contrast between the substantive quality of information formally prepared-with the discipline and rigor of a traditional publishing and review schedule and with clear authorship-and the casual unstructured nature of electronic bulletin board postings, faxes, e-mail, and other products of newer technologies. I am practically, though peripherally, aware of some of the problems our society faces in an era when intellectual property suddenly has so many new forms. I am eager to be a well-informed participant in the discussion of intellectual participation.

This week I found myself intrigued again by cataloguing when I needed to outfit my youngest son, now twelve, with a juggler's outfit for the school play. An initial subject search for "costumes" in the OPAC system at our township library was fruitless. Only when I thought to enter "costume" without the plural "s" did the system yield all the information I needed. What frustration! This confluence of technology and information, especially as it affects accessibility, fascinates me.

The degree to which your School of Communication, Information and Library Studies openly accepts the challenge to explore and lead in the information revolution is seductive. What a serendipity that this school is practically in my backyard! The strengths and attributes I bring to your school are a caring and careful nature, proven academic excellence, experience in writing and speaking for a variety of audiences, and a practical knowledge of working with volunteers and professionals. The durability of my enthusiasm for libraries and the people who work in and love them convinces me that the Master of Library Service program is indeed the right way for me to continue my formal education.

Extracurricular Activities

It is very possible to demonstrate the relevant qualities you possess for graduate school through extracurricular activities. The approaches you take will essentially be the same as those we discussed in the above two sections, Field Experience and Unrelated Work Experience, depending on whether the activity is related or not. In the Library Service case cited above, for example, the applicant was drawing on volunteer rather than work experiences, but the purposes were the same.

Why Unique?

You cannot rely on uniqueness to outweigh a mediocre academic record, but it can often give you an edge. Admissions officers are interested in assembling a diverse class of unique perspectives, so you should highlight rather than downplay your differences. To an extent, all types of diversity will help, but you should aim to focus on how unique aspects of your background will enable you to contribute to the academic community.

The purpose of this lesson is to show you examples of how other people capitalized on their unique qualities. When it comes to your own essay, only you can identify the optimal strategy for making yourself stand out. One way to start is to look over your answers to the brainstorming questions and try to find aspects of your background that separate you from your peers. Ultimately, however, what will make the difference is your ability to assess yourself honestly and thoughtfully.

The examples that follow are not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, they represent the efforts of particular individuals to recognize the unique elements of their background and use them to their advantage. You should notice that these unique elements are often directly related to their academic interests, but can still be tied effectively to the applicants' goals or integrated with their character and background.

[This applicant](#) starts by noting the diversity of his ethnic and religious background. When mentioning such points, you should not assume that such diversity is an end in itself. Rather, you should show how your background and culture have shaped your perspective and given you something unique to offer. This applicant does a good job of noting how Zoroastrianism has given him guiding principles, but he never follows through to discuss concrete examples. This essay would have benefited from more details to show his diversity in more tangible terms.

Sample Essay

In responding to a question that asked the applicant to describe experiences, events, or persons that have been important in his or her development, this applicant successfully correlated his influences to his current outlook on life.

Perhaps the most important influence that has shaped the person I am today is my upbringing in a traditional family-oriented Persian and Zoroastrian culture. My family has been an important source of support in all of the decisions I have made, and Zoroastrianism's three basic tenets—good words, good deeds, and good thoughts—have been my guiding principles in life. Not only do I try to do things for others, but I always push myself to be the best that I can be in all aspects of my life. I saw early the doors and opportunities that a good education can open up; thus, I particularly tried hard to do well in school.

Another important experience that has had a large influence on me the past few years has been college. Going from high school to college was a significant change. College required a major overhaul of my time-management techniques as the number of things to do

mushroomed. In high school, I was in the honors program, with the same cohort of students in all my classes. Thus, I was exposed little to people very different from myself. College, on the other hand, is full of diversity. I have people of all backgrounds and abilities in my classes, and I have been fortunate enough to meet quite a few of them. This experience has made me more tolerant of differences. Furthermore, a variety of classes such as the Humanities Core Course, in which we specifically studied differences in race, gender, and belief systems, have liberalized my world view.

My undergraduate research has occupied a large portion of my time in college. Along with this experience have come knowledge and skills that could never be gained in the classroom. I have gained a better appreciation for the medical discoverers and discoveries of the past and the years of frustration endured and satisfaction enjoyed by scientists. I have also learned to deal better with the disappointments and frustrations that result when things do not always go as one expects them to. My research experience was also important to me in that it broadened my view of the medical field. Research permitted me to meet a few medical doctors who have clinical practices and yet are able to conduct research at the university. This has made me seriously consider combining research with a clinical practice in my own career.

From my earliest memories, I can always remember being interested in meteorology. I believe that this interest sparked my love for the outdoors, while my interest in medicine molded my desire for healthy living. As a result of these two influences, I try to follow an active exercise routine taking place mostly in the outdoors. I enjoy running and mountain biking in the local hills and mountains, along with hiking and backpacking. All of these activities have made me concerned about the environment and my place in it.

[This applicant's](#) story is fascinating, at times harrowing, and ultimately triumphant. From committed social activism to drug and alcohol addiction to a reengagement with the world, the author pulls no punches in telling his unique tale. While he does not whitewash his experience with drugs and alcohol, notice how he situates it in a larger context, showing both how it made him oblivious to the things he really cared about (Third World injustices) and how his reintroduction to those things helped him pull himself out of his downward spiral. In doing so, he demonstrates both a strong social conscience and a dedication to his beliefs. Additionally, his story makes him very hard for an admissions committee to forget. Just be careful that any discussion of past mistakes or difficulties leads to an indubitably positive conclusion.

Sample Essay

My longtime fascination with politics and international affairs is reflected in my participation, starting in high school, in activities such as student council, school board meetings, Vietnam war protests, the McCarthy campaign, and the grape boycott. As each new cause came along, I was always ready to go to Washington or the state capital to wave a sign or chant slogans. Although I look back on these activities today with some chagrin, I realize they did help me to

develop, at an early age, a sense of concern for social and political issues and a genuine desire to play a role.

As an undergraduate, I was more interested in social than academic development. During my last two years, I became involved with drugs and alcohol and devoted little time to my studies, doing only as much as was necessary to maintain a B average. After graduation my drug use became progressively worse; without the motivation or ability to look for a career job, I worked for a time in a factory and then, for three years, as a cab driver in New York City.

In 1980 I finally "hit bottom" and became willing to accept help. I joined both Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, and for the next several years the primary business of my life was recovery. Although I had several "slips" in the beginning, I have now enjoyed nearly seven years of complete freedom from drug and alcohol use. I mention my bout with addiction because I think it is important in answering two issues that presumably will be of concern to the admissions committee: my lackluster undergraduate record and the fact that I have waited until the age of 34 to begin preparing academically for a career in public policy. It would be an oversimplification to call addiction the cause for either of these things; rather I would say it was the most obvious manifestation of an underlying immaturity that characterized my post adolescent years. More importantly, the discipline of recovery has had a significant impact on my overall emotional growth.

During the last years of my addiction I was completely oblivious to the world around me. Until 1983 I didn't even realize that there had been a revolution in Nicaragua or that one was going on in El Salvador. Then I rejoined the Quaker Meeting, in which I had been raised as a child, and quickly gravitated to its Peace and Social Order Committee. They were just then initiating a project to help refugees from Central America, and I joined enthusiastically in the work. I began reading about Central America and, later, teaching myself Spanish. I got to know refugees who were victims of poverty and oppression, became more grateful for my own economic and educational advantages, and developed a strong desire to give something back by working to provide opportunities to those who have not been so lucky.

In 1986 I went to Nicaragua to pick coffee for two weeks. This trip changed my whole outlook on both the United States and the underdeveloped world. The combination of living for two weeks amid poverty and engaging in long political discussions with my fellow coffee pickers, including several well-educated professionals who held views significantly to the left of mine, profoundly shook my world view. I came back humbled, aware of how little I knew about the world and eager to learn more. I began raiding the public library for everything I could find on the Third World and started subscribing to a wide variety of periodicals, from scholarly journals such as Foreign Affairs and Asian Survey to obscure newsletters such as Through Our Eyes (published by U.S. citizens living in Nicaragua).

Over the intervening two years, my interest has gradually focused on economics. I have come to realize that economic development (including equitable distribution of wealth) is the key to peace and social justice, both at home and in the Third World. I didn't study economics in college and have found it difficult to understand the economic issues that are at the heart of

many policy decisions. At the same time, though, I am fascinated by the subject. Given my belief that basic economic needs are among the most fundamental of human rights, how can society best go about providing for them? Although I call myself an idealist, I'm convinced that true idealism must be pragmatic. I am not impressed, for example, by simplistic formulations that require people to be better than they are. As a Quaker I believe that the means are inseparable from the end; as an American I believe that democracy and freedom of expression are essential elements of a just society, though I'm not wedded to the idea that our version of democracy is the only legitimate one.

Although I have carved out a comfortable niche in my present job, with a responsible position and a good salary, I have become increasingly dissatisfied with the prospect of a career in business applications programming. More and more of my time and energy is now being absorbed by community activities. After getting my master's in public administration, I would like to work in the area of economic development in the Third World, particularly Latin America. The setting might be a private (possibly church-based) development agency, the UN, the OAS, one of the multilateral development banks, or a government agency. What I need from graduate school is the academic foundation for such a career. What I offer in return is a perspective that comes from significant involvement in policy issues at the grass roots level, where they originate and ultimately must be resolved.

[This applicant](#) shows that you do not need to be a true one-of-a-kind to demonstrate uniqueness in the admissions process. In fact, what sets him apart is a rather typical job in the computer industry. What makes his application unique, however, is that he is applying to a geological sciences program. His interest in mathematical modeling gives him a novel area of specialization to offer to the intellectual diversity of the program.

Sample Essay

I have been planning a career in geological sciences for several years, but as an undergraduate I concentrated on getting a solid background in math and science. After graduation, I took a job to allow myself time to thoroughly think through my plans and to expose myself to a variety of work situations. This strategy has been very valuable to me in rounding out my career plans.

During the past 18 months I have had firsthand experience with computers in a wide array of business applications. This has stimulated me to think about ways in which computers could be used for scientific research. One idea that particularly fascinates me is mathematical modeling of natural systems, and I think those kinds of techniques could be put to good use in geological science. I have always enjoyed and been strong in areas that require logical, analytical thought, and I am anxious to combine my interest in earth science with my knowledge of, and aptitude for, computer-related work. There are several specific areas that I have already studied that I think would lend themselves to research based on computing

techniques, including mineral phase relations in igneous petrology and several topics in structural geology.

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My ultimate academic goal is to earn a Ph.D., but enrolling first in a master's program will enable me to explore my various interests and make a more informed decision about which specific discipline I will want to study in depth.

As far as long-term plans, I hope to get a position at a university or other institution where I can indulge my primary impulse, which is to be involved in scientific research, and also try my hand at teaching.

Finally, [this applicant](#) shows that a personal, revealing story can be enough to set someone apart. By recounting a particular episode that sparked her epiphany as a writer, she gives us an in-depth look at her unique approach to her craft. Again, this essay does not discuss exotic experiences, but instead succeeds by painting a detailed, deeply personal portrait that no one else could have written.

Sample Essay

This applicant recounts a particular incident that gives the reader real insight into what makes her "tick." Notice, by the way, that the discussion of religion is handled in a way that is not likely to offend any reader.

Two years ago, when I was a junior in college, I wrote a story entitled "It Came from Catholic School." My friends, fellow veterans of plaid uniforms and daily masses, liked it and encouraged me to submit it when the English department magazine made its annual call for stories. They published the story and asked me to read from it at a reading primarily devoted to student poetry. Well, I was pretty nervous about this. The only readings I'd done before a crowd were Paul's letters to the Ephesians and the occasional Responsorial Psalm-and that wasn't my writing on the line. I grew more nervous as I sat there that night, listening to poem after poem on angst and ennui. I couldn't imagine how the students and faculty around me, who were all listening intently with properly contorted faces, would respond to my grotesque little girl. But I stood up and read a passage, a little shaky at first. Then I heard laughs, where I'd hoped I would, and also in places that surprised me. After the reading, people wanted to shake my hand. One woman thanked me for injecting a little levity into the proceedings. I felt satisfaction in my work as never before.

At that reading, I realized I could write things that made people laugh-not just friends who felt obligated, but complete strangers. I really liked that feeling, and it's the promise of that laughter that motivates me to continue writing. I also realized that my work wasn't frivolous, that I could influence a reader, that my characters seemed real. For the first time, I felt that I could do what I really wanted to do-write.

I look forward to progressing through a series of intimate workshops en route to an MFA degree at your school. The interdisciplinary nature of the program appeals to me. Although I want to concentrate on Fiction, I would like to take screenwriting electives as well. I think my humor translates well to teleplays, and I would like to explore that avenue through the comedy writing courses your school offers. I aim to develop my natural strengths- humor, voice, and dialogue, while experimenting with the genres.

Because I'm generally at the mercy of my characters, I can't outline a specific writing goal. I do envision myself producing a collection of short stories featuring female protagonists. Women's issues are implicit in my writing, and I would welcome the chance to study with [faculty name]. My stories feature a range of women-from the precocious heroine of the aforementioned story to a "white trash" cashier, and I plan to cover a still broader scope. Mainly, I'm looking to devote myself to the work. And I hope to make some people laugh along the way.

Explain Blemishes

Certain parts of your application may call for an explanation. Such aspects might include any of the following:

- Undergraduate grades
- Entrance exam scores
- Deficiency in the number of letters of recommendation submitted
- Lack of work experience
- Lack of extracurricular activities
- Why you are applying again after being denied previously
- Gaps in the chronological account of your education or employment
- Disciplinary action by an institution of higher education
- Criminal record

Under what circumstances should you use your personal statement to explain a particular deficiency, weakness, or other blemish? First of all, the application might explicitly invite you to explain deficiencies, weaknesses, aberrations, or any other aspect of the application that might not accurately reflect your abilities or potential and fitness for graduate study. Schools almost without exception ask specifically about the last two items above (see [Disclosing Skeletons in Your Closet](#) below). Although most applications do not explicitly provide room for such explanations of the other items, the schools nevertheless permit and generally

encourage applicants to provide brief explanations. Most schools suggest that you attach an addendum to your personal statement for this purpose while reserving the personal statement itself for positive information about yourself. If you are in doubt about the policy and preferred procedure of a particular school, contact the school directly.

Another point you should keep in mind is whether you have a valid reason. Staying up late the night before the GRE is not a legitimate reason for a bad performance, while documented sickness could be. A particularly bad semester could be explained by a death or illness in the family. If you lack research experience, you might point out the number of hours you had to work to make college more affordable for you and your family.

There are many more gray areas. For example, is it worth noting that you simply have a bad history of standardized testing? Doing so tactfully (in other words, don't rail against the arbitrariness of tests or demand the right to be considered for your grades alone) can help the schools understand your exact situation, but it most likely won't have a substantial effect on their perspective, since they know to take into account the imprecision of standardized tests. What about the class for which you simply did not grasp the material, or a sub-par GPA during your freshman year? Again, what you have to say won't constitute an extenuating circumstance, since everyone has weaknesses and faces the same challenge of adjusting to college. Your best approach might be to try to transform such blemishes into something positive by pointing out particular courses in which you performed well, especially those that were more advanced, more relevant to your intended career path, or more recent.

Finally, make sure that you do not take a contentious tone. Don't accuse your teachers of unfair grading standards or complain about lack of extracurricular opportunities at your school. Be clear that you're not trying to excuse yourself of responsibility, but emphasize that you simply want the schools to have the complete picture.

[This applicant](#) clarifies one aberrant semester by explaining his decision to switch majors. Everyone recognizes the rigors of the pre-med curriculum, so his justification seems legitimate. Although it's not essential to include a positive statement when explaining blemishes, notice that the following sentence helps to ensure that the reader will not conclude that the applicant is making excuses or protesting too much: "The difficulty I faced in that advanced history course and in maintaining my status in chemistry and ecology courses affected my grades for the semester, but was a crucible out of which emerged a renewed love for and pursuit of the study of history throughout the rest of my college education." Moreover, it's important that he can point to an upward trend--"I proceeded to improve my cumulative grade point average in each successive semester"--as evidence that this poor semester was indeed an aberration.

Sample Essay

This applicant's cumulative GPA suffered a bit due largely to one difficult semester. He wisely addressed this issue rather than ignoring it, recounting that semester's events in a way that would win over any school's admissions committee.

My grades during the second semester of my freshman year of college declined because of several factors. I had been pursuing a premedical major in biology up to that time, and the spring saw me taking my first college history course which began quickly to erode my interest in pursuing a biology major. I had enjoyed and excelled in history during high school, but upon entry into college decided to take a different direction in my studies. I made the decision to change majors after several more history courses during the following semesters, as I reconciled head and heart. That first history course—a formidable "intellectual history" oriented seminar on the French Enlightenment—was comprised of juniors, seniors and myself, the one lowly freshman. The difficulty I faced in that advanced history course and in maintaining my status in severe and involved chemistry and ecology courses affected my grades for the semester, but was a crucible out of which emerged a renewed love for and pursuit of the study of history throughout the rest of my college education.

Tackling an intellectual history seminar so early made it much easier for me to successfully complete an Honors Thesis in a later Military History seminar. My educational base is, as well, much broader because of my exploration of several different disciplines during college, including the natural sciences, archaeology, art, art history, psychology, and history. Without a tough semester to make me weigh my possibilities, I might not have continued to explore the educational options available and might have remained narrowly focused on medicine. Having temporarily performed below the expectations I had of myself, I proceeded to improve my cumulative grade point average in each successive semester.

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EssayEdge Extra: Disclosing Skeletons In Your Closet

Perhaps you were once the subject of disciplinary action at your undergraduate college. Should you inform the school about this in your application? If so, should you include this discussion in your personal statement? In all likelihood, the application will inquire about academic discipline as well as a criminal record. You will undoubtedly be denied admission (or expelled if you are already matriculating) if the school discovers that you have intentionally concealed disciplinary action or criminal conviction. The admissions committee may very well overlook that indiscretion of youth (e.g., during your freshman year of college) if you bring it into the open and explain the circumstances. Many applicants do not fully appreciate that admissions officials make every effort to afford applicants the benefit of the doubt in such cases.

Lesson Three: Essay Structures

Now that you have seen the complex themes with which you must engage the reader and have begun thinking about the personal details you will use, it's time to begin the daunting task of structuring your essay.

Your first concern should be **clarity**. If your essay is haphazardly structured, the reader simply will not be able to follow your ideas, and your whole purpose will be lost.

Your second concern is focus. An essay could be clear on the sentence or paragraph level, but still lack overall coherence. Perhaps you have written three paragraphs each clearly devoted to one topic, but you haven't shown how each topic contributes to some larger point. The basic focus of every essay is why you should be admitted to the school, but a more specific theme can be helpful. You want your reader to take a clear point away as he or she puts your essay down.

Your third concern is **impact**. Even a clear and coherent essay can fail to achieve the optimal structure that would maximize the essay's overall impact. For example, the overarching theme of an essay might be your desire to help people. After outlining this clear focus in your first paragraph, you go on to write three clear paragraphs each independently offering evidence of your desire to help people. What's lacking is a sense of progression: the reader sees not growth but repetition. To maximize impact, your structure must allow each point to build upon previous points, thereby improving not only your essay's flow, but also the overall force of your argument.

It's important to remember that these three areas overlap. You don't achieve the optimal structure by treating each one as an isolated step, but must keep each one in mind as you plan out your essay.

The first subtopic, **Overarching Themes**, explains how to identify and incorporate the underlying principles or fundamental ideas that will give your essay focus. The second subtopic, **Organization**, details specific approaches to integrating your content in a clear and logical way. The third subtopic, **Narratives**, deals with the tricky issue of incorporating stories and anecdotes in an admissions essay and getting the most out of your details. The final subtopic, **Paragraphs**, explains how to structure individual paragraphs for maximum effectiveness and how to write the important transitions that affect your essay's coherence and impact.

Select One:

- [Overarching Themes](#)
- [Organization](#)
- [Narratives](#)

- [Paragraphs](#)

EssayEdge Extra: The Deceptive Appeal of a Chronological Structure

At face value, the chronological approach seems great for all parties involved. The writer has the easy job of reconstructing his personal history precisely as it happened; the reader can follow the resulting piece with little effort. It's very possible that a chronological essay will turn out to be ideal for your material because your life unfolded in a way that complements your themes, but you should not feel bound to tell your story in the order in which it happened. Here are some specific pitfalls of which you should be aware:

- 1. You may be including too much:** If you start with "I was born on..." and proceed to recite your life's history, you've probably included a great deal of unnecessary information.
- 2. Your essay might be boring and monotonous:** The most enjoyable essays have a sense of drama, which usually requires a more creative structure. Perhaps the introductory paragraph sets up some problem, and the subsequent paragraphs detail attempts to solve that problem. On the other hand, a chronological structure seems inherently like a list.
- 3. You show less thought and effort:** It's obvious to the reader when an essay has been crafted with care and insight. Chronological essays might seem too effortless if there's no authorial imprint.
- 4. You separate naturally related points:** A thematically structured essay puts related points together and allows them to build upon each other. Unless your life developed along thematic lines, a chronological essay would sacrifice the synergy that juxtaposing these points would create.

Overarching Themes

The reason we start with themes is the same reason we suggested you start your brainstorming by thinking about your long-term vision. The overarching theme you decide on

will inform the manner in which you organize the rest of your content. This theme is analogous to the thesis of an academic essay, though it's often less explicitly stated.

When we use the term "theme," we mean something that usually has multiple layers. A strong essay will never boil down to a statement as simple as the following: "My reason for pursuing a graduate degree is X." That kind of theme would invite a repetitive structure that merely includes a series of paragraphs offering evidence for a single point. Instead, your theme should introduce complexities, as in the following: "While Experience A demonstrates my commitment to B Aspect of my chosen field, Experience C drives me toward Objective D."

There are essentially two ways to set forth your theme. The first is to bring it up in the introduction, usually at the end of the first paragraph. At this stage, since you haven't explored your concrete evidence, the theme should subtly indicate the direction the essay will take rather than try to tell the whole story.

The second approach is to ensure a strong flow between paragraphs, connecting each point with previous ones so the underlying theme gradually emerges. Then the conclusion wraps these individual themes together and includes some kind of encapsulation of the material that preceded it. Below we will use examples to illustrate these two tactics:

The Upfront Approach

The theme of [this essay](#) comes at the end of the first paragraph: "Although I look back on these activities today with some chagrin, I realize they did help me to develop, at an early age, a sense of concern for social and political issues and a genuine desire to play a role." At this point, he is referring to specific activities that he somewhat regrets, but this sets the tone for a running contrast between internal struggles and outward concerns.

Sample Essay

My longtime fascination with politics and international affairs is reflected in my participation, starting in high school, in activities such as student council, school board meetings, Vietnam war protests, the McCarthy campaign, and the grape boycott. As each new cause came along, I was always ready to go to Washington or the state capital to wave a sign or chant slogans. Although I look back on these activities today with some chagrin, I realize they did help me to develop, at an early age, a sense of concern for social and political issues and a genuine desire to play a role.

As an undergraduate, I was more interested in social than academic development. During my last two years, I became involved with drugs and alcohol and devoted little time to my studies, doing only as much as was necessary to maintain a B average. After graduation my drug use became progressively worse; without the motivation or ability to look for a career job, I worked for a time in a factory and then, for three years, as a cab driver in New York City.

In 1980 I finally "hit bottom" and became willing to accept help. I joined both Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, and for the next several years the primary business of my life was recovery. Although I had several "slips" in the beginning, I have now enjoyed nearly seven years of complete freedom from drug and alcohol use. I mention my bout with addiction because I think it is important in answering two issues that presumably will be of concern to the admissions committee: my lackluster undergraduate record and the fact that I have waited until the age of 34 to begin preparing academically for a career in public policy. It would be an oversimplification to call addiction the cause for either of these things; rather I would say it was the most obvious manifestation of an underlying immaturity that characterized my post adolescent years. More importantly, the discipline of recovery has had a significant impact on my overall emotional growth.

During the last years of my addiction I was completely oblivious to the world around me. Until 1983 I didn't even realize that there had been a revolution in Nicaragua or that one was going on in El Salvador. Then I rejoined the Quaker Meeting, in which I had been raised as a child, and quickly gravitated to its Peace and Social Order Committee. They were just then initiating a project to help refugees from Central America, and I joined enthusiastically in the work. I began reading about Central America and, later, teaching myself Spanish. I got to know refugees who were victims of poverty and oppression, became more grateful for my own economic and educational advantages, and developed a strong desire to give something back by working to provide opportunities to those who have not been so lucky.

In 1986 I went to Nicaragua to pick coffee for two weeks. This trip changed my whole outlook on both the United States and the underdeveloped world. The combination of living for two weeks amid poverty and engaging in long political discussions with my fellow coffee pickers, including several well-educated professionals who held views significantly to the left of mine, profoundly shook my world view. I came back humbled, aware of how little I knew about the world and eager to learn more. I began raiding the public library for everything I could find on the Third World and started subscribing to a wide variety of periodicals, from scholarly journals such as Foreign Affairs and Asian Survey to obscure newsletters such as Through Our Eyes (published by U.S. citizens living in Nicaragua).

Over the intervening two years, my interest has gradually focused on economics. I have come to realize that economic development (including equitable distribution of wealth) is the key to peace and social justice, both at home and in the Third World. I didn't study economics in college and have found it difficult to understand the economic issues that are at the heart of many policy decisions. At the same time, though, I am fascinated by the subject. Given my belief that basic economic needs are among the most fundamental of human rights, how can society best go about providing for them? Although I call myself an idealist, I'm convinced that true idealism must be pragmatic. I am not impressed, for example, by simplistic formulations that require people to be better than they are. As a Quaker I believe that the means are inseparable from the end; as an American I believe that democracy and freedom of expression are essential elements of a just society, though I'm not wedded to the idea that our version of democracy is the only legitimate one.

Although I have carved out a comfortable niche in my present job, with a responsible position and a good salary, I have become increasingly dissatisfied with the prospect of a career in business applications programming. More and more of my time and energy is now being absorbed by community activities. After getting my master's in public administration, I would like to work in the area of economic development in the Third World, particularly Latin America. The setting might be a private (possibly church-based) development agency, the UN, the OAS, one of the multilateral development banks, or a government agency. What I need from graduate school is the academic foundation for such a career. What I offer in return is a perspective that comes from significant involvement in policy issues at the grass roots level, where they originate and ultimately must be resolved.

The next two paragraphs discuss the writer's battles with addiction. Then the applicant shows how his emotional recovery coincides with a growing awareness of political issues: "During the last years of my addiction I was completely oblivious to the world around me. Until 1983 I didn't even realize that there had been a revolution in Nicaragua or that one was going on in El Salvador. Then I rejoined the Quaker Meeting, in which I had been raised as a child, and quickly gravitated to its Peace and Social Order Committee. They were just then initiating a project to help refugees from Central America, and I joined enthusiastically in the work."

What makes this theme sophisticated is that it does not merely state, "I am concerned about Third World economic development." Rather, it ties social concerns to issues of personal development and creates a coherent portrait of a multifaceted individual. The Upfront Approach is effective in this case because it helps us to see where the writer is going when he delves into his history of addiction and prevents an overly negative undertone.

The Gradual Approach

[This essay](#) does not give away much in the opening paragraph. His first paragraph serves as a distinct point rather than establishing a framework for the rest of the essay. The next three paragraphs each also have independent points: the intersection of computers and geology; his coursework experience; and his career goals. Effective topic sentences help to ensure a strong underlying flow. For example, in the third paragraph, he identifies structural geology as an area of interest and an area in which he has some background, after describing in the second paragraph how he would apply his computer expertise to that field.

Sample Essay

I have been planning a career in geological sciences for several years, but as an undergraduate I concentrated on getting a solid background in math and science. After graduation, I took a job to allow myself time to thoroughly think through my plans and to expose myself to a variety of work situations. This strategy has been very valuable to me in rounding out my career plans.

During the past 18 months I have had firsthand experience with computers in a wide array of business applications. This has stimulated me to think about ways in which computers could be used for scientific research. One idea that particularly fascinates me is mathematical modeling of natural systems, and I think those kinds of techniques could be put to good use in geological science. I have always enjoyed and been strong in areas that require logical, analytical thought, and I am anxious to combine my interest in earth science with my knowledge of, and aptitude for, computer-related work. There are several specific areas that I have already studied that I think would lend themselves to research based on computing techniques, including mineral phase relations in igneous petrology and several topics in structural geology.

I have had both lecture/lab and field courses in structural geology, as well as a short module dealing with plate tectonics, and I am very interested in the whole area. I would like to explore structural geology and tectonics further at the graduate level. I am also interested in learning more about geophysics. I plan to focus on all these areas in graduate school while at the same time continuing to build up my overall knowledge of geology.

My ultimate academic goal is to earn a Ph.D., but enrolling first in a master's program will enable me to explore my various interests and make a more informed decision about which specific discipline I will want to study in depth.

As far as long-term plans, I hope to get a position at a university or other institution where I can indulge my primary impulse, which is to be involved in scientific research, and also try my hand at teaching.

Although there is an implicit overarching theme emerging, the writer waits until the conclusion to make that explicit: "My decision to focus on math and science as an undergraduate and to explore the computer industry after college has equipped me with a unique set of strengths to offer this program. The depth of my interest in geology has only grown in my time away from academia, and although I have identified several possible areas of specialization through prior studies, I look forward to contributing my fresh perspective on all subjects." As you can see, this theme does not lend itself to a one-sentence synthesis because the various points are broader. Nevertheless, this conclusion helps to connect these points for the reader, so she can walk away with a clear formulation of what she has just learned.

Whether you choose the Upfront or Gradual approach depends on the nature of your overarching theme and the substance it encompasses. When, as in the first example, there is a more defined framework that lends itself to succinct expression, you can provide more direction at the beginning and make a more focused point. But if your topic is broader and your ideas need to be developed before being tied together, then you should let them unfold naturally and save the integration for a nice, forceful ending. Whichever route you choose, make sure your theme is multi-layered and sophisticated. Any oversimplification would not do justice to your candidacy.

Organization

The purpose of this section is not to delineate one structural approach that will work for everyone's individual essays, but rather to discuss principles of organization that should guide you in constructing your argument. In previous sections, we have cautioned that the criteria we set forth could not be used as steps to be followed, because there was so much overlap and interdependence. Here your task grows even more challenging, because some of the principles can be mutually exclusive, and you may have to decide between them to determine which approach best suits your material.

Hierarchy of Evidence

Because your reader will be reading quickly and looking for the main points, it is often a good idea to start with your strongest evidence. You may even highlight your most interesting experience in the introduction.

[This applicant](#) decides to open with some comments on her ethnic and religious background. Although this is neither an accomplishment nor directly related to her intended field, the writer correctly recognizes that it is a unique element that will distinguish her from other candidates. By establishing this point early on, she immediately has the reader interested in learning more about her. Unfortunately, as we noted in another section, the applicant does not go on to illustrate how her diverse background has influenced her life through more concrete examples.

Sample Essay

In responding to a question that asked the applicant to describe experiences, events, or persons that have been important in his or her development, this applicant successfully correlated his influences to his current outlook on life.

Perhaps the most important influence that has shaped the person I am today is my upbringing in a traditional family-oriented Persian and Zoroastrian culture. My family has been an important source of support in all of the decisions I have made, and Zoroastrianism's three basic tenets—good words, good deeds, and good thoughts—have been my guiding principles in life. Not only do I try to do things for others, but I always push myself to be the best that I can be in all aspects of my life. I saw early the doors and opportunities that a good education can open up; thus, I particularly tried hard to do well in school.

Another important experience that has had a large influence on me the past few years has been college. Going from high school to college was a significant change. College required a major overhaul of my time-management techniques as the number of things to do mushroomed. In high school, I was in the honors program, with the same cohort of students in all my classes. Thus, I was exposed little to people very different from myself. College, on the other hand, is full of diversity. I have people of all backgrounds and abilities in my classes, and

I have been fortunate enough to meet quite a few of them. This experience has made me more tolerant of differences. Furthermore, a variety of classes such as the Humanities Core Course, in which we specifically studied differences in race, gender, and belief systems, have liberalized my world view.

My undergraduate research has occupied a large portion of my time in college. Along with this experience have come knowledge and skills that could never be gained in the classroom. I have gained a better appreciation for the medical discoverers and discoveries of the past and the years of frustration endured and satisfaction enjoyed by scientists. I have also learned to deal better with the disappointments and frustrations that result when things do not always go as one expects them to. My research experience was also important to me in that it broadened my view of the medical field. Research permitted me to meet a few medical doctors who have clinical practices and yet are able to conduct research at the university. This has made me seriously consider combining research with a clinical practice in my own career.

From my earliest memories, I can always remember being interested in meteorology. I believe that this interest sparked my love for the outdoors, while my interest in medicine molded my desire for healthy living. As a result of these two influences, I try to follow an active exercise routine taking place mostly in the outdoors. I enjoy running and mountain biking in the local hills and mountains, along with hiking and backpacking. All of these activities have made me concerned about the environment and my place in it.

Showing Progress

This approach might invite a chronological order, but we maintain that chronology should not be reason in itself (as explained in the sidebar of the Essay Structures introduction) to organize material in a particular manner. The guiding principle here is to structure your evidence in a way that demonstrates your growth, from a general initial curiosity to a current definite passion, or from an early aptitude to a refined set of skills. It differs from the Hierarchy of Evidence approach because your strongest point might come at the end, but its strength lies precisely in the sense of culmination that it creates. Chronology might not apply if you choose to show progress within a number of self-contained areas, thereby combining this approach with the Juxtaposing Themes approach described later.

[This applicant](#) chronicles the evolution of her interest in library service. The progress she describes is not merely a matter of accumulating one experience after another, but rather a process of enrichment by which she learns from fresh perspectives, adding new layers each time. In the second paragraph she discusses her work for a nonprofit organization, emphasizing her interest in "gathering information" and "using human relations skills" to show how this experience is relevant to her current goals. The following paragraph discusses her role as a column writer for that same organization, at which point she states a more defined issue that has caught her attention: "Through this experience I have seen a vivid contrast between the substantive quality of information formally prepared-with the discipline and rigor of

a traditional publishing and review schedule and with clear authorship-and the casual unstructured nature of electronic bulletin board postings, faxes, e-mail, and other products of newer technologies." As a result, we see the level of depth that she has reached in her peripheral investigation of the dynamics of information.

Sample Essay

Notice how this successful applicant avoids the expository-resume approach by focusing on two or three particular experiences and evaluating them in terms of her current outlook and educational goals. Also notice how the discussion about her children's activities, while seemingly unnecessary to make her central point, helps to bring the essay down to a more personal level.

My first employment in a library was in a work-study project during college. My duties included some shelving and a lot of typing of catalog cards. I remember the sturdy metal stacks, with so many captivating books tempting me as I tried to reshelve all that were on the carts. Mostly I remember the typing; agonizingly laborious since I was not a skilled typist, and formatting was so important. I came to understand much about the way the cataloguing system worked, and was grateful in the years to come when I needed to locate things for my own studies . . . or for my children.

For more than fifteen years now I have been working as a volunteer for La Leche League International, a grass roots, non-profit, self-help organization supporting and promoting breastfeeding. My work for the organization has taken a number of forms over the years, but can be summed up as gathering information, both practical and technical, and using human relations skills to make it accessible to others. My experience helping women access breast-feeding information and empowering them to use that information has convinced me that information alone is not nearly as useful as information plus a skilled guide.

One of my greatest pleasures in recent years has been writing a regular column-"Keeping Up-to-Date"-for La Leche League's bimonthly international newsletter. Through this experience I have seen a vivid contrast between the substantive quality of information formally prepared-with the discipline and rigor of a traditional publishing and review schedule and with clear authorship-and the casual unstructured nature of electronic bulletin board postings, faxes, e-mail, and other products of newer technologies. I am practically, though peripherally, aware of some of the problems our society faces in an era when intellectual property suddenly has so many new forms. I am eager to be a well-informed participant in the discussion of intellectual participation.

This week I found myself intrigued again by cataloguing when I needed to outfit my youngest son, now twelve, with a juggler's outfit for the school play. An initial subject search for "costumes" in the OPAC system at our township library was fruitless. Only when I thought to enter "costume" without the plural "s" did the system yield all the information I needed. What

frustration! This confluence of technology and information, especially as it affects accessibility, fascinates me.

The degree to which your School of Communication, Information and Library Studies openly accepts the challenge to explore and lead in the information revolution is seductive. What a serendipity that this school is practically in my backyard! The strengths and attributes I bring to your school are a caring and careful nature, proven academic excellence, experience in writing and speaking for a variety of audiences, and a practical knowledge of working with volunteers and professionals. The durability of my enthusiasm for libraries and the people who work in and love them convinces me that the Master of Library Service program is indeed the right way for me to continue my formal education.

In writing this essay, the writer moves effectively from experience to experience; the result does not feel like a list or a haphazard construction, but rather a logically flowing piece. Moreover, the applicant's points in the final two paragraphs have more force because we have witnessed a process of growth. Her individual ideas combine to have a synergistic effect.

Juxtaposing Themes

The strongest argument against a straight chronological order is the value of juxtaposing related themes and ideas. If two experiences are closely related but occurred years apart, it makes more sense to develop them as one set of ideas than to interrupt them with unrelated points.

[This applicant](#) uses the first three paragraphs to establish his goals in public service. In the third paragraph, he offers some childhood anecdotes, then jumps to present career interests. What unites these two chronologically separated points is the connection between his early "humanitarian kindness to animals" and his desire to provide "health care to 44 million uninsured Americans."

Sample Essay

"To be nobody but yourself--in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else--means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting." When I first read this passage by E.E. Cummings, I realized I have been fighting the same battle my whole life. When choosing the direction for my future, I have often accepted jobs based on a compromise between my own dreams and what others thought my dreams should be. This, of course, has led to an unfulfilling career.

Looking back, I always knew that I wanted to work in public service; but I also knew my staunchly conservative father would not be pleased. To him, the government is too big, too intrusive and too wasteful. I see things differently. And yet, his approval means a lot to me and

his opinion has certainly influenced my the direction of my career. But I have finally come to understand that I must pursue my own path. After careful deliberation, I am confident that public service is, without a doubt, the right career for me.

Ever since my childhood I have detected in myself a certain compassion and innate desire to help others. I was the kid that dragged in every stray cat or dog I came across--and I still do. When I was eight years old, I rescued a rat from my sister's psychology lab and brought her home. I even coaxed my father into taking Alice--I called her Alice--to the vet when she became ill. But aside from my humanitarian kindness to animals, as a child I learned first-hand about America's need to reform and improve medical care. I spent years of my childhood on crutches and in hospitals because of a tumor that hindered the growth of my leg. Without adequate health insurance and proper care, I might still be on crutches, but I was fortunate. Today, as a public servant, I still desire to help others who are not so fortunate. Providing health care to 44 million uninsured Americans, while keeping insurance affordable, is one of the most difficult challenges facing policymakers. I want to work in state or local government to resolve this health care crisis and ensure that the disadvantaged get the care they need and deserve.

In order to succeed in my endeavors toward public service, I now realize that a master's degree in public policy is essential. But when I graduated from college in 1990, I didn't know how to continue my education, only that I should. For a while, I considered such options as law school or international relations, but I always returned to my desire to impact public life. My career in public policy began as a legislative assistant at the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a non-profit educational organization that couples voices from the state legislature and the private sector to work on salient policy issues. My enthusiasm for ALEC's mission was evident, as I quickly moved up from legislative assistant to the director of two task forces. As manager of ALEC's task force on federalism and its tax and fiscal policy task force, I explored these issues thoroughly, never quite satiating my appetite for more information and knowledge. I found my integral role in the legislative process to be the most valuable and worthwhile experience I've had in my career to date.

Following ALEC, I took a position as a junior lobbyist for the Automotive Parts and Accessories Association (APAA). As a lobbyist, I voiced the APAA's concern over regulatory and environmental issues affecting the automotive aftermarket. Although I was able to help small automotive parts manufacturers battle the "Big Three" automakers, I quickly realized that being an advocate for the automotive aftermarket was not my calling in life. I wanted to promote policies which had the potential to improve life for the greater public, for I could not see myself spending a lifetime working within an isolated industry.

With that frame of mind, I accepted employment as a policy analyst in the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB) research department in Washington, D.C. Helping small business owners is a cause close to my heart. For nearly 30 years, my family has owned a barbecue restaurant in the Washington, D.C. area. I've worked in the business at several different times, since the age of 14. Because of my involvement in my family's business, I understand the unique problems facing small business owners. At the NFIB, I valued my

contributions because I know small businesses have a huge economic impact on our country and they are unquestionably an important constituency. Nevertheless, I felt uncomfortable working for a special interest group--even for one I deeply cared about.

From my experiences at the APAA and the NFIB, I have learned how I want to shape my future. My goals are now clear: I want to develop and advocate policy decisions that will benefit society as a whole, not just a few influential special interest groups. I want to uncover the objective truth of issues and tackle them in the best interests of the nation, not distort the facts for the benefit of a small group. I know I am able to look beyond partisan politics to solve problems for this country. Because of these unbending desires to reveal truth and to remain committed to fair and equal advancement for all citizens, I think of myself as an ideal candidate for public service.

Additionally, I consider my active interest in politics to aid my pursuit of a career in public policy. I've always found my interest in politics exceptional, ever since my college roommates used to tease me for faithfully watching C-SPAN. However, my faith in the political process began to wane as I witnessed sensible public policy proposals torn apart by partisan conflict. I saw advocacy groups distort facts, and provide extreme, over-blown examples, jeopardizing prudent policy decisions. I observed how powerful elected officials, ensnared in their own partisan rancor, would block fair and balanced legislation which offered the most practical solution for their constituents. But I also encountered many thoughtful and wise people who devote their lives to public service. These devoted individuals inspired me. Like them, I want to be actively involved in the design and delivery of essential government services that improve the lives of the citizens in our society today. I am positive that by avoiding partisanship and urging the private industry, the public sector and non-profit groups to collaborate, many difficult problems can be resolved.

In order to be an effective public servant, I recognize the indispensability of an advanced degree. I've gained a lot of "real world" experience, but I need more training in the fundamentals of economics and statistics, as well as direction in sharpening my analytical and quantitative skills. I also want to devote time to studying the ethical dimensions of policy decisions. In graduate school, I'll have the opportunity to truly understand and appreciate the competing interests surrounding so many complex issues like health care reform, environmental protection and economic policy.

I've chosen Duke's public policy program for several reasons. Duke's program stands out because there is an emphasis on quantitative and analytical skills, which are so critical to policy analysis. As I mentioned, I feel that if I can strengthen my ability to approach problems logically and systematically, I will have succeeded in sharpening skills I consider necessary to succeed in the public realm. And possibly even more importantly, Duke's program bridges the gap between abstract principles and reality. This interdisciplinary approach is essential for responding to today's policy problems. I am excited by the possibility of combining the MPP program with the Health Policy Certificate Program. I am particularly interested in studying the problem of reforming state health to reduce the number of uninsured, and I believe Duke's curriculum will offer me a chance to do just that. From my own research into Duke, I feel

confident in my knowledge of the public policy program and its potential to teach me. And after meeting with Helen Ladd, the Director of Graduate Studies, I'm even more convinced that Duke's program is right for me.

On the road "to be nobody but" myself, I've encountered twists and turns, and some detours--it is unquestionably the hardest battle I could fight. However, in the process, I've accumulated a tremendous amount of valuable experience and knowledge. My diversity of experience is my biggest asset. Because I can relate a Duke education to concrete examples from my own past, it is the perfect time for me to join the public policy program. I know that my past can be used to prepare myself for the promises of the future. At Duke, I hope to synthesize the two and truly learn what it means to become myself.

The four subsequent paragraphs cover all the ground in between these two points, describing his practical experience in politics. Thus, the opening three paragraphs form a self-contained unit, and although the essay as a whole is not linear, there is a definite logic to grouping his ideas in the way that he did.

Dramatic Appeal

Not all essays will have potential in this area, but if you've undergone dramatic experiences, then you should by all means set your essay up to reflect that. The most effective way to accomplish this is to use the introduction to sketch some kind of problem or question, and then use each subsequent paragraph to engage with that problem until a resolution is gradually reached.

In his opening paragraph, [this applicant](#) sets the reader up for a compelling tale that we immediately understand will entail a good bit of hardship and difficulty. It is clear that at the beginning of his story, the writer is preparing to head down the wrong path. As readers, we are interested to see where he goes and how he rediscovers his proper direction. Through use of specific detail, he effectively conveys both the attraction of a musician's lifestyle and its more unpleasant side. While he takes us step by step through his progress as a musician (and his parallel failure as a student), notice how he has already planted the seeds of his ultimate rejection of this lifestyle in the first paragraph with his description of the older musicians who populate the scene. He returns to this image at his point of transition, saying, "I came to realize that I was well on my way to becoming one of those bitter old burnouts that I used to play with when I was in high school." He has built the tension nicely, and then offered a resolution that brings a sense of closure to that period of his life. In his final paragraph, it is clear that he is ready to make a fresh start.

This applicant knew better than to hide his "misspent youth." His unique background provided just what the admissions committee welcomed—a lively story that reveals an engaging and interesting person.

One of my biggest aspirations as a child was to become a rock star. At age 14 my band performed at my school's Valentine's Day dance. I went from being the smartest kid in the school to being the coolest. By the age of 17, I was spending my weekends in bars playing with much older musicians. At the time it didn't bother me that these older musicians all led lives that were anything but glamorous. In fact, they always seemed to be broke and were usually under the influence of drugs or alcohol (a great way of escaping reality).

It was always understood by my parents that I would attend college immediately after graduating high school. College provided me with the perfect opportunity to leave San Antonio in pursuit of stardom. Austin is well known for its music scene and just happens to have a university—the perfect choice. I was awarded a generous endowment from a private foundation that I could use at any Texas university. Within two months after starting college, I was well on my way to becoming a star. I joined a top-40 cover band and spent my weekends performing at fraternity parties and night clubs all over Texas. The band soon began performing an average of four nights a week and was earning average gross revenues in excess of \$125,000. My rigorous traveling left little time for school, not that I really minded, and by the end of my second semester the University kindly informed me that I was no longer welcome as a student. Needless to say, the Foundation decided that if I wasn't going to school then I wouldn't need their money.

I spent two years as a member of the band, and during that time I lived a life that exceeded even my wildest dreams. However, the dreams of a 14-year-old boy are far different than the harsh realities of a 21-year-old adult. I came to realize that I was well on my way to becoming one of those bitter old burnouts that I used to play with when I was in high school.

I left the band and moved back to San Antonio. I began working full-time and enrolled at a junior college the following January. For the next two-and-a-half years, I worked more than forty hours per week while enrolled in nine to twelve hours per semester. Not only did my grades dramatically improve, but I also mastered the art of time management. In the past two-and-a-half years, I have learned more than just how to calculate a corporation's alternative minimum- tax liability and how to assess control risk in an EDP environment. I have learned to appreciate the rewards of hard work and the power that comes with possessing knowledge.

Narratives

Stories can be the heart of your essay—if you handle them effectively. Below are some tips on how to maximize their value.

How to Incorporate a Narrative

Integrating your story effectively ensures that it flows well within the essay and has a strong impact. Failing to do so could lead to chopiness or confusion on the reader's part. Here are some possible approaches, but what you ultimately use depends on your content:

1. The Origin: The most common approach is to start from the beginning. Many people have a story to tell about their early interests in their particular field. This tactic can be an effective way to grab the reader's attention and offer insight into your fundamental attraction to your area of interest. You should be aware, however, of two concerns: a) It has been done many times before, and if you don't offer any unique or personal insights, you won't stand out; b) Most early stories revolve around passive observation and therefore offer limited insight into your character and abilities. Despite these concerns, there is still much potential in this approach if you have a compelling, original story to tell.

2. The Flash Forward: Sometimes your essay's main focus will be showing the progression or growth of your interests and abilities. That doesn't mean, however, that your essay must start from the beginning. Often it can be effective to open with a more recent episode to accomplish three purposes: a) establishing a clear context for the rest of the material; b) demonstrating a strong interest in your particular field from the beginning; c) bringing to the forefront a significant experience with depth you could not have achieved in an earlier stage. It's the last point that distinguishes this approach from the previous one. Using a Flash Forward opening enables you to highlight your strongest points, as in the Hierarchy of Evidence structure, but then move backward to show your growth process.

3. The Bookend: Like the first two, this approach involves using a story in the introduction, but it leaves that story unfinished until the conclusion. For example, you might stop within the story to reflect on how you found yourself in that position. The body of the essay would then be a flashback to the experiences that led you to the place of the introduction, and the conclusion would return to complete the story. Another possibility would be a story that involved two distinct phases; the body of such an essay might discuss what you learned between the phases, and the conclusion would show how you applied what you learned to the second phase. Again, the precise approach depends on your content, but the Bookend method can be a very effective way to create a flowing, coherent piece.

4. Within the Body: Regardless of whether you choose to open with a narrative, you may find opportunities and reasons to insert a story within the body of the essay. This is the approach for which you have to worry most about integration. Unlike introductory anecdotes, you should not jump right into these stories without preface. You will need at least one sentence to make the transition from the previous paragraph and briefly hint at what themes your story will illustrate. Actually beginning your story will usually require some introductory phrase, such as the following: "One memorable incident involved..."

After the story, you should have some significant insight with which to conclude in order to justify the story's inclusion. This line should not be a mere repetition of the transition from the

beginning of the paragraph, because you now should have more concrete details from which to draw more in-depth conclusions.

What to Include

The basic rule here is the same as always: **include specific details**. The purpose of using stories is to illustrate your points with concrete evidence, thereby giving your ideas force and context. Telling one specific story enables you to achieve depth and convey personality beyond what you could achieve in brief, isolated descriptions. It's not enough, however, merely to decide to include a story. Some writers will start on the right track but end up conveying nothing meaningful. For example, they might name a specific personal incident and then jump to generic conclusions without demonstrating anything substantive about their character. Here are some more specific tips that have come up in other contexts but are especially important for stories:

1. Show Active Contribution: Many people tell stories in which the payoff is a lesson learned. While this can have some value, it does not say as much about your character because you are only responding passively.

2. Emphasize the Process: Don't set up a problem and jump to the solution. Show us the process of reaching that solution. Give details about your approach and your reasoning.

3. Paint a Vivid Picture: Try to draw the reader into your story by including details that bring the story alive. One effective way to accomplish this is to think visually. Of course, you should not get carried away and go down tangents or become monotonous. For example, if you're recalling a conversation, don't bother recounting all the pleasantries with which it began.

Gleaning Insights

Anecdotes should serve some clear purpose, but you have to be careful about sounding contrived. One common mistake is to start citing lessons before you've finished the story. This kind of interruption adulterates the force of the story itself. Be careful that your insights flow naturally from the details of your anecdote: stay close to your personal story and avoid making grand pronouncements based on a minor episode.

An Example

To put the above suggestions in more concrete terms, we will analyze [one actual essay](#) from a critical perspective. First, this applicant tells an anecdote that's relatively recent, but still serves to illustrate the origin of her interest in creative writing. Note that the anecdote is largely concerned with the past, and even in her reminiscences, she uses vivid, concrete details. For example, she invokes the past she shared with her peers, "fellow veterans of plaid uniforms and daily masses." To demonstrate her inexperience, she reflects, "The only readings I'd done before a crowd were Paul's letters to the Ephesians and the occasional Responsorial Psalm--and that wasn't my writing on the line."

Sample Essay

This applicant recounts a particular incident that gives the reader real insight into what makes her "tick." Notice, by the way, that the discussion of religion is handled in a way that is not likely to offend any reader.

Two years ago, when I was a junior in college, I wrote a story entitled "It Came from Catholic School." My friends, fellow veterans of plaid uniforms and daily masses, liked it and encouraged me to submit it when the English department magazine made its annual call for stories. They published the story and asked me to read from it at a reading primarily devoted to student poetry. Well, I was pretty nervous about this. The only readings I'd done before a crowd were Paul's letters to the Ephesians and the occasional Responsorial Psalm-and that wasn't my writing on the line. I grew more nervous as I sat there that night, listening to poem after poem on angst and ennui. I couldn't imagine how the students and faculty around me, who were all listening intently with properly contorted faces, would respond to my grotesque little girl. But I stood up and read a passage, a little shaky at first. Then I heard laughs, where I'd hoped I would, and also in places that surprised me. After the reading, people wanted to shake my hand. One woman thanked me for injecting a little levity into the proceedings. I felt satisfaction in my work as never before.

At that reading, I realized I could write things that made people laugh-not just friends who felt obligated, but complete strangers. I really liked that feeling, and it's the promise of that laughter that motivates me to continue writing. I also realized that my work wasn't frivolous, that I could influence a reader, that my characters seemed real. For the first time, I felt that I could do what I really wanted to do-write.

I look forward to progressing through a series of intimate workshops en route to an MFA degree at your school. The interdisciplinary nature of the program appeals to me. Although I want to concentrate on Fiction, I would like to take screenwriting electives as well. I think my humor translates well to teleplays, and I would like to explore that avenue through the comedy writing courses your school offers. I aim to develop my natural strengths- humor, voice, and dialogue, while experimenting with the genres.

Because I'm generally at the mercy of my characters, I can't outline a specific writing goal. I do envision myself producing a collection of short stories featuring female protagonists. Women's issues are implicit in my writing, and I would welcome the chance to study with [faculty name]. My stories feature a range of women-from the precocious heroine of the aforementioned story to a "white trash" cashier, and I plan to cover a still broader scope. Mainly, I'm looking to devote myself to the work. And I hope to make some people laugh along the way.

There's no real place for emphasizing contribution, per se, since this isn't a project or accomplishment. On the other hand, the writer does do an effective job of showing the process:

"I grew more nervous as I sat there that night, listening to poem after poem on angst and ennui. I couldn't imagine how the students and faculty around me, who were all listening intently with properly contorted faces, would respond to my grotesque little girl. But I stood up and read a passage, a little shaky at first." Thus she does not simply jump to the point of receiving congratulations. Instead, she provides specific details that not only help us to empathize with her, but also make the results seem more meaningful.

She allows the story to develop on its own terms, instead of interrupting its flow with forced interpretations. The insight she draws comes only in the next paragraph: "At that reading, I realized I could write things that made people laugh--not just friends who felt obligated, but complete strangers. I really liked that feeling, and it's the promise of that laughter that motivates me to continue writing." The flow from story to insights is natural and fitting.

Paragraphs

As in the case of those that include narratives, most of your paragraphs will have the same underlying structure. You begin with a transition, you offer supporting evidence, and you offer a resolution. Supporting evidence for the most part affects the strength of individual paragraphs, but transitions and resolutions are even more crucial because they affect the coherence and impact of the essay as a whole. The beginnings and endings of each paragraph are the places to draw connections between experiences, demonstrate progression, and highlight your key themes.

Not every paragraph you write will have these three distinct parts, but it's worthwhile to look at how typical paragraphs are structured so you know how to evaluate your essay on this level.

Transitions

The basic purpose of a transition is to serve as a topic sentence; it should give enough direction so the reader knows what to expect. When your essay is following not only a chronological order but also a single train of thought, the paragraphs may flow smoothly anyway. For example, in [this essay](#), note the ways in which paragraphs 3-5 begin: with clear references to time, continuing the account of his the writer's recovery from addiction. The step-by-step process is therefore logical and easy to follow.

Sample Essay

My longtime fascination with politics and international affairs is reflected in my participation, starting in high school, in activities such as student council, school board meetings, Vietnam war protests, the McCarthy campaign, and the grape boycott. As each new cause came along, I was always ready to go to Washington or the state capital to wave a sign or chant slogans.

Although I look back on these activities today with some chagrin, I realize they did help me to develop, at an early age, a sense of concern for social and political issues and a genuine desire to play a role.

As an undergraduate, I was more interested in social than academic development. During my last two years, I became involved with drugs and alcohol and devoted little time to my studies, doing only as much as was necessary to maintain a B average. After graduation my drug use became progressively worse; without the motivation or ability to look for a career job, I worked for a time in a factory and then, for three years, as a cab driver in New York City.

In 1980 I finally "hit bottom" and became willing to accept help. I joined both Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, and for the next several years the primary business of my life was recovery. Although I had several "slips" in the beginning, I have now enjoyed nearly seven years of complete freedom from drug and alcohol use. I mention my bout with addiction because I think it is important in answering two issues that presumably will be of concern to the admissions committee: my lackluster undergraduate record and the fact that I have waited until the age of 34 to begin preparing academically for a career in public policy. It would be an oversimplification to call addiction the cause for either of these things; rather I would say it was the most obvious manifestation of an underlying immaturity that characterized my post adolescent years. More importantly, the discipline of recovery has had a significant impact on my overall emotional growth.

During the last years of my addiction I was completely oblivious to the world around me. Until 1983 I didn't even realize that there had been a revolution in Nicaragua or that one was going on in El Salvador. Then I rejoined the Quaker Meeting, in which I had been raised as a child, and quickly gravitated to its Peace and Social Order Committee. They were just then initiating a project to help refugees from Central America, and I joined enthusiastically in the work. I began reading about Central America and, later, teaching myself Spanish. I got to know refugees who were victims of poverty and oppression, became more grateful for my own economic and educational advantages, and developed a strong desire to give something back by working to provide opportunities to those who have not been so lucky.

In 1986 I went to Nicaragua to pick coffee for two weeks. This trip changed my whole outlook on both the United States and the underdeveloped world. The combination of living for two weeks amid poverty and engaging in long political discussions with my fellow coffee pickers, including several well-educated professionals who held views significantly to the left of mine, profoundly shook my world view. I came back humbled, aware of how little I knew about the world and eager to learn more. I began raiding the public library for everything I could find on the Third World and started subscribing to a wide variety of periodicals, from scholarly journals such as Foreign Affairs and Asian Survey to obscure newsletters such as Through Our Eyes (published by U.S. citizens living in Nicaragua).

Over the intervening two years, my interest has gradually focused on economics. I have come to realize that economic development (including equitable distribution of wealth) is the key to peace and social justice, both at home and in the Third World. I didn't study economics in

college and have found it difficult to understand the economic issues that are at the heart of many policy decisions. At the same time, though, I am fascinated by the subject. Given my belief that basic economic needs are among the most fundamental of human rights, how can society best go about providing for them? Although I call myself an idealist, I'm convinced that true idealism must be pragmatic. I am not impressed, for example, by simplistic formulations that require people to be better than they are. As a Quaker I believe that the means are inseparable from the end; as an American I believe that democracy and freedom of expression are essential elements of a just society, though I'm not wedded to the idea that our version of democracy is the only legitimate one.

Although I have carved out a comfortable niche in my present job, with a responsible position and a good salary, I have become increasingly dissatisfied with the prospect of a career in business applications programming. More and more of my time and energy is now being absorbed by community activities. After getting my master's in public administration, I would like to work in the area of economic development in the Third World, particularly Latin America. The setting might be a private (possibly church-based) development agency, the UN, the OAS, one of the multilateral development banks, or a government agency. What I need from graduate school is the academic foundation for such a career. What I offer in return is a perspective that comes from significant involvement in policy issues at the grass roots level, where they originate and ultimately must be resolved.

The topic sentence has more work to do when you move from theme to theme or experience to experience. The reader has to know where you're going next. [This applicant](#) prefaces her fifth paragraph as follows: "I also gained valuable research experience during my sophomore year by working twenty hours a week as a behavior therapist with autistic pre-school-aged children at the Children's Behavior Therapy Unit (CBTU)." The sentence sounds natural, a distinct idea in itself but also one that intimates what is to follow. Note that the transition is smooth because it takes a step back and makes a somewhat general point. If she had skipped the first half of the sentence and instead jumped to saying, "I worked twenty hours a week," we would not know that the topic of the paragraph was her research experience. Jumping too abruptly to a new point leaves the reader lost in the gap.

Sample Essay

A. Describe the three most significant professional experiences you have had.

I have had three particularly significant professional experiences: my participation as mentor and supervisor in a supplemental Instruction program; my work and research as a behavior therapist with autistic children through the Psychology Senior Thesis Program; and serving as a Service-Learning Teaching Assistant.

For the past two and a half years, I have been involved with the Supplemental Instruction (SI) program, a project founded to provide assistance for students in freshman level classes who need help with study skills. I am, at the moment, the SI Leader for Psychology 101. As an SI Leader, I attend class every day, which means that I have in effect attended the Psychology 101 class daily for two and a half years. By now I know the lectures by heart, which is essential because my job involves teaching the material three times a week in one-hour sessions.

Through the SI program, I have gained far more than accumulated academic knowledge: I have developed insight into how to teach psychology to groups of three to fifty people. I have learned that, in order to teach, one must first understand how someone approaches a subject, and then adapt the teaching to that approach. More specifically, I have noticed that students learn best by relating a concept to their own lives. Thus, not only do I give examples that relate directly to the material, I also teach students how to apply the concepts to their own lives.

I have become an integral part of the SI program and, as a result of my hard work, this year I was promoted to the position of SI Supervisor. In that capacity, I attend supervisor meetings to assist in organizing the program, and I help conduct hiring and training for new SI Leaders. One of my most rewarding responsibilities as supervisor is to attend sessions conducted by SI Leaders and, based upon my observations, to assist them with their teaching, interaction, and group discussion skills.

I also gained valuable research experience during my sophomore year by working twenty hours a week as a behavior therapist with autistic pre-school-aged children at the Children's Behavior Therapy Unit (CBTU). Because CBTU possesses an extensive data-based assessment system, I had the opportunity to acquire practical research-related experience. As a behavior therapist, I focused on basic "learning to learn" skills, such as attention to the environment. I accomplished this using the classical conditioning techniques of positive and negative reinforcement, as well as punishment.

As a researcher, I was required to record each child's range of responses until that child developed a certain success rate with a behavior. One such success was shaping a child's behavior to the point where the child felt comfortable with direct eye contact.

As a behavior therapist, I presented bi-monthly progress reports to the CBTU staff. The purpose of the reports was to inform the parents, doctors, and teachers about whether a particular child was ready to move to a higher level in the "learning to learn" program. More specifically, I reported on the progress of children's behavior over time, which allowed me to trace development and compare individual responses.

CBTU provided me with an introduction to research, which led me to pursue further research opportunities through the Psychology Senior Thesis Program. I spent a year and a half experiencing the entire process: designing my research project, formulating hypotheses, conducting the research, and writing it up.

While serving as research assistant to Dr. John Kircher, who was conducting polygraph research, I began to wonder whether individuals with lower skin conductance readings would

also score higher on the Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES). My interest stemmed from the fact that individuals with higher DES scores, even when lying, are able to pass polygraph tests more easily than individuals who have lower DES scores. I wanted to explore whether they had this ability because their skin conductance readings were less reactive.

Through extensive study, I learned a great deal about the research process. I researched dissociation, skin conductance, and how the two are related. This knowledge enabled me to develop my hypothesis. It was expected that high scores on the DES would be associated with low levels of electrodermal activity, resulting in a negative correlation. The results did not provide support for the idea that dissociative individuals have diminished skin conductance readings while experiencing a stressful situation.

Analysis of variance became the focus of the statistical analysis. This score was tested via a t-test. Through this process of compiling data and through statistical analysis, I came to recognize the importance of accuracy and attention to detail. Overall, through conducting research and writing a thesis, I strengthened my research and writing skills.

The greatest supplement to my academic experience has been the opportunity to be part of service-learning. This is the concept of students volunteering in the community, accumulating responsibilities that allow them to acquire hands-on experience in course materials. My first experience with service-learning happened a year and a half ago, when I was offered the job of Service-Learning Teaching Assistant (TA) in Psychology 101. After rigorous evaluation of several agencies, we chose ones that would best suit the students' needs. We also developed a lesson plan that would enhance the learning experience, and we created contracts by which the agencies and students would abide. We gained valuable experience the first semester, including how to successfully conduct the Service-Learning class.

By the next semester, we had developed a system for keeping the students motivated. Our method involved asking students to keep reflective journals and conducting reflective sessions, which not only allowed students to tell about their Service-Learning experiences, but also to think critically about their experiences at their agency. We discovered that, in order for students and agencies to have a fulfilling experience in Service-Learning class, the program had to involve students in community service that addresses local needs and that allowed them to develop their academic skills, sense of civil responsibility, and commitment to the community. We also kept the students motivated by compiling the total number of hours in which they served in the community. These hours reached into the thousands, and keeping a record allowed students to see how their combined efforts made a difference.

This year, I am the Service-Learning TA in a Nurse-Practitioners graduate class. This has given me the opportunity to show the instructor what I have learned about Service-Learning, specifically how to successfully implement a service-learning course without the aid of a Service-Learning TA. Next semester, I will be a Service-Learning TA in an Environmental Ethics class, in which students will serve at activist-centered agencies. These agencies, whose purpose is to make a difference in the community, demonstrate a high need for service-learning students who can assist them in the effort.

The strongest transitions will not only introduce the ensuing material but will also draw connections to prior paragraphs. These connections can note both similarities and differences. The link does not even have to be intrinsic to the subjects themselves. For example, [this applicant](#) compares the breadth of his interests to the concentration of his strengths: "Although my strengths are concentrated in these areas, my curiosity is by no means limited to these topics." Thus, after discussing specific research areas, he makes a transition to other topics by noting the broader scope of his curiosity. This is one of the most basic transitions you can use when there's no obvious link between the two topics.

Sample Essay

In this Statement of Purpose, the applicant communicated clear focus and direction while remaining flexible in terms of academic pursuits and long-term career plans. The essay's technical nature is perfectly appropriate for application to a graduate program in the natural sciences.

While my undergraduate and Master's curriculum have provided exposure to a wide variety of environmental engineering topics, I have gained extensive knowledge in relatively few areas. I have, however, found an area in which my curiosity and my ability are suitably paired. As an M.S. student I have held a research assistantship position for the last year and a half, working both at the university and at a national laboratory. The strengths of the Civil (Environmental) Engineering Department at the university, as well as those of the group at the laboratory, lie in the investigation of the fate and transport of subsurface contaminants, along with general groundwater quality and flow characteristics, and it is also within these areas that my research interests reside.

[Here the applicant describes his specific research experience.]

Although my strengths are concentrated in these areas, my curiosity is by no means limited to these topics. I believe that I have a solid foundation, but through a program of graduate study and research I hope to develop expertise in these and other related areas. One such area of interest is the remediation of contaminated groundwater and contaminant plumes by incorporating microbial processes with in situ treatment techniques. I also find the interdisciplinary relationship between environmental engineering and ecology to be of great personal interest. One particular example is the growing trend toward identifying and controlling diffuse source contamination from areas of heavy agricultural activity. The processes involved in this contamination, as well as the resultant heavy down-gradient nutrient loadings, play an extensive role in the ecological development of receiving waters and need to be understood more comprehensively. The curriculum in the Environmental Engineering Program, particularly through interactions involving the Studies in Physical & Chemical Hydrogeology program, provides an opportunity to expand my knowledge in these areas while pursuing my ambitions in the area of subterranean contaminant transport processes. Further,

your graduate program would permit me to incorporate my areas of interest into an applied research project under the mentorship of the faculty in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering.

Ultimately, I aim to gain a faculty position at a university and to continue my involvement in innovative research in the field while directly encouraging the development of aspiring engineers, both in the classroom and laboratory. In this manner I believe I can make a significant and purposeful contribution to the scientific community while gaining a great deal of personal satisfaction.

Of course, you should seek more in-depth transitions to strengthen the forcefulness of your points. [This applicant](#) uses this transition to show how the experience he's about to describe builds on previous points: "As a result of the in-depth exposure to networks I gained in the dormitory project, I was well prepared for the challenges that awaited me as the manager of Information Services at the Transportation Center at Northwestern University." Now we are reminded that the previous paragraph demonstrated the "in-depth exposure to networks" he had gained, and we see that the ensuing paragraph will continue to describe the progress he has made.

Sample Essay

For the past two and a half years, I have been a professional in the technology field, but now I am preparing to become a professional corporate information officer. Although my work has introduced me to specific areas of information technology, (including telecommunications, network wiring and databases) I have recently become intrigued with the field of information security. I am concerned about the vulnerability of the company I work for, particularly with regard to employee and client information. The specialty phase of your Professional program appears to be well endowed with the resources needed to address such concerns.

While my undergraduate and MS curriculum exposed me to a wide variety of computer science topics, I have gained extensive knowledge in the area of network infrastructure development. As an MS student at DePaul University, I worked as a network support technician and project manager for Information Services. My most significant accomplishment in this capacity involved the re-wiring of over a thousand dormitory rooms to enable the students to have Internet access with a link to the other four campuses. In doing so, I had to investigate the existing needs of a high-speed Internet network, as well as the transport of bandwidth to support future demands, which are almost impossible to determine.

As a result of my experiences in the dormitory project, I was well prepared for the challenges that awaited me as the manager of Information Services at the Transportation Center at Northwestern University. My primary task was to build a state-of-the-art network infrastructure that would support a leading graduate research center in the transportation field. In a succinct

and convincing manner, I had to demonstrate my vision in building the foundation and developing the budget, as well as managing the project, purchasing, installation and finally, deployment of my plan. My success in leading this project and utilizing the newly installed technical tools to empower the Center's goals led to the realization of similar goals and projects in a corporate environment.

Currently, I am the manager of Information Systems at Active Screw and Fastener, where I am responsible for the entire IT unit. Although my strengths are concentrated in the area of Information Technology, I do not want to limit myself to building and maintaining data networks. Through a focused program of study, my goal is to develop expertise in information security, an area that is becoming more and more critical to all information systems managers. As my company grows, I must also be capable of providing the necessary growth in its IT functions to enable people to share information with confidence. It is imperative that sensitive data assets, be it personal or corporate, will not be vulnerable to Cybercrime or compromised by unauthorized users.

The key to becoming a successful Tech manager and future CIO is the ability to demonstrate that a company's secret information resources are in alignment with corporate priorities. The Chicago Professional Programs in Computer Science will give me extensive exposure to information security, and will allow me to take a step toward securing the infrastructures that I have already built. With its strong cadre of experienced faculty, Chicago will prepare me to become a solid senior technical manager and partner with an enlightened vision towards the new directions manifesting in the information security field.

What Not to Do

The most common mistake - other than not including transitions at all - is to rely on words like "also" or "further," which don't provide any thematic link. Using such substance-less transitions makes your essay sound like a list instead of a logical argument. For example:

Bad: "Doing research for my departmental adviser also provided a great deal of useful experience."

Good: "Although classroom debates sparked my interest in this obscure area, the chance to do hands-on research for my departmental adviser exposed me to the detail-oriented nature of academic inquiry."

Whenever possible, you should aim to create transitions with as much depth as this one has. When you can make a substantive statement both about what's to follow and what preceded, then you not only ensure a smooth flow, but you also reiterate and highlight your key themes.

Supporting Evidence

While the transition statement can be general to orient the reader, your very next sentence should be specific. The movement within each paragraph should be from specific to general, rather than vice versa. There are two main reasons for this approach: 1) The reader will be more interested in the specifics of your situation than in generic, broad themes; 2) You can draw much more interesting, in-depth insights after you have laid out the evidence out. The principles here are therefore the same as for stories.

Consider the following paragraph, taken from [this essay](#):

"As a result of my experiences in the dormitory project, I was well prepared for the challenges that awaited me as the manager of Information Services at the Transportation Center at Northwestern University. My primary task was to build a state-of-the-art network infrastructure that would support a leading graduate research center in the transportation field. In a succinct and convincing manner, I had to demonstrate my vision in building the foundation and developing the budget, as well as managing the project, purchasing, installation and finally, deployment of my plan. My success in leading this project and utilizing the newly installed technical tools to empower the Center's goals led to the realization of similar goals and projects in a corporate environment."

Sample Essay

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The reader-friendly orientation comes in the first sentence, but immediately after, the writer focuses on the details of his experience: the nature of his task and the roles he fulfilled. Only in the final sentence does he begin to expand to the broader lesson. Looking at this example, you might think that this is the natural, obvious approach, and it seems that way because it works so seamlessly. But writers who aren't conscious of what they're doing will often go the exact opposite route. Their paragraph might include something like the following as the second sentence: "In this position, I learned many valuable skills while refining my career vision."

Writers who make this mistake will be wise enough to keep the resolution at the end, but they'll state a general point closer to the top. Their reasoning is that the big lesson needs to be highlighted, but they don't realize that bringing it up prematurely gives it less weight and in turn downplays the uniqueness of their personal details.

Resolutions

It's a shame to see a paragraph with vivid, powerful details end on a flat note, but that's precisely what happens even in otherwise strong essays. The challenge is to say something both meaningful and personal. Most resolutions are too broad and superficial.

The other mistake that writers tend to make is just to state the obvious. For example, every paragraph will end with some form of the following: "This experience reaffirmed my passion for

history." Such a poor attempt not only hurts the impact of the paragraph but also makes the writer appear simple-minded and superficial.

[This applicant](#) concludes a paragraph on her experience with a nonprofit organization as follows: "My experience helping women access breast-feeding information and empowering them to use that information has convinced me that information alone is not nearly as useful as information plus a skilled guide." What makes this resolution effective is that it makes a clear, meaningful point that is closely tied to the evidence presented within the paragraph.

Sample Essay

Notice how this successful applicant avoids the expository-resume approach by focusing on two or three particular experiences and evaluating them in terms of her current outlook and educational goals. Also notice how the discussion about her children's activities, while seemingly unnecessary to make her central point, helps to bring the essay down to a more personal level.

My first employment in a library was in a work-study project during college. My duties included some shelving and a lot of typing of catalog cards. I remember the sturdy metal stacks, with so many captivating books tempting me as I tried to reshelve all that were on the carts. Mostly I remember the typing; agonizingly laborious since I was not a skilled typist, and formatting was so important. I came to understand much about the way the cataloguing system worked, and was grateful in the years to come when I needed to locate things for my own studies . . . or for my children.

For more than fifteen years now I have been working as a volunteer for La Leche League International, a grass roots, non-profit, self-help organization supporting and promoting breastfeeding. My work for the organization has taken a number of forms over the years, but can be summed up as gathering information, both practical and technical, and using human relations skills to make it accessible to others. My experience helping women access breast-feeding information and empowering them to use that information has convinced me that information alone is not nearly as useful as information plus a skilled guide.

One of my greatest pleasures in recent years has been writing a regular column-"Keeping Up-to-Date"-for La Leche League's bimonthly international newsletter. Through this experience I have seen a vivid contrast between the substantive quality of information formally prepared-with the discipline and rigor of a traditional publishing and review schedule and with clear authorship-and the casual unstructured nature of electronic bulletin board postings, faxes, e-mail, and other products of newer technologies. I am practically, though peripherally, aware of some of the problems our society faces in an era when intellectual property suddenly has so many new forms. I am eager to be a well-informed participant in the discussion of intellectual participation.

This week I found myself intrigued again by cataloguing when I needed to outfit my youngest son, now twelve, with a juggler's outfit for the school play. An initial subject search for "costumes" in the OPAC system at our township library was fruitless. Only when I thought to enter "costume" without the plural "s" did the system yield all the information I needed. What frustration! This confluence of technology and information, especially as it affects accessibility, fascinates me.

The degree to which your School of Communication, Information and Library Studies openly accepts the challenge to explore and lead in the information revolution is seductive. What a serendipity that this school is practically in my backyard! The strengths and attributes I bring to your school are a caring and careful nature, proven academic excellence, experience in writing and speaking for a variety of audiences, and a practical knowledge of working with volunteers and professionals. The durability of my enthusiasm for libraries and the people who work in and love them convinces me that the Master of Library Service program is indeed the right way for me to continue my formal education.

Ultimately, your approach to writing resolutions should follow the same basic principles you use for other areas: be detailed, personal, specific, and concrete. The additional challenge arises from the fact that you also must speak to some broader significance, and it's tempting either to get carried away and write too generically, or to take the easy way out and conclude with something superficial.

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Lesson Four: Style and Tone

While the structure of your essay affects the clarity, coherence, and impact of your content, writing style affects presentation in an even more fundamental way: it determines how engaged your reader is from sentence to sentence. Poor writing can make fascinating experiences a dull read, while strong writing can transform mundane details into an exciting tale.

The best advice we can give is to be **simple and straightforward**. Occasionally, an essay will sound choppy or unsophisticated because of too many short sentences, but usually the problem is the opposite scenario. Applicants think that flowery prose and large words will make them sound more intelligent, when in reality their expression ends up being muddled and tedious. A direct style is not only more efficient to read, but it's also more enjoyable because it allows a steadily moving pace.

The tone you use should be **conversational, not too formal or informal**. The sentences you write should be sentences that you would actually say. This is not to suggest that you shouldn't spend time refining your writing carefully, but the ultimate goal should be a natural voice.

In this section of the course, we will cover the major weaknesses and mistakes most applicants are guilty of and show you how to turn them into strengths.

Select One:

- [Sentence Variety](#)
- [Word Choice](#)
- [Verb Tense](#)
- [Tone](#)
- [Essay Clichés](#)

EssayEdge Extra: Achieving Genuine Style

In a sense, the advice covered in this section is remedial. We're trying to teach you to avoid the common mistakes of bad writing. The goal is to achieve a clean, readable, and enjoyable piece of writing. Very few writers in the entire applicant pool will have the kind of style that will make them stand out on the strength of writing alone.

Developing such a style requires time and investment, and some may argue that it can't be taught. If you want to undertake a more long-term investment in your writing aptitude, here are some tips:

- 1. Immerse Yourself in Good Writing:** Read publications like *The New Yorker* and *Atlantic Monthly*. Even without conscious effort, your writing will improve because you will begin to think in more vivid language.
- 2. Imitate Good Writers:** Try a broad range of styles, from Faulkner to Hemingway. This will get you thinking about writing on a higher level and prepare you to forge your own voice as you begin to master the nuances of language.
- 3. Keep a Journal:** No matter what you choose to write about, your writing will improve simply because you're practicing the craft. Keep to a steady schedule.
- 4. Become a Good Editor:** Whether you're rewriting your own piece or someone else's, the process of editing will help you learn to pay attention to subtleties and keep an eye on the big picture.
- 5. Have Your Work Critiqued by Professionals:** Using a service such as EssayEdge's will not only help you improve the essay you submit, but will also teach you to recognize your general strengths and weaknesses as a writer.

Sentence Variety

Inexperienced writers tend to use longer, more complex sentences because they think they demonstrate intelligence. In contrast, strong writers know that a point is most forceful when it is conveyed concisely and directly. Although the purpose of this section is to teach you to improve on sentence variety, we also want you to be aware that simplicity should be your ultimate goal. Sophisticated thoughts will require complex sentences, but you should never complicate a simple idea for the sake of creating more intricate sentences.

Does this mean that the best essay will consist of all simple sentences? No. We stress this point only because most people have a tendency to start with sentences that are more complex than necessary, because ideas don't formulate themselves in our minds in the clearest, most direct structure. The best-written essays will feature steady variation in sentence length--but with no sentences forced into a more complex mode.

Simplifying

The first step in simplifying is to identify what needs to be fixed. Usually the problem comes from trying to cram too many points into one sentence and using too many auxiliary clauses. Consider the following two sets of examples:

Before: To this program I will bring a determined spirit, coupled with a strong background in research and volunteer work, which I pursued with energy and a focus on the future that grows ever closer to being within reach.

After: I have pursued all my research and volunteer work with relentless energy and clear focus. To this program I will bring the same sense of determination that has made my once distant goals now close within my reach.

The total word count remains the same, but the ideas are now much clearer and more fully fleshed out.

Before: Having long been interested in a career in law, which will allow me to combine my analytical thinking skills with the pursuit of social justice, I now feel that I have accumulated the necessary experience and education to begin a formal pursuit in this field, with X school offering the best curriculum for my needs.

After: A career in law will allow me to combine my analytical thinking skills with the pursuit of social justice. Having accumulated the necessary experience and education, I now look forward to pursuing my long-held interest in law at X school, which offers the best curriculum for my needs.

Oversimplified: A career in law will allow me to combine my analytical thinking skills with the pursuit of social justice. I have accumulated the necessary experience and education. I now

look forward to pursuing my long-held interest in law at X school. X school offers the best curriculum for my needs.

As you can see, the second version still includes a complex sentence, but separating one clause makes the ideas much clearer. We are not by any means advocating the extreme simplicity of the third version. It is oversimplified not only because it sounds choppy, but because it has removed certain textual relationships that were in the original--most importantly, "Having accumulated --> I now look forward."

Varying Constructions

Sentence variety is not just a matter of length; a well-paced piece of writing will vary its sentence constructions as well. Everyone can recognize what's wrong with the following:

"I walked into the room. The patient looked up at me. I greeted him with a smile. His eyes brightened."

Most people, however, would write something like the following without realizing their error:

"Having entered the room, I saw the patient look up at me. Sensing his discomfort, I tried to ease his concerns by greeting him with a smile. Appreciating my gesture, he responded with glowing eyes."

Every sentence starts with a present participle (a verb + "ing" --> adjective), states the subject, and gives the predicate. The following is a revision:

"I saw the patient look up as I entered the room. Sensing his discomfort, I tried to ease his concerns by greeting him with a smile. Although his brightening eyes showed that he appreciated my gesture, pain prevented him from responding any further."

The first sentence now starts with the subject, and the third sentence introduces a new kind of dependent clause with the conjunction "although."

If you have trouble finding ways to vary your sentence constructions, try some of the following basic ideas:

1. Combine two short sentences into one compound sentence:

"The game had just started, and our seats gave us a perfect view."

2. Use prepositional phrases, and vary their location:

"With only an hour left to finish, I knew I had to focus."

"I knew I had to focus, with only an hour left to finish."

3. Use the many conjunctions available to you--however, when, while, as, because, for, since, although, though--and vary their location:

"When we arrived, I knew we were too late to stop the fight."

"We watched in disbelief, though we longed to intervene in some way."

4. Use participles and gerunds (a verb + "ing" --> noun):

"Facing great risks, he nevertheless accepted the challenge without hesitation."

"Working at an immigration law firm has given me firsthand knowledge of the struggles people face in settling in the United States."

Using these basic tools, you can create a powerful and engaging piece of writing. The key is to keep changing your constructions so that each sentence sounds fresh and new.

Word Choice

Whenever Possible, Use the Shorter, Simpler Word.

You can use a thesaurus to jog your memory when you're trying to come up with a better synonym, but never use a word with which you aren't already familiar. Words often have connotations and nuances of meaning that you can appreciate only after having seen them in context, so you're taking a great risk if you use a word that you don't know well.

Even if you do feel comfortable with more advanced vocabulary, you should use the simpler synonym if that captures your meaning just as well. For example, instead of "ameliorated the situation," you could just as easily say "improved the situation." On the other hand, a word like "exasperated" is more intense than a synonym like "frustrated," and so you should use it if that's the sense you're trying to convey.

Use precise language.

Choose words that capture your experience fully and accurately. For example:

Vague: When we first started the business, I performed a range of duties to get the company going.

Precise: When we first started the business, I took the initiative to contact potential partners, evaluate the services of our competitors, and tailor our plan to local markets.

Use Nouns and Verbs Rather than Adverbs and Adjectives.

Inexperienced writers think that using fancy adverbs and adjectives will make their writing look more eloquent, but in fact, they just bog down your rhythm and usually sound like fluff. They also tend to make your writing sound abstract because they are not actual physical substances. Good writers stick to concrete nouns that the reader can grasp and, even more importantly, vivid verbs that are the lifeblood of active, engaging language.

Before: I ran quickly to the board where the results would be posted, with many curious people standing around waiting anxiously to see their scores.

After: I rushed to the board to find people crowded around muttering prayers to themselves as they awaited the dean's arrival with their score results.

The phrase "ran quickly" has become the more succinct and punchy "rushed." Instead of "many curious people standing around," we have substituted "people crowded around muttering prayers to themselves." Thus, we gain a more vivid verb in "crowded" and a concrete image of people muttering prayers instead of the abstract adjective "curious" and the clunky adverb "anxiously." In focusing on nouns and verbs, we have succeeded in showing instead of telling.

Avoid Repetition.

Don't use words twice in close proximity, and don't use the same words regularly throughout an essay. The problem usually comes in overusing the same noun that's central to your topic. Although we emphasized the importance of precision when you're describing the details of experiences, you can get away with synonyms when writing more broadly about themes and topics.

For example, if your essay is about your skills in interpersonal interaction, you could use such similar phrases as "communication strengths" and "building trusting relationships."

Verb Tense

The reason we are devoting nearly an entire section to tips on removing the passive voice from your writing is that it's both a very common flaw and very easily correctable. Within this section we also will explain how to choose more active language even when the passive voice is not involved.

Defining Passive Voice

Passive voice occurs when the subject and object of an action are inverted, so the subject is the recipient of the act instead of its performer. For example:

Passive: The man was bitten by the dog.

Active: The dog bit the man.

Passive: I was told by my teacher to come at noon.

Active: My teacher told me to come at noon.

Note that the word "by" is present in these two examples. A sentence can be passive without the word "by," but it is always at least implied. For example: "I was given bad directions [by my friend]."

Passive voice always involves a *to be* verb. *To be* verbs include *am, are, been, being, is, was, were*. On the other hand, a sentence can include a *to be* verb without being passive. For example:

"I have been involved in this organization for several years."

"He is leaving in five minutes."

Later we will discuss ways to avoid *to be* verbs even when they are not in passive-voice constructions.

When Passive Voice is Acceptable

There are generally two cases when passive voice is acceptable: 1) when there is no defined or tangible subject; 2) when the emphasis really should be on the object of the action. In these cases, the alternative is often awkward and less natural sounding.

Case 1: He is referred to as "the great one."

Awkward Alternative: The general public refers to him as "the great one."

Case 2: For the fifth time this year, Johnson was hit by a pitch.

Awkward Alternative: For the fifth time this year, a pitch hit Johnson.

Avoiding Passive Voice

As we've already shown, the basic approach to avoiding passive voice is quite simple. Identify the subject of the action (the noun that follows "by" or is otherwise implied) and bring that to the front of the clause. Remove the *to be* verb. Adjust any other word-order issues as needed. Try these five examples as an exercise:

1. He was given too many chances to start over by his friends.
2. She was instructed to remain seated by her teacher.
3. Their efforts were obstructed by brilliant defensive strategy.
4. The machine was started by the operator on time.
5. The door was shut by the angry mother.

Answers:

1. His friends gave him too many chances to start over.
2. Her teacher instructed her to remain seated.
3. Brilliant defensive strategy obstructed their efforts.
4. The operator started the machine on time.
5. The angry mother shut the door.

Achieving Active Writing

Active language comes not just from avoiding passive voice but further requires the use of strong action verbs. In addition to avoiding *to be* verbs, you should try to replace helping verbs such as *have, had, has, do, does, did* and other vague verbs like *got* and *get*.

Before: I **had** opportunities to develop my skills.

After: I **sought** opportunities to develop my skills.

Before: I **got** the promotion through hard work.

After: I **earned** the promotion through hard work.

Before: She **did** well in this competitive environment.

After: She **thrived** in this competitive environment.

Before: My mother **didn't want** to show up without a gift.

After: My mother **hesitated** to show up without a gift.

Before: The salesman **told** the audience about his products.

After: The salesman **promoted** his products to the audience.

The last two examples demonstrate the lack of clear distinction between strong and weak verbs. There's nothing in the dictionary that will tell you that *promoted* sounds stronger than *told*. It's largely a matter of how much meaning the word contains. *Promoted* has a more precise and nuanced meaning than *told*.

You can certainly develop a strong eye for these subtle issues, but active writing is an area where professional editing can make a substantial difference.

Tone

Tone is broadly described as the author's attitude toward his or her subject. It can be passionate, distant, angry, and lighthearted, among many other possibilities. Unfortunately, there are too many possibilities for us to cover, and without knowing your subject, we cannot

give the most specific advice possible. The obvious pitfalls include sounding condescending or frivolous, while sounding energetic and enthusiastic is a definite positive.

Although we cannot be more detailed about these specific approaches, there are still important general lessons to convey. In this section we will teach you how to strike a balance between sounding too casual and too formal. Then we will discuss ways to achieve the confident, energetic tone for which all writers should strive.

Too Casual

The danger in writing too casually is that you might come across as someone who doesn't take the application process seriously enough. When we say that you should be conversational, you should think in terms of an interview conversation. In other words, the situation is serious, but your words sound natural and not overwrought. Writing that's too informal would be the language you use when chatting with friends.

Some examples include the use of colloquialisms, sentence fragments, or slang. The following should illustrate a clear problem:

"The way I look at it, someone needs to start doing something about disease. What's the big deal? People are dying. But the average person doesn't think twice about it until it affects them. Or someone they know."

Too Formal / Detached

More people err on the side of being too formal, because they take the quality of being professional to an extreme. They forget that this is a personal and not an academic essay. For example, some people even try to write about themselves without using the first person, because they were taught in high school English that "I" is anathema.

Generally, the problem of sounding too formal goes along with detaching oneself from one's subject. Some writers will try to write too objectively or as though they were trying to provide logical evidence for a thesis. Consider this before-and-after example:

Before: There was a delay in the start of the project, attributable to circumstances beyond the control of all relevant parties. Progress came to a standstill, and no one was prepared to undertake the assessment of the problem and determination of the solution. An unexpected shift in roles placed this duty on myself.

After: The project got off to a late start due to circumstances beyond our control. We could not move forward, and no one stepped forward to take the lead in figuring out what went wrong. Despite my junior status, I decided to undertake this challenge.

The second version clearly sounds more natural, and the uses of "our," "we," and "I" make the reader sense that the writer has a more personal stake in the problem. There are several differences worth noting.

1. The second version is shorter. Writing in excessively formal language often requires more words, such as "beyond the control of all relevant parties" versus "beyond our control."
2. The second version avoids two *to be* verbs and replaces them with more active ones.
3. The first version turns words that are usually verbs into nouns: "determination" and "assessment." This adds a definite stiffness to the writing.
4. The second version uses phrases that sound conversational but not informal: "got off to a late start" and "figuring out what went wrong." The line is fuzzy, but again, ask yourself if you would use these phrases in an interview. The answer here should be yes, while "What's the big deal?" is a clear mistake.
5. Another example of the first version depersonalizing the issue is in the last sentence, which is ambiguous. The new version does not rely on the vague phrase "an unexpected shift in roles" and has the further benefit of making the writer sound more active in assuming leadership.

Sounding Confident

Within this category, we will also cover how to sound enthusiastic, positive, and passionate—in other words, the basic qualities every essay should have regardless of its subject. We will go through some general guidelines and offer before-and-after examples when appropriate:

1. Avoid phrases like "I believe," "I feel," and "I think." Even worse are phrases that add an adverb, such as "I strongly believe." Your tone will be much more confident if you just make the statement without preface.
2. There's little value that can come from being negative, whether you're writing about a weakness or a negative external situation. Downplay the negative aspects and emphasize the positive.

Before: Our business has struggled since the whole market started its downturn, but we are staying strong.

After: Despite a slowdown that has coincided with the market struggles, we have taken measures to remain competitive and are beginning to reverse the downturn.

3. When you're trying to convey your enthusiasm about a subject, the language you use should parallel your feelings. Stiff, deadened, and passive writing will contradict the passion you're claiming to possess. Use action verbs to inject vigor into your writing, and of course, show rather than tell whenever possible.

Before: Civil rights is an issue I feel strongly about. The legal field is closely related to this issue, and I would like to use it as an avenue to effect change.

After: I have marched, demonstrated, and campaigned for the civil rights of all people. Now I hope to tackle the systemic roots of the problem through a career in law.

4. Emphasize your active role. This point has come up so many times because it affects so many aspects of your writing. Highlight the ways in which you actively contributed to a situation or to your own progress. For example, if you were assigned an important project, you should point out that your consistent quality of work earned you higher responsibilities.

Before: I was not sure what job to take next, but a great opportunity in health care administration came up.

After: I explored a wide range of career possibilities and discovered an opportunity in health care administration that intrigued me most.

A Note on Humor

Being funny in writing is very difficult, because the voice and exact context depend on the reader and are in a sense beyond the writer's control. You could be a very funny person and nevertheless be unable to show that side of you in writing. If you see potential for using humor, you should aim small. Don't expect big laughs by being outrageous. Instead, aim to bring a smile to the reader's face by including a clever witticism.

Be careful that your tone does not come across as flippant or overly sarcastic. Slight irony is good, and self-deprecating humor can be effective because it shows that you don't take yourself too seriously.

Essay Clichés

In everyday language, clichés are simply common expressions that are an easy way to get one's point across. For example, saying, "He really put his foot in his mouth" is a convenient way to make the point that "He said something that he should now regret saying."

What's acceptable in spoken language can be offensive in writing. Good writing must be original: you should always aim instead to state your ideas through engaging language and from a fresh perspective.

In addition to the general clichés of the English language, you have to watch out for those that are more specific to the application essay. The challenge here is that these themes have become clichés precisely because they are valuable and significant, so you don't want to ignore them. You simply have to find fresh ways to convey hackneyed ideas. The best advice

is to be as specific and personal as possible, thereby emphasizing your uniqueness. The following is a list of some of the most egregious clichés, within the context of a bland statement:

"As I finished the race, I realized I had learned **the value of hard work** and appreciated the fact that I could accomplish anything **if I set my mind to it.**"

"Working in this atmosphere made me appreciate **the value of diversity.**"

"With each member contributing something valuable to our purpose, I soon recognized the **importance of teamwork.**"

"As the young child embraced me in gratitude, I discovered the **true value of making a difference in people's lives.**"

"That summer in New York truly **broadened my horizons.**"

There's no way to reword the above sentences to make them significantly stronger. The problem lies in the very approach the hypothetical writer of those statements has taken. A reliance on clichés is usually indicative of superficial ideas and telling instead of showing. The only way to improve upon the above sentiments would be to enrich them with concrete details and add depth using a more personal perspective.

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Lesson Five: Intros and Conclusions

In the Graduate Statement Themes section, we touched on some of the purposes of the introduction and conclusion. Specifically, we discussed how an introduction can orient the reader to the ideas the essay will undertake, and, more briefly, how the conclusion can be useful in synthesizing those ideas. At that point, we were most concerned about the coherence of your essay's structure.

In this section, our focus is slightly narrower for the introduction and broader for the conclusion. That is, having covered one of the two major aspects of the introduction already, we will now focus on the other: how to draw in the reader. Conversely, since we have not yet covered the conclusion in depth, we will focus here on defining its purpose and offering tips on how to achieve that purpose.

Select One:

- [Introductions](#)
- [Conclusions](#)

EssayEdge Extra: Opening With a Quotation

There is no approach more hackneyed than opening with a quotation. The ones we see at EssayEdge are almost always just marginally clever expressions of the most obvious lessons about hard work, persistence, and fulfilling one's dreams--often barely relevant to the rest of the essay. Occasionally, someone will find a quote that's worth a pause, but even then the reader will not be impressed. The very sight of quotation marks at the beginning of your essay may very well elicit a cringe or a sigh.

The admissions committee is far more interested in hearing what you have to say. If you happen upon a fascinating or pithy quotation by another person, using it will not make your case for admission any more compelling. In fact, an impatient reader might simply write you off as unoriginal. Additionally, quoting a philosopher or Shakespeare will not make you appear well-read, because anyone can open *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* to find something that appears intelligent and insightful.

Finally, even quoting your grandmother or some other wise relative has been overdone. This is not to say that you shouldn't use dialogue if you're describing a particular episode, but anything that sounds like an aphorism will only make your essay seem trite, no matter how perfectly it sums up your theme.

Introductions

The introduction is the most important part of your essay, and its one purpose above all others is to draw in the reader. Ideally, your introduction should grab the reader's attention right from the first sentence. If the introduction can proceed to orient the reader to the focus of the essay, that can be very helpful. But orientation is not an essential purpose because that can be achieved gradually throughout the course of the essay.

Many students make the mistake of over-explaining in the introductory paragraph what they will be talking about in the rest of the essay. Such paragraphs may include something similar to the following: "My journey toward graduate school has been shaped by a variety of experiences, including academic studies, volunteer work, and extracurricular activities." This is quite simply a waste of time and space. The reader already knows that you will be addressing these things and is most likely thinking, "Get to the point."

If your essay opens with a paragraph such as this, the best move would be to delete it. Often, your second paragraph, which begins to discuss a specific experience, will work much better as an introduction. You may also find that a later paragraph works even better. In general, you should bring your most compelling experience to the forefront and then structure your essay around it.

The following is a list of possible approaches to the introduction, with an emphasis on the opening sentence itself.

Jump Right In

Some people will start with a compelling experience but will insist on prefacing that experience with a very generic statement such as: "From the first time I looked through a microscope, I knew that science was my calling." Often, the reason people will open with such a statement is that they feel compelled to restate the question in some way. This is unnecessary and more than likely to bore your reader right out of the gate. You should be able to demonstrate your reasons without relying on such a bland summary sentence.

If, on the other hand, you are tempted to use the first sentence to explain context, you should respect the reader's intelligence enough to save that context for later, once you have grabbed the reader's attention. Consider the following example, taken from [this essay](#):

"Perhaps the most important influence that has shaped the person I am today is my upbringing in a traditional family-oriented Persian and Zoroastrian culture. My family has been an important source of support in all of the decisions I have made, and Zoroastrianism's three basic tenets-good words, good deeds, and good thoughts-have been my guiding principles in life."

Although the question asks the applicant to describe his influences, he need not restate that line. Moreover, he can delay explaining the context of his upbringing. Review the following restructure, which grabs the reader's attention more immediately and conveys the necessary context in time:

"Good words, good deeds, and good thoughts--these are the three basic Zoroastrian tenets that have shaped my guiding principles. Indeed, my upbringing in a traditional Persian and Zoroastrian culture and all the family support that entails have come to define me more than any other influence."

The advice to jump right in also applies to anecdotes. Rather than set the stage for a story with boring exposition, beginning your essay with some interesting action is often an effective way to draw in your reader.

Sample Essay

In responding to a question that asked the applicant to describe experiences, events, or persons that have been important in his or her development, this applicant successfully correlated his influences to his current outlook on life.

Perhaps the most important influence that has shaped the person I am today is my upbringing in a traditional family-oriented Persian and Zoroastrian culture. My family has been an important source of support in all of the decisions I have made, and Zoroastrianism's three basic tenets-good words, good deeds, and good thoughts-have been my guiding principles in life. Not only do I try to do things for others, but I always push myself to be the best that I can be in all aspects of my life. I saw early the doors and opportunities that a good education can open up; thus, I particularly tried hard to do well in school.

Another important experience that has had a large influence on me the past few years has been college. Going from high school to college was a significant change. College required a major overhaul of my time-management techniques as the number of things to do mushroomed. In high school, I was in the honors program, with the same cohort of students in all my classes. Thus, I was exposed little to people very different from myself. College, on the other hand, is full of diversity. I have people of all backgrounds and abilities in my classes, and

I have been fortunate enough to meet quite a few of them. This experience has made me more tolerant of differences. Furthermore, a variety of classes such as the Humanities Core Course, in which we specifically studied differences in race, gender, and belief systems, have liberalized my world view.

My undergraduate research has occupied a large portion of my time in college. Along with this experience have come knowledge and skills that could never be gained in the classroom. I have gained a better appreciation for the medical discoverers and discoveries of the past and the years of frustration endured and satisfaction enjoyed by scientists. I have also learned to deal better with the disappointments and frustrations that result when things do not always go as one expects them to. My research experience was also important to me in that it broadened my view of the medical field. Research permitted me to meet a few medical doctors who have clinical practices and yet are able to conduct research at the university. This has made me seriously consider combining research with a clinical practice in my own career.

From my earliest memories, I can always remember being interested in meteorology. I believe that this interest sparked my love for the outdoors, while my interest in medicine molded my desire for healthy living. As a result of these two influences, I try to follow an active exercise routine taking place mostly in the outdoors. I enjoy running and mountain biking in the local hills and mountains, along with hiking and backpacking. All of these activities have made me concerned about the environment and my place in it.

Show Your Originality

If you can make yourself stand out right from the first sentence, then you will have significantly improved your chances for admission. You should not, of course, just throw out random facts about yourself. The inclusion of such statements should fall within the larger context of your essay. But if you are going to emphasize a unique aspect of your life, then, by all means, it should come up right away.

State a problem

By stating a problem, you create instant curiosity because the reader will want to see how you address it. [This applicant](#) actually opens with a rhetorical question, wasting no time. The remainder of the essay explores the concept of "middleware" and its relevance to the applicant's career.

Sample Essay

Please state your purpose in applying for graduate study, your particular area of specialization within the major field, and any additional information that may aid the selection committee in evaluating your preparation and potential for graduate study at UCSD.

What, exactly, is middleware? According to Level8 Systems, the term refers to any programming which serves to "glue together" two separate programs - localized or distributed. I like to think that the word also embodies my abilities as a software "glue" engineer in the field of embedded systems, and illustrates my capacity to tackle two fields at once.

For many people, imagining their career and contributions five to ten years from college is a daunting task. I have never hesitated to make projections, yet -- since graduating from Cal Poly with a BSEE degree -- my path has taken an interesting, and somewhat unexpected, direction: from hardware to software. Because of my background in electronic engineering and my participation in both the Cal Poly Pomona Solar Energy Team racecar project and the development of simulation software, I was offered a position as system test engineer by the U.S. Naval Research, Development, Test, and Evaluation command. The position introduced me to various engineering disciplines, including modeling and simulation, software systems engineering, real-time performance analysis, and communication (LAN, WAN, wireless) systems.

After a few years, the exposure strengthened my resolve to specialize in embedded software development. Initially, the transition to software engineer was challenging. Despite my lack of formal training in computer science, I enrolled in courses at UCSD Extension to study languages like C and C++. With the skills I acquired from the courses and self-teaching materials, I accepted a position as software engineer on a project called the Battle Force Tactical Training (BFTT) System. The project's main goal was to provide a common synthetic environment to the various ships' on-board trainer (OBT) systems and shore site training centers using the Distributive Interactive Simulation (DIS) protocol (IEEE 1278.1). Since our prime directive was to use commercial off-the-shelf technology, we selected the VMEbus architecture and the VxWorks real-time operating system. My task was to develop software on a VME board, which interfaced with each OBT system and the synthetic environment network - LAN and WAN. The software provided the following functions:

- 1) It received real-time high fidelity track information from each different OBT,
- 2) It translated the data into the DIS Protocol Data Units (PDUs),
- 3) It distributed the PDUs to all nodes on the networks,
- 4) It synchronized and modeled the PDUs at each site in a course database, and
- 5) It translated the PDU information into OBT specific data messages.

With the successful deployment of the distributive training system, BFTT, I am currently involved with a new project, the Distributive Engineering Plant (DEP). DEP is in the process of connecting Command, Control, Communication, and Intelligence (C4I) land base test sites from around the country for total ship test events - T&E and Verification, Validation, and Accreditation (VV&A). My responsibility lies in the design and development of the Common Scenario Common Environment (CSCE) simulation, which will stimulate the whole spectrum of a ship's C4I systems in a coordinated synthetic environment. One aspect of the design is the use of TAO, Real-Time CORBA from University of Washington at St. Louis, as the communication infrastructure for object distribution between the embedded computers.

This type of middleware, as well as other technologies unheard of in embedded systems just a few years ago, will become more prevalent in the future. As an engineer catching a glimpse of the future and its technological possibilities, I am eager to continue my involvement in this field.

Specializing in distributive simulation and real-time embedded systems, I have come to realize that working with embedded systems demands comprehensive knowledge of both hardware and software. Designing drivers and application software requires attention to detail with respect to the hardware devices (DSP, PLD, Flash Memory), buses (VME, PCI), and network interfaces (Ethernet, FDDI, ATM). The current trend in embedded systems is system-on-a-chip (SOC) implementations, which can incorporate microprocessor cores (ARM, MIPS), memory (DRAM, SRAM), peripherals (USB), DSP cores, communication protocol stacks (TCP/IP), and applications (MPEG).

Thinking about hardware and software as mutually exclusive is a thing of the past. The convergence of these two aspects will present both opportunities and challenges for embedded software engineers to "glue" together new technologies, and only those willing to educate themselves and to use this cutting-edge technology will benefit from it. I believe that my ability to learn quickly and to switch fields -- evident from my transition to software engineering -- will allow me to approach these developments with creative and rigorous thinking. I plan to focus my graduate studies in Electronic Circuits and Systems, but I will also be taking courses in Communication and Signal Analysis as part of the breath requirements. UCSD's Master of Engineering program will provide me with the perfect chance to study new concepts and remain in a working environment, while participating in the university's vibrant community. I can think of no better way to build on my professional and academic experiences than pursuing the program's demanding and innovative course of studies.

[This applicant](#), on the other hand, deals with a more urgent social issue that has affected her personally. The remainder of the essay does not purport to solve the problem, but rather to demonstrate her in-depth understanding of it and the level of her commitment to her cause.

Instead of dealing with external issues, you can also discuss personal difficulties and how you have struggled through them. There are many possibilities here, but what unites them is the element of drama, and you should use that to your advantage in creating a strong lead.

Sample Essay

Despite our advances in science, technology, and living standards, I have learnt first-hand that many women are denied the opportunities arising from such progress. Some are denied even the most fundamental rights, imprisoned by a religion whose tenets call for their protection.

I have long been concerned with the terrible plight of Afghani women, who have been subjected to inhumane conditions by their "liberators," the Taleban. Women in Afghanistan are refused an education, banned from working, and denied freedom of movement. As a woman, I find such treatment unacceptable. As a Muslim, I have always been taught that Islam preaches equality, not the humiliation and torture of women. Unfortunately, the Taleban's treatment of women is not entirely foreign to me. In my native Pakistan, women are often said to live "sheltered" lives; the term is nothing more than a euphemism for "living in a prison" -- a gilded prison, perhaps, but a prison nonetheless.

Yet my situation could have been a lot worse had I been born on the other side of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. I have heard several Afghani refugee women describe the brutalities which they endured at home. Last year, I volunteered at a camp on the outskirts of Karachi. The camp was a fly-infested, rubbish-strewn hellhole. Dirty, unkempt children played in the dust, and emaciated women sat staring into the distance. There I met a refugee called Ferooza, and I asked her why they put up with these depressing, unsanitary conditions instead of trying to improve their surroundings. Ferooza's answer shocked me, but in retrospect I realize that to her, life after Afghanistan held no meaning. Her words still ring in my ears:

"After the Soviets left, we thought we could finally be a free people. How wrong we were!" She laughed bitterly. "The Soviets were nothing compared to the Taleban. I had a job then, a family then, a life then. Under the Taleban I have nothing. They stoned my son in front of me -- for listening to music! My daughter--" she started sobbing, and I held her. "They raped her in front of me," she continued. "She was just fifteen. The local Mullah said that his men were not at fault. He claimed my daughter had acted promiscuous by not wearing a veil and had gotten what she deserved." At this point, Ferooza broke down, and I found myself unable to hold back my own tears.

I didn't go back to the camp for a long time after I meet Ferooza -- I couldn't face the horrors. When I finally regained the courage and returned to the camp, I was told that Ferooza had died just a few weeks earlier; the other women whispered that she simply lost the will to live.

My sadness is accompanied by a fear that such brutalities will become matter-of-fact. But I have developed a firm conviction: I want to do something to help these women -- not hide from them, as I did with Ferooza. I am determined to make a difference, and now I know that even individual effort makes a world of difference.

Being Offbeat

This type of approach is risky, but because it has the potential to be so effective, it is worth considering. The same warnings apply here that we enumerated for humor in the Tone section. Try to be subtly and creatively clever rather than outrageous.

[This applicant](#) begins with a joke about his prospective institution: "You'd think I would have had my fill of Indiana winters. But, here I am, applying to go back, ready to dig my parka out of storage. It's not like I've been gone long enough to forget the cold, either. In some ways, I feel as if that permacloud is still hanging over me." The introduction goes on to make some jokes about the applicant's potential concerns. These musings don't serve much of a substantive purpose except to establish the writer's familiarity with the school. On the other hand, they do make the reader more comfortable with the writer's style as he goes on to make more serious points.

Sample Essay

This applicant immediately engaged the reader with a witty and almost conversational style, then segued gracefully into a Statement of Purpose.

You'd think I would have had my fill of Indiana winters. But, here I am, applying to go back, ready to dig my parka out of storage. It's not like I've been gone long enough to forget the cold, either. In some ways, I feel as if that permacloud is still hanging over me. I graduated this past May, and I think my toes just stopped tingling a couple of weeks ago. But I can deal with the winters. I can handle the Hoosiers. I don't mind if the football team loses even more games next year.

So, why come back to my alma mater? To be honest, I'll never fit the profile of the plaid-clad, legacy-bred alum who looks back on his/her undergrad experience as "da best four years of my life." I do, however, feel very grateful for the education. I majored in English and Communication, programs which complemented each other well. The time I spent in writing workshops was productive and rewarding. Also, the validation I received-the stories accepted for RE:VISIONS, the laughter and compliments at Juggler readings- inspired me to keep writing.

I feel that your program provides a nurturing and challenging environment. I aim to develop my talent, to take more risks, and to let my characters lead me, and I know I can work toward these goals in a graduate workshop setting with fewer distractions and a more committed community. I learned quite a bit from [faculty name]. He made me question certain decisions but resisted the temptation to lecture or exert too strong an influence. I regret that I didn't get to study with [faculty name]. I think we have similar styles and concerns, Catholicism for one. A survivor of seventeen years of Catholic school, I find a wealth of material in confessionals, virgin births, and splinters of the true cross. I know I can write funny stuff, but I want to focus my wit as pointedly as she does.

Mainly, I'm looking for two years to devote to the work. I expect to be inspired by other members of the writing community and to form closer working relationships with the faculty. I'm looking forward to criticism, camaraderie, and even the cold. It builds character, so they say.

Conclusions

The second most important part of your essay, behind only the introduction, is the conclusion. Just as the introduction had the purpose of drawing in the reader, the conclusion's foremost function should be to leave the reader with a lasting impression. This section offers guidelines on ways you can maximize the impact of that impression. These guidelines can be grouped into three categories, each of which encompasses a lesson on what not to do.

Synthesize, Don't Summarize

The chief difference between these two tactics is that the former deals with themes while the latter deals with facts/experiences, though there is some overlap. You do not need to recap the essay paragraph-by-paragraph. You do not need to remind the reader of the experiences you have discussed (except as individual experiences might be tied to certain themes you want to synthesize).

You do want to reiterate key themes, but preferably not in a way that merely repeats them. Instead, in synthesizing these key themes in your conclusion, you should ideally be adding a fresh perspective. Try to tie themes together and demonstrate how they complement each other. In doing so, you should always avoid trite and clichéd generalizations.

In this essay, [this applicant](#) uses the conclusion to synthesize the second half of the essay. It's worth noting that he does not mention the content about recovering from addiction, because he could have tied this in with his renewed interest in public policy. Nevertheless, the concluding sentences do an effective job of linking his past experiences with his career goals: "After getting my master's in public administration, I would like to work in the area of economic development in the Third World, particularly Latin America. The setting might be a private (possibly church-based) development agency, the UN, the OAS, one of the multilateral development banks, or a government agency. What I need from graduate school is the academic foundation for such a career. What I offer in return is a perspective that comes from significant involvement in policy issues at the grassroots level, where they originate and ultimately must be resolved."

Sample Essay

My longtime fascination with politics and international affairs is reflected in my participation, starting in high school, in activities such as student council, school board meetings, Vietnam war protests, the McCarthy campaign, and the grape boycott. As each new cause came along, I was always ready to go to Washington or the state capital to wave a sign or chant slogans. Although I look back on these activities today with some chagrin, I realize they did help me to develop, at an early age, a sense of concern for social and political issues and a genuine desire to play a role.

As an undergraduate, I was more interested in social than academic development. During my last two years, I became involved with drugs and alcohol and devoted little time to my studies, doing only as much as was necessary to maintain a B average. After graduation my drug use became progressively worse; without the motivation or ability to look for a career job, I worked for a time in a factory and then, for three years, as a cab driver in New York City.

In 1980 I finally "hit bottom" and became willing to accept help. I joined both Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, and for the next several years the primary business of my life was recovery. Although I had several "slips" in the beginning, I have now enjoyed nearly seven years of complete freedom from drug and alcohol use. I mention my bout with addiction because I think it is important in answering two issues that presumably will be of concern to the admissions committee: my lackluster undergraduate record and the fact that I have waited until the age of 34 to begin preparing academically for a career in public policy. It would be an oversimplification to call addiction the cause for either of these things; rather I would say it was the most obvious manifestation of an underlying immaturity that characterized my post adolescent years. More importantly, the discipline of recovery has had a significant impact on my overall emotional growth.

During the last years of my addiction I was completely oblivious to the world around me. Until 1983 I didn't even realize that there had been a revolution in Nicaragua or that one was going on in El Salvador. Then I rejoined the Quaker Meeting, in which I had been raised as a child, and quickly gravitated to its Peace and Social Order Committee. They were just then initiating a project to help refugees from Central America, and I joined enthusiastically in the work. I began reading about Central America and, later, teaching myself Spanish. I got to know refugees who were victims of poverty and oppression, became more grateful for my own economic and educational advantages, and developed a strong desire to give something back by working to provide opportunities to those who have not been so lucky.

In 1986 I went to Nicaragua to pick coffee for two weeks. This trip changed my whole outlook on both the United States and the underdeveloped world. The combination of living for two weeks amid poverty and engaging in long political discussions with my fellow coffee pickers, including several well-educated professionals who held views significantly to the left of mine, profoundly shook my world view. I came back humbled, aware of how little I knew about the world and eager to learn more. I began raiding the public library for everything I could find on the Third World and started subscribing to a wide variety of periodicals, from scholarly journals such as Foreign Affairs and Asian Survey to obscure newsletters such as Through Our Eyes (published by U.S. citizens living in Nicaragua).

Over the intervening two years, my interest has gradually focused on economics. I have come to realize that economic development (including equitable distribution of wealth) is the key to peace and social justice, both at home and in the Third World. I didn't study economics in college and have found it difficult to understand the economic issues that are at the heart of many policy decisions. At the same time, though, I am fascinated by the subject. Given my belief that basic economic needs are among the most fundamental of human rights, how can society best go about providing for them? Although I call myself an idealist, I'm convinced that

true idealism must be pragmatic. I am not impressed, for example, by simplistic formulations that require people to be better than they are. As a Quaker I believe that the means are inseparable from the end; as an American I believe that democracy and freedom of expression are essential elements of a just society, though I'm not wedded to the idea that our version of democracy is the only legitimate one.

Although I have carved out a comfortable niche in my present job, with a responsible position and a good salary, I have become increasingly dissatisfied with the prospect of a career in business applications programming. More and more of my time and energy is now being absorbed by community activities. After getting my master's in public administration, I would like to work in the area of economic development in the Third World, particularly Latin America. The setting might be a private (possibly church-based) development agency, the UN, the OAS, one of the multilateral development banks, or a government agency. What I need from graduate school is the academic foundation for such a career. What I offer in return is a perspective that comes from significant involvement in policy issues at the grass roots level, where they originate and ultimately must be resolved.

Seeing how the pieces fit together leaves us with a clear point to take away. Moreover, the last sentence is key to the lasting impression he creates, as it provides a fresh interpretation of the significance of his work at the grassroots level.

If in the process of synthesizing you are able to invoke your introduction, you will add to your essay a further sense of cohesion and closure. There are a number of different ways this can be accomplished. For example, you might complete a story you started in the introduction, as in [this essay](#), or you might show how something has changed in your present since the timeframe of the introduction.

Sample Essay

This applicant successfully told about overcoming cultural disadvantage by creating an interesting short story for the reader.

The spring quarter had just ended in my second year of college. As I sat in the airplane, waiting for it to take off, I was terrified. If man was meant to fly he would have been given wings, and since I did not have a pair of wings, flying was very uncomfortable for me. Although the excitement of backpacking through Europe slowly began to dissipate this feeling of flight anxiety, the roar of the engines and the sluggish movement towards the runway sent my fear sky high. With death impending, my thoughts turned retrospective, reviewing moments of my past and how they would affect the future that I would not have.

This was not my first flight on an airplane, so I could not explain this deathly fear of flying. My initial introduction to flying came when I was four, traveling half way across the world from

South Korea to meet my new family in America. Although I was flying alone, I soon met several passengers who were happy to keep an eye on me and help me pass the time. When the flight was over, I was introduced to my new family; there were Thomas and Penny, a.k.a. Dad and Mom, and two boys and two girls, who I am proud to call brothers and sisters.

I don't know about reincarnation or anything like that, but I felt that I had known this group of people forever. It was as if I was a piece of a jigsaw puzzle; I was a piece, and combined with others, we made a nice "picture." From the first day, I gave them as much love as a person could give, and received it back tenfold. There were the usual family problems-fighting siblings and parental confrontations- but we were a great family. I never really thought that I or my family was different until we moved to a small town on the coast.

The town was predominantly filled with white, middle class people. When I arrived I was 12 and the only Asian in the entire school. It never occurred to me that I was different, but as people started to harass me about my looks, I was devastated that I did not fit in. My family gave me a lot of support, and with a lot of determination, I was soon accepted as one of the guys. These initial experiences, however, imprinted an image about the naiveté of people, and how quick people are to judge a person without getting to know him first. However bad the experience was, it did make me a better person, making me more prone to give people a chance before passing judgment on them.

All I had to do was survive the airplane flight. After a few moments of turbulence and very dangerous levels of anxiety, the plane began to fly smoothly. I finally settled down as I began reviewing my makeshift plan of attack to see Europe. My life was in order, unlike the points of Europe I wanted to see, but then, who wants to follow a set plan when there is so much to see!

Expand on Broader Significance-Within Reason

One way to ensure that your closing paragraph is effective is to tie your ideas to some broader implications, whether about yourself or your field. However, do not get carried away. Some applicants feel they must make reference to changing the world or derive some grand philosophical truths from their experiences. Remember to stay grounded and focused on your personal details.

[This applicant's](#) conclusion ties his goals in teaching to a broader issue about research limitations at smaller liberal arts colleges. He does not express the goal of revolutionizing education, but instead simply wants to make a contribution that has personal significance to him. The final sentence invokes the tradition of scholars before him. Such a tactic is not usually advisable, because it can sound forced and generic, but in this case, the applicant has established his focus on a specific intellectual topic-human memory-so it's not as vaguely trite as invoking Plato, Descartes, and Kant in the search for truth.

Sample Essay

Note: This essay appears unedited for instructional purposes. Essays edited by EssayEdge are dramatically improved. For samples of EssayEdge editing, please [click here](#).

Ever since my first psychology lecture, I have been fascinated by the nature of human memory. Indeed, human memory is one of the most tenacious and enigmatic problems ever faced by philosophers and psychologists. The discussion of memory dates back to the early Greeks when Plato and Aristotle originally likened it to a "wax tablet." In 1890, pioneer William James adopted the metaphorical framework and equated memory to a "house" to which thirty years later Sigmund Freud chimed that memory was closer to "rooms in a house." In 1968, Atkinson and Shrifren retained the metaphorical framework but referred to memory as "stores". The fact that the controversy surrounding human memory has been marked more by analogy than definition suggests, however, that memory is a far more complex phenomenon than has been uncovered thus far. I intend to spend the rest of my professional life researching the nature of human memory and solving the riddle posed yet cunningly dodged by generations of philosophers and psychologists.

When I first came to psychology, however, I wanted to be a clinical psychologist. Only upon enrolling in Dr. Helga Noice's Cognitive Psychology course, did I discover the excitement of doing research. The course required us to test our own autobiographical memory by conducting an experiment similar to the one run in 1986 by W. Wagenaar. Over the course of the term, I recorded events from my personal life on event cards and set them aside without reviewing them. After studying the effect serial position on the recollection of autobiographical memories, I hypothesized that events that, when I sat down at the end of term to recall those same events I had described on the event cards, that events that had occurred later in the term would be recalled with greater frequency than events that had occurred earlier. Although the experiment was of simple design and predictable results, I found the processes incredibly exciting. Autobiographical memory in particular fascinated me because I realized how crucial, yet fragile, memory is. Why was my memory of even ten weeks so imperfect? What factors contributed to that imperfection? Could such factors be controlled?

I had ignited my passion for experimental psychology. Suddenly, I had many pressing questions about memory that I wanted to research. Under the guidance of Dr. Noice, I continued to study human memory. I worked closely with Dr. Noice on several research experiments involving expert memory, specifically the memory of professional actors. Dr. Noice would select a scene from a play and then a professional actor would score it for beats, that is, go through the scene grouping sections of dialogue together according to the intent of the character. Some actors use this method to learn dialogue rather than rote memorization. After they were finished, I would type up the scene and the cued recall test. Next, I would moderate the experimental sessions by scoring the actor's cued recall for accuracy and then helping with the statistical analysis. My work culminated with my paper, "Teaching Students to Remember Complex Material Through the Use of Professional Actors' Learning Strategies."

My paper accompanied a poster presentation at the Third Annual Tri-State Undergraduate Psychology

Conference. In addition, I presented a related paper entitled "Type of Learning Strategy and Verbatim Retention of Complex Material" at the ILLOWA (Illinois-Iowa) Conference the following year. Again, I was involved in all aspects of the experiment, from typing the protocol and administering it to the subjects, to analyzing the data and finally presenting my results.

The opportunity to perform this research was invaluable, particularly as I began taking independent research seminars in my senior year. For the seminars, I was required to write an extensive review of the literature and then design a research proposal on any topic of my choice. Although I had participated in all aspects of research previously, this was my first opportunity to select my own topic. I was immediately certain that I wanted to explore human memory. But I spent a long time considering what aspect of memory I found most intriguing and possible to tackle within the confines of the research seminar. I had always been interested in the legal implications of memory, so I to investigate eyewitness memory.

In retrospect, my choice was also informed by my recollection about an experiment I had read about several years earlier. In the experiment, subjects read about Helen Keller. Later they were given a recall test. Still later they were given an additional test to determine the source of their knowledge about Helen Keller. The authors discovered that subjects could not determine the source of their knowledge, that is, they could not distinguish whether specific details of their knowledge about Helen Keller came from the information provided by the experimenters or if the details came from another source at an earlier time. Once their new knowledge about Helen Keller had been assimilated into their previous knowledge about Helen Keller, there was no way to separate the information according to the source it came from.

I wondered what the implications of that conclusion would be for eyewitnesses. I wondered if an eyewitness account could be corrupted by misleading post-event information. My research proposal was entitled "The Rate of Memory Trace Decay and its Effect on Eyewitness Accuracy." While I was not able to complete the experiment in its entirety, I was excited by the fact that I created a possible research protocol. Immediately, I knew I wanted to pursue the field of experimental psychology. My success in course work and my passion for research demonstrated to me that I had both the interest and ability to enter this challenging and rewording field.

I have dedicated my undergraduate years to preparing myself for graduate work in experimental psychology. Once receive my doctorate, I intend to pursue research on human memory while teaching psychology to undergraduates at a small, liberal arts college, similar to the one I attended. It was, after all, my undergraduate research experience that gave me the opportunity to come to psychology with an interest in counseling people, but to leave with a passion for investigating the nature of human thinking. Undergraduates at smaller liberal arts colleges are often left out of research, which makes my desire to provide such experiences that much stronger. In the years ahead, I look forward to teaching as well as continuing my

research. In the company of such greats as Aristotle, James, and Freud, I endeavor to leave behind my own contribution on the nature of human memory.

Don't Add Entirely New Information-Except to Look Ahead

We have used the word "fresh" here several times, and what we're mainly talking about is perspectives and ideas. You should avoid adding entirely new information about your experiences. In shorter essays, you may have to pack details everywhere, but in general, if it's an important experience, it should come earlier.

That said, writing about your future goals is a strong way to end. After you have established your background and qualifications in the previous paragraphs, delineating your goals can help synthesize these topics, because you are tying your themes together in the context of where you will go next.

[This applicant's](#) conclusion is a straightforward, well thought out description of her professional goals. Such an ending demonstrates to the reader that she has given much consideration to her future and the role a Ph.D. in literature can play in it. Moreover, she makes clear that while she has definite career goals in mind, she also appreciates literature for its own sake. This kind of natural affinity for her subject of study serves to make her a dedicated and genuinely engaged student, and, therefore, a more attractive candidate to the admissions committee.

Sample Essay

Having majored in literary studies (world literature) as an undergraduate, I would now like to concentrate on English and American literature.

I am especially interested in nineteenth-century literature, women's literature, Anglo-Saxon poetry, and folklore and folk literature. My personal literary projects have involved some combination of these subjects. For the oral section of my comprehensive exams, I specialized in nineteenth-century novels by and about women. The relationship between "high" and folk literature became the subject for my honors essay, which examined Toni Morrison's use of classical, biblical, African, and Afro-American folk tradition in her novel. I plan to work further on this essay, treating Morrison's other novels and perhaps preparing a paper suitable for publication.

In my studies toward a doctoral degree, I hope to examine more closely the relationship between high and folk literature. My junior year and private studies of Anglo-Saxon language and literature have caused me to consider the question of where the divisions between folklore, folk literature, and high literature lie. Should I attend your school, I would like to resume my studies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with special attention to its folk elements.

Writing poetry also figures prominently in my academic and professional goals. I have just begun submitting to the smaller journals with some success and am gradually building a working manuscript for a collection. The dominant theme of this collection relies on poems that draw from classical, biblical, and folk traditions, as well as everyday experience, in order to celebrate the process of giving and taking life, whether literal or figurative. My poetry both draws from and influences my academic studies. Much of what I read and study finds a place in my creative work as subject. At the same time, I study the art of literature by taking part in the creative process, experimenting with the tools used by other authors in the past.

In terms of a career, I see myself teaching literature, writing criticism, and going into editing or publishing poetry. Doctoral studies would be valuable to me in several ways. First, your teaching assistantship program would provide me with the practical teaching experience I am eager to acquire. Further, earning a Ph.D. in English and American literature would advance my other two career goals by adding to my skills, both critical and creative, in working with language. Ultimately, however, I see the Ph.D. as an end in itself, as well as a professional stepping-stone; I enjoy studying literature for its own sake and would like to continue my studies on the level demanded by the Ph.D. program.

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Lesson Six: Editing and Revising

Even the best writers need to edit their work. Their first drafts might be very strong already, but they can always get better. You too will find aspects to improve during the editing process, from broad content issues down to basic word choice.

Try to write a complete first draft before you worry too much about editing. Otherwise you might find your creativity hampered by your analytical side. Once you have a first draft finished, set it aside for a few days or more if you have that luxury. When you return to it with a fresh perspective, you will probably notice many problems that did not occur to you before and recognize better ways of handling various points.

Do not hesitate to edit at all levels, even if it means you'll be doing a lot of rewriting. Throw out entire paragraphs if you can't recall what purpose they were serving. Replace boring passages with vivid details, banal generalizations with sharp insights. Cut and paste until you've achieved the optimal structure. Fine-tune every sentence until it is clear, concise, and graceful.

Is there such a thing as over-editing? If you begin to lose sight of your goals and can no longer distinguish between constructive and unconstructive changes, then you may begin to detract from the freshness and strength of your essay. At that point, the only course you can take is to set the essay aside again until you can read it with a clear mind.

EssayEdge provides significant help with the editing and revising process. Having edited tens of thousands of admissions essays, our Harvard-educated editors can take a poor, boring essay and make it a powerful personal essay. We will carefully edit the essay to improve the impact of the introduction and conclusion, the logic and transition, the content, and the grammar. For more on our services, please visit our editing section.

 **Select One:**

- [Editing Checklist](#)
- [Final Steps](#)

EssayEdge Extra: Soliciting Feedback

All writers rely on outside feedback. You may want to use friends, family, and teachers as an initial resource before submitting your essay for more hands-on editing by EssayEdge. While the people you know can give you valuable suggestions based on their relationship with you, EssayEdge offers a vital perspective in providing objective criticism and expertise specific to the admissions essay.

The following is an evaluative questionnaire for you to give your readers along with the essay:

1. Did my opening paragraph capture your attention?
2. Did you find the statement as a whole to be interesting?
3. Did you find it to be well written?
4. Did it seem positive, upbeat?
5. Did it sound like me?
6. Do you regard it as an honest and forthright presentation of who I am?
7. Did it seem to answer the question(s)?
8. Can you think of anything relevant that I might have inadvertently omitted?
9. Is there material within the statement that seems inappropriate?
10. Did you gain any insight about me from reading this?
11. Did you notice any typos or other errors?
12. Do you think the statement has in any way distinguished me from other applicants?

Editing Checklist

The following checklist is divided into the basic categories that we used to organize this course: content, structure, and style.

CONTENT

Are you answering the actual question given in the prompt?

Have you been sincere and personal?

Is your essay within the word limit?

Will your reader find the essay interesting?

Are you showing rather than telling?

Does your introduction grab the reader's attention?

Do you explore your experiences in sufficient depth?

Does your essay contain a high level of detail and concrete evidence?

Have you avoided unsubstantiated claims?

Do you offer specific, personal insights rather than trite generalizations and clichés?

Does your essay reveal anything meaningful about your character?

Do you avoid summarizing information that can be found elsewhere on your application?

Will your essay make you stand out?

Does your conclusion leave a lasting impression?

STRUCTURE

Can you identify an overarching theme? Have you articulated that theme in the essay?

Does your theme have multiple layers and genuine depth?

Do you have a reason for placing every paragraph where it is?

Do your paragraphs flow smoothly? Are there any gaps or jumps?

Does each point build upon previous points, or does your essay sound like a list?

Have you written insightful transitions and resolutions that highlight your key themes?

Are your stories well integrated into your essay?

Is the essay clear and coherent? Have you strengthened its impact by using the optimal structure?

STYLE

Have you achieved a simple, straightforward style?

Have you varied your sentence constructions?

Have you avoided unnecessarily fancy vocabulary?

Have you avoided passive voice?

Have you achieved active writing through the use of strong verbs?

Have you avoided overusing adjectives and adverbs?

Is your tone conversational, rather than too casual or too formal?

Have you conveyed confidence, enthusiasm, and passion?

Final Steps

Read Your Essay Out Loud: To help you polish the essay even further, read it out loud. You will be amazed at the faulty grammar and awkward language that your ears can detect. This will also give you a good sense of the flow of the piece and will alert you to anything that sounds too abrupt or out of place. Good writing, like good music, has a certain rhythm. How does your essay sound? Is it interesting and varied or drawn out and monotonous?

Have Your Essay Professionally Edited: Named "the world's premier application essay editing service" by The New York Times, EssayEdge has helped more applicants write successful application essays than any other company in the world. Please [click here](#) to have your essay professionally edited.

Congratulations!

You have completed the course.

We wish you the best of luck throughout the application process.