

# WRITING THE APPLICATION ESSAY

No. 37 in the Writing Center Handbook Series

*You opened the mail this afternoon and it has arrived: the application for your top choice graduate school! As you flip through the materials, you come across a big blank page. Perhaps the application committee is asking a question: "What experience made you decide to go into medicine?" or "What book made you reevaluate your goals?" Or maybe they present a situation and ask you to explain how you'd handle it: "An established client comes to you with a manuscript you don't think should be published. How would you conduct yourself in the meeting?" If you are given a prompt like this, read the instructions carefully and decide why you're being asked the question: what information about your abilities, interests, or character is the committee trying to discover?*

*Or suppose that blank response page gives you no prompts, and instead just two words stare back at you from the top: PERSONAL STATEMENT. Now what?*

## **Starting Points: How to think about the essay**

Your chance to tell them who you are. A supplement to your resume. Space to tell a story. Opportunity to explain something in your background. A way to make your application stand out.

## **GETTING TO WORK...**

### **Step 1: This is YOUR life—Who are you and what do you have to offer?**

Who are you? What do you want? What are your strengths? How does your mind work?

What are your unique experiences? Why did you choose the program? Why should they choose you? How do you handle problems like the ones they see everyday?

### **Step 2: Consider your audience—Who will read your essay?**

They are your future teachers or coworkers. They read hundreds of essays like yours. They are looking for good, clear writing. They want to get to know you to see what you have to offer and if you fit in. They will notice originality and specificity.

### **Step 3: Brainstorm ideas—What story should you tell?**

- ☛ Unique experiences and light bulb moments (internship, study abroad, special seminar, independent study, service project, leadership position, etc.)
- ☛ The stories behind the accomplishments that show up on your resume (awards, publications, committee or organizational work, sports, etc.). Flesh out something that only appears as a title.
- ☛ Experiences that will prepare you to do the work this program or scholarship or opportunity would ask of you.

#### **Now move in closer: What one moment...**

Changed your life? Made you able to see more points of view?

Tell the story of that moment, how you changed, what you learned, and why it's relevant to your future plans.

(continued on reverse)

For more information on writing application essays, see  
the Office of Career Planning  
sample essays on file in the writing center  
<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/apessay.html>



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## Step 4: Start Writing

Get the story out on paper; write quickly. Think beginning, middle, end. Don't worry about language, spelling, etc. at this point. Write the "bad" version so you can get to writing the "good" version. Tell what really happened; give details. Tell how you changed and what you learned, but be honest; don't oversimplify for the sake of creating morals to your story ("When I dropped the brick on my toe, I was immediately aware of the fact that I was becoming a stronger person").

## Step 5: Revising the Essay

Cut extra words. *Cut "I" when possible. Cut it again, and again!* Use strong verbs and fresh, original language. Avoid passive voice. Use strong opening and closing lines. Cut filler words (thus, serves to, consequently, however, it is important to note, etc.). Cut clichés ("I want to help mankind"), and phrases that tell the committee what they already know ("Your program is the best in the country").

Read the essay aloud. Make an appointment to take it to a Career Planning counselor. Show it to faculty members in your discipline. Show it to friend or a fellow major. Go to the writing center at least once for content, once for proofreading. Proofread. Proofread again!

## Step 6: Take a Step Back

Have you really said what you wanted to say about your experiences, your education, your goals, etc.?

## Step 7: Celebrate!

Proofread all of your application materials once more, apply postage, drop the envelope in the mail, and wait for an acceptance letter.



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