

Writing Your Graduate School Application Essay

Although different graduate schools may ask you to answer different prompts, most ask that you write no more than a two-page application essay. The application essay is difficult to write because you must pitch your candidacy to a few department faculty members who read through hundreds – or sometimes thousands – of other essays. In this handout, you will learn how to show these busy readers that you will contribute meaningfully to the university and their department.

The application essay is often called a statement of purpose (SOP) or a personal statement. Refer to FAQs to find out how the two are different, but both types are similar in one key way: you must convince the admissions committee that you are a good fit for the program and can contribute to the department.

1. Relate your past and present experiences to the future.

In their application essays, many applicants make the mistake of underemphasizing the future. But it's important that you show how your past experiences have informed your present work, and how your present work can be extended to the **future** or raise new research questions.

Admissions committees assess many qualified applicants based on whether their research will reflect positively on the university and their department. Committees will think your past and present work is relevant only if it relates directly to your plans for the future. If you don't know exactly where your current work will take you, you should at least mention how you could develop it. Committees want to see that you have a sense of direction and motivation to pursue issues specific to your field.



Note: Your application essay is not a binding contract, and you don't have to list your qualifications in chronological order like a résumé or CV. It may be better to order them according to importance.

BEFORE

I am an ideal candidate due to the knowledge I have gained thus far in my Master's program at Carnegie Mellon University. I have completed courses in multiple fields of chemical engineering, as well as increased my knowledge in engineering techniques and lab research. I further honed these techniques from participating in a lab research project. My first lab experience started when I joined Professor Annette Jacobson's team to determine the electrophoretic mobility of colloidal contaminants in water, which is useful in water treatment processing. Moreover, I have acquired scientific research skills, for instance, searching literature, designing experiments, analyzing results and writing papers.

Doesn't show how qualifications will benefit applicant in the future

Doesn't explain how past experiences are relevant to graduate level work

AFTER

My Master's from Carnegie Mellon University in Chemical Engineering **has equipped me with** content knowledge and technical experience on colloidal properties that **will be a strong asset to** the work on soft matter phenomena currently being conducted at Yale University's department of Chemical and Environmental Engineering. I've focused the majority of my studies on both supramolecular engineering of colloidal forces and aggregation dynamics, and electrophoretic deposition of colloidal crystalline arrays for display technologies. These foci were further honed when I joined Professor Annette Jacobson's team to determine the electrophoretic mobility of colloidal contaminants in water, which is useful in water treatment processing. I **plan to extend** my research pursuits to intrinsic and extrinsic microstructural relaxation rates in protein separation and crystallization processes, work currently being explored by Professor Michael Lowenberg, and my work on colloidal properties will give me a valuable perspective into that investigation.

Connects past and present to future

Shows sense of direction for future research

2. Elaborate on your qualifications.

Faculty members who read your application essay are experts in your field. They want to read about your specialized work so they can decide if your skills and research will benefit their department. Don't be vague about your work hoping to reach a wider audience. On the other hand, you shouldn't overload your application essay with jargon just to impress the committee. Use only the jargon you need to tell a specific story about your research.

Emphasize the qualifications you have gained from your experiences; don't just list the experiences themselves. Do **not** just restate your résumé, but elaborate on the qualifications that you have gained through your accomplishments, giving concrete examples. Remember the axiom: show; don't tell.

BEFORE

I believe my knowledge base, skills and motivation for research make me a great contribution to Carnegie Mellon's electrical and computer engineering research group. I'm passionate and enthusiastic about ECE techniques. I also have a strong background in foundations of engineering, due to my comprehensive undergraduate work, and I'm versed in research methodologies, as shown through my multiple collaborative projects.

Needs to be elaborated on
Every applicant has mastered the basics

AFTER

I am an ideal candidate for Carnegie Mellon University's Electrical and Computer engineering program **due to my extensive research on radio transmitter identification techniques** that can identify multiple transmitters and weak interference sources, independent of the DTV reception. More specifically, my current collaborative publication with Professor Qijun Wu of Xidian University **proposes a timely new transmitter fingerprinting technique that reduces multipath distortion generated by neighboring transmitters in an SFN**, which would enable broadcast authorities and operators to identify the source of in-band interference in some coverage overlapped areas. I believe my expertise at this area could supplement the cutting-edge TxID work being conducted at Carnegie Mellon.

Specifically discusses applicant's strongest qualification, his or her current work

3. Specifically explain why this institution is the best fit for you.

You must show how your research interests match the department's academic strengths. Visit the department's website to see what research they emphasize and what faculty are working on.

In your application essay, identify 2-3 faculty members and relate their work to your future research goals. If you discuss how your intended work aligns with the department's work, you will convince the committee that you're interested, well informed and detail-oriented. Committees can sense if you use the same statement for every school; you must tailor your essays to specific programs.

BEFORE

My visit to Carnegie Mellon University and my correspondence with several faculty members has further strengthened my will to join CMU's chemical engineering department. I believe that your leading faculty and rigorous training is a good match for my research interests, and will aid me in pursuing an academic career in a top Process Systems Engineering program.	<i>Omits names and work of faculty members Doesn't discuss department's specific strengths</i>
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AFTER

Carnegie Mellon University is the ideal institution to support my academic pursuits since the Process Systems Engineering group's focus on optimization dovetails perfectly with my research interests . I believe I would be a valuable asset to the PSE team's endeavors to solve design and operation problems in process industries, specifically with my research focus in integrated process water systems. In particular, the techniques of Professor Ignacio E. Grossmann on mixed-integer nonlinear programming for the synthesis of integrated process water networks are foundational to my current work. In addition, the work of Professor Nikolaoz V. Sahinidis on global optimization is very intriguing to me as a path for future research , as I've communicated to him in our correspondence. I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to learn from and collaborate with CMU's influential faculty and the Center for Advanced Process Decision-making.	<i>Connects research interests to strengths of department Names specific faculty members and discusses their work</i>
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4. Introduce the main idea for each body paragraph in the topic sentence.

Communication research suggests that readers best comprehend and retain information when you unify a paragraph around one main idea that is clearly signaled in the topic sentence. Try to organize each body paragraph in your application essay around one qualification or ability.

BEFORE

CMU's program emphasizes real world data analysis and the practical application of statistical knowledge in the workplace. I have taken classes in linear and hierarchical regression analysis, including multilevel models, and data visualization. Currently I am working on a consulting project, finding software solutions for a variety of clients. I have also completed four actuarial exams – P, MLC, FM and C.	<i>Qualifications are not related so readers may not understand the point of this paragraph</i>
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AFTER

Data analysts at Google have the added opportunity and challenge of **recommending solutions for the data problems** they encounter. I am prepared for the distinct **problem-solving facet of this position** because I received unique training from CMU’s Statistics program, where I practiced applying statistical knowledge in the workplace. I have **acquired the communication skills necessary to present solutions** to Product Managers, Sales Associates, Engineers, and Marketing Teams through my coursework and current project of working with a variety of clients **to find data-driven solutions.** In addition to reporting solutions, I have completed four actuarial exams – P, MLC, FM and C – and **acquired the problem-solving skills** to analyze and interpret large data sets through my experience in hierarchical regression analysis of multilevel models.

*Introduces main idea
Unifies all qualifications
under the main idea of
“problem solving”*

5. Utilize white space.

You should provide ample white space (parts of the page left without text) in your application essay with at least 1” margins, short paragraphs and readable type (at least 12 pt). Employers and recruiters who read hundreds of application essays do not want to read documents that look crowded or lengthy. Respect your readers’ position and provide a visually inviting document.

At a glance, which application essay do you find more inviting?

Statement of Purpose

A statement of purpose, sometimes referred to as a personal statement, is an application document that allows an admissions committee to get to know you as an applicant and understand your decision to pursue graduate work at their institution. While prompts vary, most schools limit the statement of purpose to around two pages. The graduate school SOP is a notoriously difficult document to write since your audience will be a small group of department heads reading through hundreds – or even thousands – of other statements! You must show this rushed audience how you will make an integral contribution to their institution’s academic team.

This handout will offer you some helpful guidelines when writing your statement of purpose or personal statement. Be future oriented; connect your past and present to future research. Show how your past has informed your current work, and how your current work shows potential for future extension, or raises new research questions. One of the most common mistakes in the SOP is underemphasizing the future. An admissions committee assesses many qualified candidates based on their potential for future research.

Your past and present are only relevant to the committee as they relate to your future. Some students avoid being specific about future paths of research since they are not completely sure what area they want to focus on. While you certainly shouldn’t lie, you should at least mention facets of your current work that could potentially be developed. Your statement of purpose is not a binding contract; the committee wants to see that you have a sense of direction, knowledge of the field, and motivation to pursue issues in a certain area. Note: your qualifications do not need to be in chronological order, like a résumé; in fact, it may be better to position them in order of importance. Be as specific as possible about your qualifications. The department members reading your statement are specialists in your field!

Do not be vague or general in hopes of reaching a wider audience. Note: Only use language that is appropriate and relevant to your work. In other words, do not use unfamiliar jargon to impress the committee. Be specific about the qualifications that your experience gave you – not the experience itself! Your SOP should NOT simply restate your résumé, but should elaborate on the qualifications that your abilities, accomplishments, and experiences give you. Remember the axiom: show, don’t tell. Give concrete examples that illustrate the work you have done and eliminate vague qualifications that could be written by anybody with your degree. Be specific about why this institution is the best fit for you. You must explain why a school is a good fit for you and show how your research interests match the department’s academic foci.

Mention several specific faculty members and their work. Do some research on a school’s website to find the primary focus of the department and see what strengths they themselves emphasize. Specifics about the school and department make you look interested, well informed and detail-oriented. Committees can sense if you use the same statement for every school; you must tailor each statement to each institution and program.

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The advice in this handout is compiled from the career and/or writing centers and admissions representatives of several institutions including Purdue University OWL, U. of Central Missouri, CMU, U. of Michigan American Culture Dept., UC Berkeley, Claremont Graduate U., U. Chicago Graduate School of Business, Northwestern U. Graduate School of Management, UCLA School of Law, Cornell U. Medical College, Washington U. School of Medicine, as well as posts by Ryan Hickey and Geoffrey Cook from the EssayEdge Blog.

Graduate School Application Essay FAQs

Application essays are also difficult to write since there's a lack of consensus about the best practices of the genre. There isn't **one** correct way to write application essays because you can make yourself stand out in many different ways. These FAQs highlight some of the differing approaches.

Note: *Talk to an advisor in your field to see which approach is better for your discipline.*

What's the difference between a statement of purpose and a personal statement?

Sources haven't reached a consensus on the difference between personal statements and statements of purpose. Some say that personal statements should explain your personal history and past experiences more, while statements of purpose should be more future-oriented, with special language about future work. Others say that personal statements should be more engaging, autobiographical and anecdotal, while statements of purpose should be more direct and to-the-point about your academic work. Often, the institution you're applying to can offer advice about how to write and what to include in your application essay, even if instructions are not in the main prompt.

Should my tone be personal or strictly professional?

You can assume many tones when writing your application essay, ranging from engaging, anecdotal, and entertaining to objective, direct, and concise. Here's a good guideline: don't be too extreme with any tone you assume. Check with the institution you're applying to or an advisor to see which approach is better for your field.

Should I begin my statement with an anecdote or personal hook?

Some sources recommend starting your application essay with a personal hook – a relevant, personal anecdote or experience that will make you stand out from other applicants. (Medical schools often like to see personal hooks). Other sources recommend focusing your application essay on your research and academic goals, without any fluff. Talk to an advisor to see which approach is better for your field, but no matter your approach, be sure to connect your introduction to your future plans.

Personal hook introduction: When I was 17 years old, I was scuba diving off the coast of Australia and had my right leg, below the knee, bitten off by a Great White shark. While this experience was incredibly difficult, the prosthetic leg I received enabled me to live a "normal" life. I could maintain a similarly active lifestyle engaging in activities like running, skiing, skateboarding, and even scuba diving. My accident was the event that incited my entry to the field of biomedical engineering, with a focus on orthotics and prosthetics.

Direct introduction: I'm applying to the biomedical engineering program at M.I.T. with a concentration in orthotics and prosthetics. I believe my extensive work with ankle stabilizing mechanisms, along with my firsthand experience of living with a prosthetic leg, makes me the ideal candidate for your doctorate program.

Should I account for things like a drop in my GPA, poor SAT/GRE scores, or lapses in my work or education history?

Don't lie, but don't ignore any unusual or potentially negative experiences hoping that the committee won't notice. You don't need to make excuses – especially if you don't have a good one – but you should note if your grades dropped because you were caring for a sick family member, or if you took time off from school to work in an unrelated industry. However, why you let your grades slip or took time off is often less important than what you did to remedy your situation. If you had a rough semester, what did you do to get yourself back on track? If you were working as a chef, what made you decide to pursue a Ph.D. in engineering? More importantly, what did you learn from those experiences that will benefit you in graduate school? These experiences may not directly affect what you'll research in graduate school, but they demonstrate your commitment to pursuing an advanced degree.