

Types of Application Essays for Graduate School

When applying to graduate school, you will likely be asked to write one or more essays. These essays are a chance for you to demonstrate to the admissions committee your strengths as an applicant and your interest in the program. However, there are many different types of application essays you may be asked to write. Some universities may require several types of essays, and some universities may develop unique essay prompts that are distinct from the main categories of essays. Most, however, will require one of the following essay types. It is critical that you determine exactly which type of essay the university requires so you can write the essay that meets their expectations. Be sure to read the prompt carefully to determine what type of essay the university is seeking.

Basic Features of Graduate School Essays

- All try to indicate to the graduate program committee why they should accept you, but they do this through a focus on different kind of information.
- All should be professionally written and formal, although personal statements can be more approachable in tone.
- All vary in length between 500 and 1,500 words. Different universities may have more specific guidelines around length.

Types of Graduate School Application Essays

- Statement of Purpose
- Personal Statement
- Diversity Statement
- Research Statement

Statements of Purpose

Statements of purpose are one of the most commonly required essay types. In a statement of purpose, you are asked to write about your interest in pursuing your graduate field of study at the university you are applying to. Statements of purpose should include information about your past and present experiences as well as how those relate to your future professional and academic goals at the institution you are applying for.

Example Prompt:

Graduate Program at UC Berkeley¹

Please describe your aptitude and motivation for graduate study in your area of specialization, including your preparation for this field of study, your academic plans or research interests in your chosen area of study, and your future career goals. Please be specific about why UC Berkeley would be a good intellectual fit for you

¹ <https://me.berkeley.edu/graduate/application-requirements/>

Personal Statements

Personal statements are another common type of application essay. This type of essay is frequently required when applying to law school or medical school. A personal statement should be personal: its purpose is to give the admissions committee insight into you as a person. This is a chance to demonstrate your strong personal qualities, discuss challenges you have overcome, and show the admissions committee you are the type of person they want in their department or program. The essay should relate to your personal motivations for attending graduate school and pursuing your specific career as well as challenges you have overcome and your successes.

Example Prompt:

Graduate Program in Law at NYU²

This is a brief statement--make it no more than 500 words. It is also personal. Describe aspects about yourself, your accomplishments, or your academic and professional goals. Take a moment to reflect on these, and consider your thoughts about how they motivate you towards graduate study and/or illuminate the reasons you are applying for one of our programs or a particular specialization.

Diversity Statements

Diversity statements are often required when applying for jobs, but universities are increasingly requiring their graduate school applicants to write this type of essay. A diversity statement can include personal experiences with issues of diversity, but most importantly, it should focus on how your work, both in your classroom and in your research, contributes to DEI. You can focus on past, present, and future DEI work you have done and plan to do and demonstrate that you will try to make the community you are joining more equitable.

Example Prompt:

Graduate Program at Emory University³

We are committed to enrolling a diverse student body. We are also committed to initiating, cultivating and sustaining an academic community that engages diverse intellectual and cultural perspectives and that values open dialogue, shared responsibility, mutual respect, and ethical competence — forces that enrich and enhance innovative research and scholarship. (...) Your statement should be no longer than 500 words. This is an optional component of our application.

<https://www.gs.emory.edu/admissions/diversity.html>

² <https://www.law.nyu.edu/graduateadmissions/application-required-materials>

³ <https://www.gs.emory.edu/admissions/diversity.html>

Research Statements

Research statements are an opportunity for you to showcase your research background, skills, experiences, and goals. The purpose of a research statement is to demonstrate to the admissions committee that you are capable of conducting research, with a particular interest in independent research you have conducted. The research statement should include information about your past research projects as well as your short and long-term research goals. A research statement should avoid focusing on personal motivations and anecdotes and instead focus on your research. Be sure to include mentions of any grants, funding, or awards you have received for your research.

Example Prompt:

Research Statement Prompt from NSF⁴

Present an original research topic that you would like to pursue in graduate school. Describe the research idea, your general approach, as well as any unique resources that may be needed for accomplishing the research goal (e.g., access to national facilities or collections, collaborations, overseas work, etc.). You may choose to include important literature citations.

For more information on graduate school applications, check out our other related handouts:

[Writing a Diversity Statement](#)

[Graduate School Application Statement of Purpose](#)

[Questions for Diversity Statements](#)

[Writing a Research Statement](#)

⁴ <https://www.nsfgrfp.org/applicants/application-components/statements/>

Essay Type Comparison Chart

Essay type	Essay Purpose	Essay Content	Should the essay reference career goals?	Should the essay address fit for the program?
Statement of Purpose	To convince admissions that you are a good candidate for their program or department and that you have the background and skills to succeed in their program	Includes content on relevant research experiences, courses, academic background, internships or jobs.	Yes	Yes
Personal Statement	Give admissions committee a deeper sense of you as a person	Focuses on personal motivations for attending graduate school and pursuing your specific career, as well as challenges you have overcome and your successes.	Not necessary	Not necessary
Diversity Statement	Give admissions committee an understanding of how you would contribute to the DEI (Diversity Equity and Inclusion) of the department	Content can include personal experiences with issues of diversity, how you engage with issues of DEI around you, and projects you hope to implement should you be accepted into the university.	Not necessary	Yes, but through the lens of DEI
Research Statement	Demonstrate to the admissions committee that you are capable of conducting research, with a particular focus on independent research	Should include information about your past research projects as well as your short and long-term research goals	Yes, relating to research	Yes, but through the lens of research