

Graduate school applications often require a letter of intent, personal statement, or similar essay. These may highlight your personality, interests, accomplishments, and goals, as they relate to what you want to study and why you want to attend that school to do it.

Writing a personal statement for grad school could be one of your biggest opportunities. You can use it to show the school who you are and why they should consider your application. Because it's something of a first impression, it's important to make sure your essay is thought out, well organized, and well written. Here are some tips for creating a standout application essay or letter of intent for graduate school.

What Is the Difference Between a Letter of Intent and Personal Statement?

The first step in writing an effective application essay is identifying exactly what you're meant to be writing. Is your application asking you for a letter of intent, a personal statement, or a statement of purpose? Or are they asking for more than one of these? The basic content of each option is similar. They all talk about your intention to study at that school, and why you might be a good fit. Despite these similarities, there are some key differences which should guide your approach to composing them.

- **Letter of Intent:** A letter of intent, or letter of interest, is like a cover letter. It's a formal letter, ideally addressed to the decision-maker regarding your application. The goal of a letter of intent for graduate school is to provide an overview of your goals in applying, highlights of your experience, and why you'd be a good fit. You'd probably also want to close with a call to action.
- **Graduate Personal Statement:** Rather than a letter, a personal statement for graduate school is an essay. It's intended to show who you are as a person, your personal and academic goals, and why you might be a good fit for the program. An important distinction here is "who you are as a person." Personal statements should speak to what you want to study and why. But you'll probably want to frame it as a personal narrative that helps the reader get to know you as an individual.
- **Statement of Purpose:** The biggest difference between a statement of purpose and a personal statement is the intent. While also an essay, a statement of purpose generally focuses specifically on your reasons for applying to a program. The content should focus on the program itself and the specific achievements and experience that make you a good candidate. A statement of purpose could also be known as a graduate school statement of intent, a goal statement for graduate school, or an academic goals essay.

While some programs may only ask for one of these pieces, it's possible that your selected school might want a few of them. If you're asked for a personal statement and a statement of purpose, it's important to think what makes each one different. One strategy to make it a little easier could be to delineate between your "personal" and "academic" achievements. For example, you could write your statement of purpose

about the academic and professional experience that makes you a good candidate for that program. Your personal statement might focus on the personal experiences that shaped your character and led you to choosing that field and that school.

Getting Ready to Write Your Graduate School Application Essay

When you're getting ready to write your personal essay, you will first need to think about a few key points.

1. **Your Purpose in Writing Your Essay**

In other words, what are you trying to tell your reader about yourself and your goals? Make sure you have a clear message.

2. **What You Want to Say**

Think about the kinds of details, or the type of story you want to tell to achieve your purpose. Do you have a specific experience you want to describe, or certain achievements you need to share? How do these details support your message?

3. **The Style You'll Use to Write It**

Sometimes, schools might look for a certain style of writing, such as a scholarly voice. However, in other cases, you might have a little bit of wiggle room. This is your chance to show your target school that you're a competent, engaging writer with personality. Thinking about your strategy in advance could help you do that.

All of this should be informed by the particular school you're writing the essay for. So, before you begin, be sure to read the essay requirements carefully, and research the school and the program in question.

Formatting Your Personal Statement for Graduate School

Thinking about how you'll structure your essay early on could be an advantage when it comes to writing and revising. One good way to do this could be by drafting an outline of your ideas. By doing this, you could make sure your ideas are organized effectively, and see how it all fits together, even before you start writing.

Chances are you learned the basics of essay structure in high school. But in case you're out of practice—for example, if you spent the last few years knee deep in math or computer science—here's a refresher.

- **Introduction**

Anywhere from a sentence to a paragraph, the introduction creates context for the reader. Generally speaking, it should provide an overview of the topics you'll be discussing. But, depending upon the style of your essay, it could also serve as a dramatic lead-in, setting the stage for a story you'll be telling...

- **Body**

The body of personal statement, will likely consist of two to four paragraphs. These

paragraphs should be sequenced logically – one should naturally flow from the next – and contain the bulk of the essay’s important information. Usually, these paragraphs will begin with a “topic sentence” summarizing the paragraph’s content, but again that may not apply if your statement has a more narrative style.

- **Conclusion**

Rather than introducing new ideas or supportive arguments, the conclusion is where you tie it all together. Close out your essay by making clear what your argument is and what you want the reader to take away from it.

If you’re writing a letter of intent, the above should still apply. However, you’ll need to do this as a formal letter. That should include a header containing the date, the recipient’s name and address, your name and address, and a salutation, as well as a closing and signature.

How Long Should a Personal Statement for Graduate School Be?

While every school will have its own requirements, generally a personal statement should fall between 250 and 750 words. This is roughly one half to one full page.

First, double check to see if the school provides specific guidelines. If they don’t, then try to be as clear and succinct as possible while still answering the question. Does your personal statement cover all the key points? Is it clear what you are trying to say? Did you repeat yourself? If your answers are yes, yes and no, then your personal essay is likely the right length.

Writing Style for Your Personal Statement

In addition to telling the school about yourself and your goals, a personal essay demonstrates your writing ability to your school. As such, you’ll want to put your best foot forward with an effective writing style. Here are some tips to consider while you write.

- **Strike a balance between personal and professional.**

You might be talking about yourself, but you’re also writing to a graduate school, so it’s important to show that you can write formally. Try and be direct, clear, and organized, to help your reader follow easily. Don’t stray from your topic and watch your grammar and punctuation! That said, this essay is about you, so don’t be afraid to write in first-person.

- **Be engaging.**

Keep your reader interested through your style choices. For example, sticking with active verbs when possible and avoiding passive voice could help enliven your writing. Strong imagery or concrete examples could also make an impression that lasts. And using a conversational tone (but not too informal!) could help personalize it for the reader.

- **Be accurate.**

You want your reader to be interested, but make sure everything you write is true! Avoid embellishing or inventing stories and stick to facts that could be substantiated.

- **Follow the rules.**

Your school might have specific guidelines for how you write and submit your personal essay. Make sure you follow them to a tee! When in doubt, be conservative, and stick with a traditional font choice (12 pt. Times New Roman) and paper (white). Also make sure you're spelling names correctly and using the right credentials and terminology when talking about your target school.

Editing Your Graduate School Application Essay

One of the most important aspects of the writing process is revision. Don't be surprised if this takes more than one draft to do! Many writers revise over several rounds before settling on a finished product. Here's a brief guide on the revision process and what to look for.

- **Work from big to small.**

Before worrying about individual words and sentences, make sure the big issues are covered. Start with things like your ideas, the clarity of your argument, and your overall structure and fix those first.

- **Check your message.**

Think back to the beginning of this process, to the message you decided you wanted to get across. Is your essay or letter communicating that message? Is it clear? If you're not sure, consider having somebody else read it over.

- **Check your organization.**

If you started with an outline, compare your finished draft to your original outline. Is your essay organized the way you planned? If so, read through it and make sure that it makes sense and has a logical flow.

- **Make sure your paragraphs make sense.**

Each paragraph should have a clear topic or message, and support for that topic. Make sure it's clear what each paragraph is trying to say, and that each one is organized.

- **Check your style.**

Double check to make sure your tone isn't too casual. If you included any slang, for example, now is the time to remove it. Then check your sentence structure. Avoid fragments and run-on sentences, and make sure to vary your sentence structure to keep the reader engaged. Try and remove any instances of passive voice, when you can. Reading your essay aloud could be one way to catch any awkward writing you might have missed.

- **Fix your grammar and punctuation**

This is the last and possibly most important step. Make sure you catch any errors in grammar and punctuation. Pay careful attention to common errors, like mixing up your/you're, and there/their/they're. Also make sure to check your subject/verb agreement, number agreement, capitalization, and punctuation. Finally, double check spelling, especially when it comes to important names. One strategy to avoid missing anything is to read your essay backwards, starting with the final sentence. That will help

force your brain to focus on each individual sentence, instead of skimming over mistakes by accident.

Final Advice

Writing personal statement for graduate school is only one piece of the application puzzle. But it's more than that. It's an opportunity to show your chosen school your writing expertise, your passion for your subject, and who you are as a person. Keep in mind what the application is asking you for and what you're trying to tell them. Take time to edit carefully, and your essay could potentially set your application apart.