

Writing Application Essays

Barbara Gastel, MD, MPH

Professor, Texas A&M University

INASP Associate – AuthorAID

Opportunities for Which Applicants Sometimes Must Submit Essays

- Graduate (postgraduate) programs
- Professional school (for example, medical school)
- Internships (in various professional fields)
- Residencies in medical fields
- Fellowships (for example, for postdoctoral study)
- Scholarships
- Awards
- Other

A Note on Terms

For some opportunities, the *application essay* may have another name, such as *admissions essay*, *personal statement*, or *statement of purpose*.

In this presentation, the general term *application essay* will be used.

Some Purposes of an Application Essay

- To show where you're coming from, where you are now, and where you're going
- To show that you're well matched with the opportunity you're seeking
- To show that you think clearly and express yourself well
- Other?

Ideal Impression on a Reader

“This applicant is essentially a perfect fit. The applicant’s background, values, and goals all suit the opportunity. So do the applicant’s abilities and traits. And the applicant comes across as someone we’d enjoy working with. Of course this applicant should be a finalist for this opportunity.”

Preparing to Write an Application Essay

Researching the Opportunity

- Inform yourself well about the opportunity in order to
 - Make an informed choice
 - Gear your application essay accordingly
- Find out any requirements for the application essay—for example:
 - Length
 - Deadline

Reflecting on Yourself

- Identify items such as relevant
 - Experience
 - Abilities
 - Traits
 - Goals
- Note: Consulting your resume or curriculum vitae can be helpful.

Looking at Models

- Consider looking at general examples of application essays (for example, online).
- If feasible, perhaps look at application essays by people who have obtained opportunities like the one you are seeking.

Drafting an Application Essay

Establishing the Mindset

- Be ready to tell your story. Application essays that are largely stories tend to be easier to write and read.
- Know that the point is to communicate, not to impress with your literary skill.
- Be aware that readers are likely to be busy. Therefore write in a way that is easy to read.
- Remember that a draft is just a draft. Get something written. You can then revise it.

A Basic Structure

- Introduction (can be a straightforward overview or, for example, can incorporate an anecdote or quote)
- Relevant aspects of your history
- Evidence that you're well matched with what you're seeking (can be integrated into the above)
- Your hopes for the future, especially as related to the opportunity you're seeking

Note: Having the content at the end “circle back” to that at the beginning can work well.

Some Suggestions on Content

- **Be focused.**
 - Relate the content to your main objective.
 - Be selective.
- If, for example, you're applying for different fellowships, have different versions of your application essay, each geared accordingly.
- Include the 5 Ws and an H (who, what, where, when, why, and how).

Suggestions on Content (cont)

- Support statements with evidence (for instance, examples).
- Show that your choice of what to seek is well informed and thoughtful.
- Show rather than tell. For example, rather than saying that you're hardworking, make it clear from your story that you've worked hard.
- Consider presenting your strengths in terms of perceptions by others.

Suggestions on Content (cont)

- Be sure to explain items that may be unclear. For example, if the purpose of an award is unclear from its name, say what the award was for.
- If there are aspects of your background that readers may wonder about (for example, gaps in your education or career), explain them.

Some Notes on Drafting

- When drafting an application essay, don't worry much about length. Just try to get the ideas down. You can expand or condense the essay later.
- Likewise, don't get bogged down in trying to make the application essay perfect right away. You can polish it later.

Polishing an Application Essay

Some Items to Check

- Clarity
 - Insufficient just to be clear enough to understand
 - Should be so clear it can't be misunderstood
- Completeness (Was anything major left out?)
- Focus (Is any content tangential and therefore in need of deletion?)
- Organization (Is everything in logical order?)
- Flow (Does each idea lead smoothly to the next?)
- Mechanics: grammar, spelling, punctuation, usage

To Avoid: Wordiness (Unnecessarily Lengthy Wording)

- A common problem, especially in drafts
- Tends to make writing harder to read
- Takes up valuable space; thus, can't present as much content
- Decrease wordiness by
 - Generally using the shorter word
 - Deleting unnecessary words
 - Condensing wordy phrases

Using the Shorter Word

- Attempt → Try
- Currently → Now
- Demonstrate → Show
- Fundamental → Basic
- Numerous → Many
- Subsequently → Later
- Utilize → Use

Deleting Needless Words

- Absolutely essential → Essential
- Completely destroy → Destroy
- Count the number of cases → Count the cases
- In the field of biostatistics → In biostatistics
- Of an efficient nature → Efficient
- Red in color → Red
- This particular disease → This disease
- Whether or not to → Whether to

Condensing Wordy Phrases

- At this point in time → Now
- In the event that → If
- Is able to → Can
- Is similar to → Resembles
- Make contributions → Contribute
- Produce relief of → Relieve
- The majority of → Most

Also to Avoid

- Overly long sentences
- Excessive use of abbreviations
- Undefined abbreviations

Getting Feedback

- Consider getting feedback on one or more drafts of your application essay.
- Think of who can best help with what aspects.
- Indicate what kind of feedback you're seeking:
 - General comments on content?
 - Help in final polishing?
 - Something else?
 - Whatever could help?
- Note: Provide enough time to do the review.

Formatting an Application Essay

- Follow the instructions, if any.
- Unless otherwise specified:
 - Use a standard, readable typeface.
 - Use medium-sized type (10 to 12 points).
 - Use margins of at least 2.5 cm (1 inch).
 - For readability, use an unjustified (“ragged”) right margin.

Proofreading Your Application Essay

- Set your application essay aside for a while, so you can proofread it with a fresh eye.
- Read your application essay aloud. That way, you might more easily notice problems such as missing words.
- Consider having someone else proofread your application essay too.

Wishing You Much Success!