

# PERSONAL STATEMENTS & APPLICATION ESSAYS

*Convincing an admissions committee that their program should invest in you*

## OVERVIEW

Application essays are a standard component of most graduate and professional school applications and allow admissions committees to put a face to your test scores and GPA. These essays give you an opportunity to explain aspects of your personal, educational, and professional history that have led you to pursue entrance into a program, school, etc. Your application essay should describe how your *unique* background and experiences will help you succeed in the program you have chosen, and beyond.

## BRAINSTORM BEFORE YOU START WRITING

Ask yourself these questions to generate content for your essay:

- What experience or education has sparked your interest in the program?
- How have you been pursuing your interests in this field of study thus far?
- What appeals to you the most about the program?
- Why do you think you're a good fit for this particular program?
- What do you plan to do with the education you hope to receive?

## GUIDELINES

- Read the program materials carefully, and make sure that you *understand* them fully.
- Keep your audience (faculty of the graduate program) and its opinions in mind when writing.
- Show the committee your reasons for pursuing this *specific* program, and explain what gives you the unique ability to succeed (persistence, determination, self-discipline).
- Explain how you intend to use the knowledge and experience you will gain in this program after graduating; in other words, how will *this* program help you become a productive member of society?
- Follow the application instructions (including word count, formatting, and content) very carefully.
- Be selective about what you include – *create a theme* instead of just listing your achievements.
- Avoid clichés! Try to avoid making statements that could apply to someone else's essay.
- **Show, don't tell.** Give the reader *evidence that demonstrates your success or skill* instead of telling Show, don't tell them that you are successful.
- Use words and phrases that have positive connotations.
- *Proofread* your essay! Even if you have excellent content, improper use of punctuation and poor grammar can hinder the reader. Poor spelling implies carelessness.

## SHOW, DON'T TELL:

In the Warner Brothers, Inc. film *Inception*, Leonardo DiCaprio and his team must cunningly plant an idea in an important businessman's mind – an idea that he must be convinced he came up with himself. To do this, they use highly-advanced technology to infiltrate his dreams.

You are also practicing inception, but you are doing it without sophisticated technology: you are doing it with words. This is what "show, don't tell" means.

Instead of telling your audience what to think about you, you should select evidence that will cause your

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audience to think of you in a certain way.

FOR EXAMPLE:

***Tell:***

I am a very skilled cross-country runner.

***Show:***

Throughout high school, I participated in over 40 cross-country tournaments and earned 32 gold medals for my efforts.

Both the “**tell**” and the “**show**” in the example above talk about how the applicant is very good at cross-country running. However, the “**tell**” simply makes a claim, while the “**show**” implies the claim made in the “**tell**” by presenting the right evidence.

The reader is more likely to be convinced and impressed by the “**show**” than by the “**tell**” since they will feel that they came to a conclusion about the applicant on their own, using evidence instead of bias.

In addition, notice how words with positive connotations (“earned,” “efforts”) enhance the meaning of the sentence and imply that the applicant is dedicated and hardworking.

### NEED MORE INFORMATION?

The information in this handout is based on the University of Wisconsin’s Writing Center website, and on Duane Roen’s Personal Statements for Graduate School workshop series, which is presented through the Graduate College at ASU. Go to <http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/index.html> for more on this and other writing assignments.