

WRITING AN EFFECTIVE ADMISSIONS LETTER

When you write a letter or personal statement as part of applying for graduate or professional school, you make your case as much by the way you write as by what you say. Here are some qualities to aim for.

Be focussed. Take your cue first from the prompts given in the application form; also research the program widely, looking for hints about its values and identity. What is the main stated question (e.g., why you will be a good researcher or lawyer, what experience you can bring to the program, whether you can stand the pressure)? If the prompt is very general (or lacking), choose an overall point you want to make: that you are a proven achiever, that you thrive on challenges, that you have something special to contribute to the profession. . . . Don't just write about law or medicine or anthropology: write about yourself as a lawyer, physician or anthropologist.

Be coherent. Being "together" is a quality of writing as well as of character. A clearly organized letter can create a picture of a clear-minded and sensible person. You might want to write from an outline or a diagram of main points. At least check the topic sentences of each paragraph in your finished piece to see if they make a logical sequence. Ask a tough-minded friend to give her impression. (See the advice on the other side of this sheet about possible types of organization.)

Be interpretive. You need to make an impression concisely, so don't use your letter just to repeat the facts set out in other parts of the application. Provide explicit answers for the question that arises in the mind of any reader looking at a hundred or more similar documents: "So what?" Use nouns and adjectives that name qualities (*outgoing, curiosity, confident*) and verbs that show action (*coordinated, investigated, tried*). Make an effort to find the exact right words to suit the evidence you are offering.

Be specific. There's no point making claims unless you can back them up. Refer to the fact lists in other parts of your application ("as my academic record shows"), but offer enough examples so that your letter can stand on its own. Say that they are just instances, not your whole proof ("An incident from last summer is an example...."). The concrete language you use for these specific references will also balance the generalizing words of your interpretive points.

Be personal. Your letter substitutes for an interview. In effect, the readers have asked you to tell stories, mention details, expand on facts. So mention things you might not have put into the rest of the application—your ethnic background or political interests, even, if they're relevant to your academic interests. Don't be afraid to mention problems or weaknesses if you can show how you overcame them and what you learned from the experience.

Use *I* rather than evasive phrases like "this writer" or "was experienced by me." A stylistic tip: to avoid monotony, start some sentences with a subordinate clause such as "While I scrubbed floors" or "Because of my difficulties"—then go on to *I did* or *I learned*.

Options for Organizing an Admissions Letter

Judge by the clues on the application form and by the nature of the profession or discipline what kind of logical structure you could use to tie your points together into a coherent whole. You may see indications you are expected to demonstrate your personality, or be self-analytical, or enter into discussions in the discipline. You will probably use one or more of these standard expository patterns.

Narrative: A chronological order is easy to organize. It progresses from a beginning to an end, and you can divide up the middle into manageable sections. But beware of overworked openings like "I have always wanted to be a dentist," and of excessive detail. Select relevant and interesting stories and make sure that the readers know why you are telling them.

Analytic: To deal with the central question why you are a good match for the program, give an overall answer about yourself and then discuss the elements that contribute to your engagement with the discipline. Discuss your interests in terms of key issues and theories in your discipline. To balance the dryness of this approach, break into memorable stories at times, using specific details, and use verbs to put yourself into action. Show what you intend to do after you have completed the program.

Technical: To indicate your research or professional interests, show your involvement with a specific issue. Don't just outline the topic you want to work on; write about your summer research job or independent-study project, or even your program on student radio or your volunteer experience. Outline specific undergraduate projects as examples. Emphasize what you learned from these activities, and indicate how your studies will extend that learning.

Other Sources of Advice

Writing Centres can sometimes give you a consultation on your admission letters. Many other sources of advice are available—besides feedback from your professors, TAs, and fellow-students.

Writing Style: Don't give your readers any excuses to eliminate your application. Proofread carefully for missing details as well as errors in grammar or punctuation. Write readably; don't overload your sentences with academic jargon or pretentious words. Pull out your dictionary and reference books on writing if you're wondering about specific constructions. If you need to set up your statement as a letter, check a book or website on standard letter formatting for the date and return addresses. If you use a Word template, choose one of the simpler ones to avoid looking pretentious.

Specific Guidebooks: Lots of books give advice on writing graduate admissions letters. The ones you'll see in bookstores and libraries are nearly all focussed on American universities, so take their advice and samples with a grain of salt. Above all, don't imitate too closely—suspected plagiarism or obvious insincerity would lead to quick rejection.

Online Advice: Avoid commercial sites. But you may find useful advice at academic sites such as the Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL), the University of Wisconsin Writing Center, and PsychWeb.

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