



***PERSONAL ESSAY
WRITING FOR
GRADUATE SCHOOL
APPLICATIONS***

**MIT Careers Office
12-170 • 617-253-4733**

This workshop will answer the following questions:

- **What is a personal essay?**
- **What role does my essay play in the application process?**
- **What is the best way to convey my message?**
- **How do I know if my essay is effective?**



What is a personal essay ?

- A personal essay is a brief (1-2 page) narrative that describes your past experiences and future goals. It is meant to compliment (NOT simply reiterate) the facts found in the rest of your application.

What role does my essay play in the application process?

Search committees use your essay to:

- Learn why you want to pursue your area of study - where your “passion” comes from and what your goals are.
- Find out a little more about your personality and any unique characteristics you may bring to their program.
- Assess your writing skills. Committees often look at your score on the writing portion of the GRE and compare it to your essay.

What is the best way to convey my message?

Effective essay writing techniques:

- Tell personal stories.
- Write a strong opening paragraph.
- Observe simple essay writing tips.
- Avoid common pitfalls.
- Follow the format for the type of graduate or professional school to which you are applying.



Tell Personal Stories

- A personal story is a powerful technique to convey a message.
- Stories:
 - Capture the audience's attention.
 - Reveal personal characteristics through metaphor, analogies, and symbolism.
 - Allow the reader to make an intimate connection with the author.
 - Allow the audience to become involved in the narrator's experiences.



*How do you determine your personal stories?
Here are some questions to get you thinking:*

- Why did you choose this career path?
- What were some turning points in your life?
- What were some of the biggest challenges in your life, and how did you handle them?
- What person or event influenced you the most, and how?
- What were the reasons for the major decisions in your life?
- What are your future goals, and why?

Strong Opening Paragraphs

- Your opening should draw the reader in to your essay and be compelling enough to make people want more.
- If it helps, write the rest of the essay first and come back to the opening later. Expect to do many drafts before you come up with the right one.
- Some examples (*from EssayEdge.com*)

“My mother is back. For two and a half years, she has been tucked away in a place where those more fortunate have never ventured. The woman who returned bears only a slight resemblance to the person I knew before her departure.”

““We don't need to take this analysis any further, especially since the client isn't paying for additional work.” I was dumbfounded. An idealistic graduate of Dartmouth College, I had imagined that the business world would provide an excellent learning environment in which to explore and apply my theoretical training. I was wrong.”

Essay Writing Tips

- **Keep it simple:**
 - Don't focus on too many experiences.
 - Don't list all the things you already describe in your resume / on your application
- **“Show” instead of “telling” the reader:**
 - Use action verbs and descriptive words.
 - Convey your thoughts and feelings about what you have learned from your experiences.
- **Explain weaknesses (grades, scores, lack of experience, etc.)**
 - Be brief. Don't make long-winded excuses.
(explanation of weakness can also be accomplished within the application.)

Common Pitfalls

- Rewriting your resume or being overly biographical
- Using highly technical language
- Providing more information about someone else than about self
- Trying to be too creative (e.g., writing poetry)

Graduate School Essay Types

Medical School Essays

- **AMCAS Essay**
 - *5300 characters or less (approx. 1 page)*
 - *Use text-only format and software if you plan to cut and paste*
 - *Avoid using all caps or all lower case*
 - *Proofread carefully! Changes cannot be made once you have submitted to AMCAS*
 - *2 additional essays required for MD-PhD*
- **Additional essays for secondary applications**
 - *Should be different than AMCAS essay*
 - *Should relate to the specific school*

Law School Essays

- Length varies from school to school. Typically 1-2 pages.
- Important writing sample – much of law school is written work.
- Make it personal. Most law schools do not interview, so this is one of their only ways of seeing “you”.
- Try not to simply repeat information that can be read elsewhere in your application.

Business School Essays

- Typically 1-3 essays.
- Common themes/questions include:
 - *Career Goals: Why are you pursuing an MBA? Where do you hope to be in 5 years?*
 - *Your Greatest Achievement: Describe a significant accomplishment, and discuss why you view it as such.*
 - *Teamwork: Describe a situation in which you demonstrated ...(teamwork/leadership).*
- Pay attention to school specific details (requested essay length, how question relates to information the school thinks is important).
- Relevant internship experiences are appropriate topics.
- Think about what will distinguish you.

PhD Program Essays

- Talk about past research experience.
- Discuss what areas of research you are interested in doing now. Pick several areas and try to show a range so that they can find the most appropriate advisor.
- Make sure your personal goals are aligned with the program's goals for its students (i.e. if they are primarily concerned with producing future academics, but you want to go into consulting, this may not be the program for you.)

How Do I Know My Essay is Good?

- Review your essay with a faculty mentor and/or MITCO staff.
- Visit the Writing Center.
- Ask for feedback from someone who knows you well.
 - *Does this essay sound like you?*
- Ask for feedback from someone who does not know you at all.
 - *What does this essay make that person think of you?*

Writing Resources

- MITCO Staff
<http://web.mit.edu/career/www/aboutus/staff.html>
- Books: MIT Careers Office Library
<http://web.mit.edu/career/www/infostats/librarycareer.html>
- Faculty Advisors
- MIT Online Writing and Communication Center
 - <http://web.mit.edu/writing/>
- MIT Writing Center: The Writing Process
 - http://web.mit.edu/writing/Writing_Process/writingprocess.html
- Sample Essays with Critiques
 - <http://www.essaybank.co.uk>
 - <http://www.essayedge.com/>
 - <http://www.ivyessays.com/>
 - <http://www.admissionsessays.com/>