

Graduate School Essays for US graduate schools

- Length: usually prescribed (typically 500 up to 2000 words)
- Purpose: to show to the admissions committee:
 - that you know what doing a PhD means (tenacity, teamwork, resourcefulness);
 - that your previous decisions in life have been the result of careful planning and consideration;
 - that you can think, write a coherent argument, and express yourself well.

The **best way to write the essay** is usually to focus on your interest for science, and to tell how it was first awakened, which stimuli you were exposed to, what you have done to develop your interest, what you gained and learned at Jacobs and at your internships, and finally how all of this has led you to apply to this particular graduate school, in this particular field. You should also mention that you believe you are now well-equipped to start graduate school because of your theoretical and practical training, and that you recognize how important it is to work productively with others within a research environment.

Other suggestions:

- Enumerate your achievements (such as good grades and prizes) but do not show them off. Use them as indicators that your chosen career path is going in the right direction.
- Do not belittle yourself, your effort, or your achievements.
- This is not the place to list things that you cannot do, or that you don't find interesting.
- Do not overly praise the institution you are applying to. They know how good they are, and they also know that you are applying to several other places.
- But demonstrate that you know what is special about this particular institution, and give the impression that you know why you are applying there.
- Use the active voice, especially when you talk about yourself. ("I found cell biology fascinating" instead of "Cell biology attracted me".)
- Be as precise as possible. Use specific instead of general terms. ("I operated a gas chromatograph in a bioanalytical laboratory" instead of "I worked in a lab".)
- Use active verbs that carry precise meanings, instead of general ones. Look at the [List of Verbs to use in a Graduate School Essay](#), and the special [List of Active Verbs structured by Levels of Abstraction](#).
- Use positive language, looking towards your aims. ("I came to Germany because of the superior opportunities to study biochemistry" instead of "I left xxx because it stunted my scientific growth".)
- Look at the "Words and phrases to avoid without explanation" section of the site, <http://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/GradStatement.stm>.
- Books on style in general: The best book on writing in English that I know is "[The elements of style](#)" by William Strunk and E.B. White. It can be found in the IRC.
- Perform a spell and grammar check using your word processor, and have your essay read by a native English speaker. [CSC](#) may be able to help with this.

Beware of essay books, websites, and companies that offer ready-made essays. It is fine to use them as an inspiration, but do not copy anything slavishly. Templates will usually not fit to your life and may even give a suspicious contrast to your CV. The admission officers are looking for a genuine statement, and they know very well that such books exist.

Websites with general advice that are worth looking at include:

- <http://www.rpi.edu/web/writingcenter/gradapp.html>
- <http://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/GradStatement.stm>

On the process of writing the essay:

- <http://www.yale.edu/career/students/gradprof/generalapp.html>
- http://www.lclark.edu/~writing/grad_essays/grad_complete.htm

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