

Writing the First Drafts—Essays for Grad School

1. Type the question you are answering at the top of your first page. Re-read this question frequently as you write.
2. Accept the inevitable—the first draft will be unfocused, unclear, too long, and possibly boring to boot. That’s the nature of first drafts.
3. Keep your eyes on the prize, a final essay that shows you as too-good-to-pass-up. Be ready to write second, third, and fourth drafts of this very important essay.

SHOW, DON’T TELL.

“Show, don’t tell” is a cliché about writing, but an absolutely true and necessary one. The saying means, provide the evidence to prove your claims about yourself.

Not: I enjoy helping others.

But: My first job netted me \$1.50. For one and a half memorable hours, I helped Mrs. Kennedy’s developmentally disabled daughter construct a father’s day card for her dad. I don’t remember how I spent that money, but I carry with me forever Clare’s grin as she triumphantly pressed the last sticker into place.

OPENING SENTENCE/PARAGRAPH

The goal is to wake up the reader, focus their attention on you . . . without resorting to cheap theatrics or false bids for sympathy. You are unlikely to discover this opening the first time you write. It will reveal itself to you as you work on the essay.

Personal stories interest readers and reveal your character; just make sure the point of your story is clear. The moment you realized you were meant to study this subject or pursue this career can become a powerful story.

Professional guidebooks, like the one listed on the bottom of this page, offer excellent examples to provoke your imagination.

INCLUDE EVIDENCE THAT YOU’VE DONE YOUR HOMEWORK

Weave information from the school/the program, into your essay. As you study their catalog, their website, their admissions materials, look for words and phrases and statements that excite you, match your personal philosophy, intrigue you intellectually.

ADDRESSING POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

Don’t avoid problem areas, but don’t devote a lot of attention to them, either. Freshman year pull down your overall GPA? Refigure it without that year, briefly comment on how much you’ve matured since then, and show them what your REAL GPA looks like . . . or maybe focus a spotlight on your GPA in your major.

Maybe you majored in something that doesn’t directly connect to your desired course of study in graduate school. Use the essay to demonstrate how the lessons of dance or theatre directly apply to the study of international relations.