

## Preparing to Write—Essays for Grad School

### *Study the prompt and consider the situation.*

- Busy people are reading your essay (and hundreds more). How will you capture and hold their interest?
- You want these people to want YOU as part of their graduate program. What do you bring that other applicants do not?
- You want to convince these people that you have a genuine interest in this subject and their program. What proof of this can you provide?
- Your essay should complement the other materials in your packet, not repeat them.

### *Understand the nature of pre-writing.*

- We call it pre-writing, but the process requires you to put words on a page.
- Organization and elegance do not matter at this stage.
- You want to thoroughly mine your life for relevant experiences and start documenting them on paper, with as much detail as you can remember.

### *What makes you special?*

This is awkward but necessary . . . you are NOT like the other applicants. Help your readers understand this.

What's your background (geographically, economically, culturally, every which way)? Who's your family and what are their values? What stories about your life—both past and present—do you find yourself telling over and over? What is it about those stories that define you?

Travel? Work? Volunteer service? What have you done that has shaped the person you are today? As you write, spell out the connection between the experience and your character.

Schooling? They have your transcripts. They have letters of recommendation from your professors. Perhaps they have a resume that lists some special achievements. What else do you want them to know about this significant piece of your life? “Aha!” moments related to learning. Reading, writing, speaking experience. Intellectual influences. What have you done with your education? How have you used it to accomplish something? Do you have to explain some low points in your academic progress?

### *Why have you chosen this field/this program?*

No, it's not obvious why you want to study this subject. And, no, it's not politic to suggest that, from your point of view, one program is as good as another in this area. Know your subject and know your school.

Be specific about your life goals. How will this education contribute to realizing those goals? Imagine and then describe your ideal future, both career and life situation.

How will this education help you live out your personal values?

What experiences prepare you to succeed in this field/this program?

Plot the evolution of your interest in graduate study. What precipitated that interest? What plot twists and turns carried you closer to (or away from) your goal? What do you already know and what work have you already done?