How to Conquer Your Graduate School Application Essay

While your test scores, undergraduate GPA, transcript, and resumé generally speak for themselves, they are hardly a complete representation of who you are. As a result, admissions committees for graduate programs use essays to assess not just what you have done, but what you are capable of doing.

This realization may make the task of writing an application essay seem even more daunting. But you can also choose to consider it an empowering opportunity. Your application essay is your chance to advocate for yourself. To not just say that you are unique, but prove it.

To make this process a little less intimidating, here are some steps you can take to guide your writing process. The goal is to streamline your effort, avoid procrastination, and finish your essay with sufficient time to polish and perfect it.

Stage 1: Plan

Know your parameters. Check the maximum word count and the application due date. If there is a prompt or guidelines, read it carefully and identify exactly what you should address. Make your essay purposeful.

Schedule. Create a timeline for the writing process. Set due dates for yourself: maybe have your preliminary research done in the first two days, then a first draft within a week, then a second draft a few days after that. Your timeline will depend on how long you have until your application is due, your personal and professional commitments, and your own writing speed. Stay on schedule, and if you can, build in extra time for possible interruptions or issues that arise.

Research. Explore both the school and program you’re considering. If possible, talk to accepted students or alumni about their application process. Make connections between your experience and the program. Brainstorm which features of the program you might want to reference. Your application should be clearly tailored for the school rather than generic to prove the level of your interest.

Review your application. Talk through your resumé and transcript. You can highlight skills you feel the application does not accurately reflect or emphasize, explain weaker aspects of your history (for instance, if your grades were affected by a medical experience or personal event, you might want to contextualize that), and illustrate connections between your experiences and skills and what the program is seeking.

Seek others’ opinions. If you find yourself struggling for things to say or have a hard time discussing your achievements, find someone close to you personally or professionally who knows you well. She or he can help you generate a topic or simply help you see yourself from a different angle. At Meredith, we recognize the power of strengths. You might want to use the results of CliftonStrengths to frame your perspective.

Stage 2: Draft

Write! While a blank page can be intimidating, it will be a lot less unnerving if you get some ideas down. Remember, you do not have to immediately commit to anything you write, so allow yourself some freedom. Once you have some general ideas, you can sharpen and clarify them.
Watch your ego. Discuss your achievements without bragging or minimizing. That can be difficult. When talking about yourself, try to describe your accomplishments in terms of how they can help you contribute to your program, and your peers and advance your life goals rather than simply for the sake of congratulating yourself.

Focus on growth, not just the past. Emphasize your hard-won achievements by centering your essay on what you still can learn and how your experiences will influence your future. Tell your readers what you can give them, not just what you have already done.

Make it sparkle. Once all the overarching issues have been addressed, really nitpick your essay. Read it aloud. Check dictionary, spelling, and grammar. Make sure it fits the word count parameters and fully addresses the prompt if there is one. While this might seem like the easiest stage, allow yourself plenty of time to thoroughly proofread. In addition, always find one or two other people to look it over. Fresh eyes will often see the mistakes you naturally skip over. You know what you wanted to say; someone else will not and might be able to identify logical issues or missing words.

Ultimately, you want your essay to be polished and competent and to tell a compelling story about who you are, what you can do, and why you belong in the graduate program to which you are applying. With a little confidence and the right tools, your essay can be your chance to counterbalance a weak GPA or to showcase your potential. So take advantage of your application essay, see it as a tool rather than a trial, and the chance to tell your story.