

## Lesson Two: Graduate Statement Themes

The best way to approach your personal statement is to imagine that you have five minutes with someone from the admissions committee. How would you go about making the best case for yourself while holding the listener's interest? What would you include and omit in your story? Figuring out the answer to these questions is critical to successfully preparing an effective statement.

To arrive at these answers, you should begin by asking yourself some more specific questions:

- Why have I chosen to attend graduate school in this specific field, and why did I choose to apply to this particular school's program?
- What are my qualifications for admission?
- What is special, unique, or impressive about my life story?

The answers will not necessarily come easily to you, but this exercise will have great practical benefit in readying you to write an outstanding personal statement. By answering each question thoroughly, you will have given much thought to yourself, your experiences, and your goals, thereby laying the groundwork for formulating an interesting and persuasive presentation of your own personal story.

### Select One:

- [Why Graduate School?](#)
- [Why Qualified?](#)
- [Why Unique?](#)
- [Explain Blemishes](#)

### EssayEdge Extra: The Future Over the Past

"First, they should tell me where they're coming from--what it is in their background that leads them to apply to a program like ours. Second, they should tell me what it is they want to get out of our program. Third, I want to know where they hope our program will eventually take them in their career."

**- The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University**

"Usually a straight autobiography should be avoided, although interesting and pertinent autobiographical facts should be included. But the statement should be more future-oriented

than past-oriented. I don't really want the story of a student's life (although there are exceptions) but rather plans for and a vision of the future."

**- Graduate English Department, UCLA**

"Mistakes? Dwelling on past accomplishments as opposed to describing future interests. The recitation of past accomplishments, prizes won and scores gotten--all that kind of stuff--is helpful but at the stage when we're reading the statement, we know all the applicants are highly qualified; that is almost beside the point. What we're looking for at that stage is, again, some insight into how the student thinks, what sort of clarity of purpose he has into one or more research areas."

**- Graduate Admissions Committee, Applied Mechanics, Civil Engineering & Mechanical Engineering, California Institute of Technology**

Whereas some professional programs, particularly law schools, give applicants more freedom to discuss any past experiences that may help them to stand out, graduate schools are chiefly interested in your past only as it relates to your future. That said, if there are aspects of your background that would make you stand out, you should still try to incorporate them into your discussion. Just be prepared to put in a little more thought and analysis.

## **Why Graduate School?**

Because people do not make career decisions based purely on reason, it can be difficult to explain why you have chosen a particular field of study. What follows are some categories into which your ideas may fall, but your focus should be on your unique, personal details. Also, keep in mind that you are not limited to any one of the following, but should develop multiple reasons as you see fit--so long as your points are focused and coherent.

### **Early Exposure to Your Field**

Graduate school is a serious commitment, and it may have been your goal for a long time. Describing your early exposure to a field can offer effective insight into your core objectives. Watch out, however, for these two potential problems:

1. Avoid offering your point in such a clichéd, prepackaged way as to make your reader cringe. For example, you should not start your essay, "I have always wanted to...." or "I have always known that [X field] was my calling." Instead, you should discuss specific events that led to your interest in the field.
2. Do not rely solely on your initial reason and forget to justify your choice with more recent experiences. Think about what you have learned about your chosen field--and yourself--that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to that course of study.

[This applicant](#) traces his interest in photojournalism to his collection of baseball cards and sports pictures at a young age. The youthful sense of curiosity and passion he conveys is sincere and draws the reader in to his individual mindset. The writer goes on to describe the evolution of his hobby, which becomes a vocation after he earns some publishing credits and enrolls in a BFA program.

## **Sample Essay**

*A tale from your childhood can pique the reader's interest along with underscoring the earnestness of your intended academic pursuits, as this essay illustrates.*

My interest in photojournalism began when I was nine years old. After a couple of years of collecting baseball picture-cards and accumulating more than ten-thousand treasured images, my interest in acquiring posed mug shots and static faces decreased, so I liquidated my assets and discovered a new hobby: reading the sports sections of my father's newspapers. I became captivated by the genuine, timely and action-packed pictures of the 1964 Phillies appearing regularly in the Philadelphia Daily News and Inquirer. A short time later, I began a nightly ritual of clipping and collecting the grainy black-and-white photos accompanying detailed descriptions of our home team's performances.

In 1979, I resumed the practice of clipping tear-sheets, when my byline started appearing under photos and short concert reviews published in several South Philadelphia community newspapers. After some success selling articles and pictures to local, small circulation publications, I enrolled in college, determined to pursue a career in photojournalism, and became the only member of my family to graduate from an academic institution of higher education when I received a BFA in documentary photography. Although I am extremely satisfied with my current employment as a photographer for a world-renowned eye hospital and will continue to write articles and to photograph events on a free-lance basis, I would also eventually like to teach. With my previous experience in photojournalism, travel, politics, medicine, sports and entertainment, and as the overseer of our department's medical

photography internship program, I feel that I will make a significant contribution to the learning environment.

## Goals

Graduate school is, of course, a means to an end, and admissions committees prefer students who know where they're going and to what use they'll put their education (though the occasional soul-searcher, who may exhibit exceptional raw potential, is welcomed). For many people, the long-term goal is to work in academia, and to differentiate yourself in such cases, you can stress more specific objectives such as your research interests (see the following section).

Other degrees can lead to work outside the academic setting. [This applicant](#) describes his reasons for pursuing a degree in public policy: "Providing health care to 44 million uninsured Americans, while keeping insurance affordable, is one of the most difficult challenges facing policymakers. I want to work in state or local government to resolve this health care crisis and ensure that the disadvantaged get the care they need and deserve." Rather than offering a clichéd sentiment about wanting to "help people" or "change society," he identifies a specific issue and explains the origin and evolution of his interest.

## Sample Essay

"To be nobody but yourself--in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else--means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting." When I first read this passage by E.E. Cummings, I realized I have been fighting the same battle my whole life. When choosing the direction for my future, I have often accepted jobs based on a compromise between my own dreams and what others thought my dreams should be. This, of course, has led to an unfulfilling career.

Looking back, I always knew that I wanted to work in public service; but I also knew my staunchly conservative father would not be pleased. To him, the government is too big, too intrusive and too wasteful. I see things differently. And yet, his approval means a lot to me and his opinion has certainly influenced my the direction of my career. But I have finally come to understand that I must pursue my own path. After careful deliberation, I am confident that public service is, without a doubt, the right career for me.

Ever since my childhood I have detected in myself a certain compassion and innate desire to help others. I was the kid that dragged in every stray cat or dog I came across--and I still do. When I was eight years old, I rescued a rat from my sister's psychology lab and brought her home. I even coaxed my father into taking Alice--I called her Alice--to the vet when she became ill. But aside from my humanitarian kindness to animals, as a child I learned first-hand about America's need to reform and improve medical care. I spent years of my childhood on

crutches and in hospitals because of a tumor that hindered the growth of my leg. Without adequate health insurance and proper care, I might still be on crutches, but I was fortunate. Today, as a public servant, I still desire to help others who are not so fortunate. Providing health care to 44 million uninsured Americans, while keeping insurance affordable, is one of the most difficult challenges facing policymakers. I want to work in state or local government to resolve this health care crisis and ensure that the disadvantaged get the care they need and deserve.

In order to succeed in my endeavors toward public service, I now realize that a master's degree in public policy is essential. But when I graduated from college in 1990, I didn't know how to continue my education, only that I should. For a while, I considered such options as law school or international relations, but I always returned to my desire to impact public life. My career in public policy began as a legislative assistant at the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a non-profit educational organization that couples voices from the state legislature and the private sector to work on salient policy issues. My enthusiasm for ALEC's mission was evident, as I quickly moved up from legislative assistant to the director of two task forces. As manager of ALEC's task force on federalism and its tax and fiscal policy task force, I explored these issues thoroughly, never quite satiating my appetite for more information and knowledge. I found my integral role in the legislative process to be the most valuable and worthwhile experience I've had in my career to date.

Following ALEC, I took a position as a junior lobbyist for the Automotive Parts and Accessories Association (APAA). As a lobbyist, I voiced the APAA's concern over regulatory and environmental issues affecting the automotive aftermarket. Although I was able to help small automotive parts manufacturers battle the "Big Three" automakers, I quickly realized that being an advocate for the automotive aftermarket was not my calling in life. I wanted to promote policies which had the potential to improve life for the greater public, for I could not see myself spending a lifetime working within an isolated industry.

With that frame of mind, I accepted employment as a policy analyst in the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB) research department in Washington, D.C. Helping small business owners is a cause close to my heart. For nearly 30 years, my family has owned a barbecue restaurant in the Washington, D.C. area. I've worked in the business at several different times, since the age of 14. Because of my involvement in my family's business, I understand the unique problems facing small business owners. At the NFIB, I valued my contributions because I know small businesses have a huge economic impact on our country and they are unquestionably an important constituency. Nevertheless, I felt uncomfortable working for a special interest group--even for one I deeply cared about.

From my experiences at the APAA and the NFIB, I have learned how I want to shape my future. My goals are now clear: I want to develop and advocate policy decisions that will benefit society as a whole, not just a few influential special interest groups. I want to uncover the objective truth of issues and tackle them in the best interests of the nation, not distort the facts for the benefit of a small group. I know I am able to look beyond partisan politics to solve problems for this country. Because of these unbending desires to reveal truth and to remain

committed to fair and equal advancement for all citizens, I think of myself as an ideal candidate for public service.

Additionally, I consider my active interest in politics to aid my pursuit of a career in public policy. I've always found my interest in politics exceptional, ever since my college roommates used to tease me for faithfully watching C-SPAN. However, my faith in the political process began to wane as I witnessed sensible public policy proposals torn apart by partisan conflict. I saw advocacy groups distort facts, and provide extreme, over-blown examples, jeopardizing prudent policy decisions. I observed how powerful elected officials, ensnared in their own partisan rancor, would block fair and balanced legislation which offered the most practical solution for their constituents. But I also encountered many thoughtful and wise people who devote their lives to public service. These devoted individuals inspired me. Like them, I want to be actively involved in the design and delivery of essential government services that improve the lives of the citizens in our society today. I am positive that by avoiding partisanship and urging the private industry, the public sector and non-profit groups to collaborate, many difficult problems can be resolved.

In order to be an effective public servant, I recognize the indispensability of an advanced degree. I've gained a lot of "real world" experience, but I need more training in the fundamentals of economics and statistics, as well as direction in sharpening my analytical and quantitative skills. I also want to devote time to studying the ethical dimensions of policy decisions. In graduate school, I'll have the opportunity to truly understand and appreciate the competing interests surrounding so many complex issues like health care reform, environmental protection and economic policy.

I've chosen Duke's public policy program for several reasons. Duke's program stands out because there is an emphasis on quantitative and analytical skills, which are so critical to policy analysis. As I mentioned, I feel that if I can strengthen my ability to approach problems logically and systematically, I will have succeeded in sharpening skills I consider necessary to succeed in the public realm. And possibly even more importantly, Duke's program bridges the gap between abstract principles and reality. This interdisciplinary approach is essential for responding to today's policy problems. I am excited by the possibility of combining the MPP program with the Health Policy Certificate Program. I am particularly interested in studying the problem of reforming state health to reduce the number of uninsured, and I believe Duke's curriculum will offer me a chance to do just that. From my own research into Duke, I feel confident in my knowledge of the public policy program and its potential to teach me. And after meeting with Helen Ladd, the Director of Graduate Studies, I'm even more convinced that Duke's program is right for me.

On the road "to be nobody but" myself, I've encountered twists and turns, and some detours--it is unquestionably the hardest battle I could fight. However, in the process, I've accumulated a tremendous amount of valuable experience and knowledge. My diversity of experience is my biggest asset. Because I can relate a Duke education to concrete examples from my own past, it is the perfect time for me to join the public policy program. I know that my past can be used

to prepare myself for the promises of the future. At Duke, I hope to synthesize the two and truly learn what it means to become myself.

## Research Interests

Read the instructions carefully: Sometimes schools will ask for a statement of purpose describing your specific research interests in lieu of, or in addition to, a personal statement that emphasizes your character and qualities. For these types of essays, you can assume that a faculty member will be reading your statement, but it should still be accessible enough for a non-specialist to understand. Remember that such essays should also still aim to engage the reader, in a way that conveys your own enthusiasm for the subject matter.

[This applicant](#) demonstrates the depth of her knowledge about her subject. To engage the reader, she identifies specific problems that she hopes to investigate: "My junior year and private studies of Anglo-Saxon language and literature have caused me to consider the question of where the divisions between folklore, folk literature, and high literature lie. Should I attend your school, I would like to resume my studies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with special attention to its folk elements." The essay is not scholarly, but it offers a glimpse of her intellectual character and proves the maturity of her goals.



## Sample Essay

Having majored in literary studies (world literature) as an undergraduate, I would now like to concentrate on English and American literature.

I am especially interested in nineteenth-century literature, women's literature, Anglo-Saxon poetry, and folklore and folk literature. My personal literary projects have involved some combination of these subjects. For the oral section of my comprehensive exams, I specialized in nineteenth-century novels by and about women. The relationship between "high" and folk literature became the subject for my honors essay, which examined Toni Morrison's use of classical, biblical, African, and Afro-American folk tradition in her novel. I plan to work further on this essay, treating Morrison's other novels and perhaps preparing a paper suitable for publication.

In my studies toward a doctoral degree, I hope to examine more closely the relationship between high and folk literature. My junior year and private studies of Anglo-Saxon language and literature have caused me to consider the question of where the divisions between folklore, folk literature, and high literature lie. Should I attend your school, I would like to resume my studies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with special attention to its folk elements.

Writing poetry also figures prominently in my academic and professional goals. I have just begun submitting to the smaller journals with some success and am gradually building a

working manuscript for a collection. The dominant theme of this collection relies on poems that draw from classical, biblical, and folk traditions, as well as everyday experience, in order to celebrate the process of giving and taking life, whether literal or figurative. My poetry both draws from and influences my academic studies. Much of what I read and study finds a place in my creative work as subject. At the same time, I study the art of literature by taking part in the creative process, experimenting with the tools used by other authors in the past.

In terms of a career, I see myself teaching literature, writing criticism, and going into editing or publishing poetry. Doctoral studies would be valuable to me in several ways. First, your teaching assistantship program would provide me with the practical teaching experience I am eager to acquire. Further, earning a Ph.D. in English and American literature would advance my other two career goals by adding to my skills, both critical and creative, in working with language. Ultimately, however, I see the Ph.D. as an end in itself, as well as a professional stepping-stone; I enjoy studying literature for its own sake and would like to continue my studies on the level demanded by the Ph.D. program.

### **Addressing the School**

While professional schools tend to have similar curricula, the differences between graduate programs abound. The highest ranked institution in your basic subject might not be strong in the particular areas that you want to pursue. Moreover, graduate school involves more direct faculty relationships, so you want to evaluate your potential mentors carefully.

You should do this research for your own sake, of course, but discussing your discoveries in your personal statement can help convince the admissions committee that you are a good fit. Avoid mistakes like discussing the school's rank or prestige, or simply offering generic praise. Instead, mention faculty members by name and indicate some knowledge of their work. Discuss your interest in becoming involved in a particular student organization or activity. Consider contacting faculty members first and discussing their current research projects and your interest in studying under them. Then refer to these contacts in your essay. You may also want to discuss your interest in becoming involved in a particular student organization or activity.

[This applicant](#) demonstrates a carefully considered interest in the school's program in paragraphs 7 and 8. She explains, for example, that this particular university's cross-disciplinary focus holds a specific appeal for her. Additionally, she reveals an in-depth understanding of the work of one of the school's faculty members, mentioning Akhil Gupta by name and expounding upon Dr. Gupta's influence upon her own work.



My freshman year at Harvard, I was sitting in a Postcolonial African Literature class when Professor Ngugi wa Thiong'o (the influential Kenyan author) succeeded in attracting me to the study of African literature through nothing more than a single sentence. He argued that, when a civilization adopts reading and writing as the chief form of social communication, it frees itself to forget its own values, because those values no longer have to be part of a lived reality in order to have significance. I was immediately fascinated by the idea that the written word can alter individual lives, affect one's identity, and perhaps even shape national identity.

Professor Ngugi's proposal forced me to think in a radically new way: I was finally confronted with the notion of literature not as an agent of vital change, but as a potential instrument of stasis and social stagnancy. I began to question the basic assumptions with which I had, until then, approached the field. How does "literature" function away from the written page, in the lives of individuals and societies? What is the significance of the written word in a society where the construction of history is not necessarily recorded or even linear?

I soon discovered that the general scope of comparative literature fell short of my expectations because it didn't allow students to question the inherent integrity or subjectivity of their discourse. We were being told to approach Asian, African, European, and American texts with the same analytical tools, ignoring the fact that, within each culture, literature may function in a different capacity, and with a completely different sense of urgency. Seeking out ways in which literature tangibly impacted societies, I began to explore other fields, including history, philosophy, anthropology, language, and performance studies.

The interdisciplinary nature of my work is best illustrated by my senior thesis ("Time Out of Joint: Issues of Temporality in the Songs of Okot p'Bitek"). In addition to my literary interpretations, the thesis drew heavily on both the Ugandan author's own cultural treatises and other anthropological, psychological, and philosophical texts. By using tools from other disciplines, I was able to interpret the literary works while developing insight into the Ugandan society and popular psychology that gave birth to the horrific Idi Amin regime. In addition, I was able to further understand how people interacted with the works and incorporated (or failed to incorporate) them into their individual, social, and political realities.

On a more practical level, writing the thesis also confirmed my suspicion that I would like to pursue an academic career. When I finished my undergraduate career, I felt that a couple of years of professional work would give me a better perspective of graduate school. I decided to secure a position which would grant me experiences far removed from the academic world, yet which would also permit me to continue developing the research and writing skills I needed to tackle the challenges of graduate school. I have fulfilled this goal by working as a content developer at a Silicon Alley web start-up for two years. The experience has been both enjoyable and invaluable -- to the point where colleagues glance at me with a puzzled look when I tell them I am leaving the job to return to school. In fact, my willingness to leave such a dynamic, high-paying job to pursue my passion for literature only reflects my keen determination to continue along the academic path.

Through a Masters program, I plan to further explore the issues I confronted during my undergraduate years by integrating the study of social, cultural, and linguistic anthropology into the realm of literature. I believe that, by adopting tools used in such disciplines, methods of inquiry can be formulated that allow for the interpretation of works that are both technically sound and sociologically insightful. Thus far, my studies have concentrated largely on African and Caribbean literatures, and I am particularly interested in studying these geographic areas in more specific historical and cultural contexts. I also seek to increase my knowledge of African languages, which will allow me to study the lingering cultural impact of colonialism in modern-day African literature. Eventually, I would like to secure an academic post in a Comparative Literature department, devoting myself to both research and teaching at the college level.

I believe the Modern Thought and Literature program at NAME is uniquely equipped to guide me toward these objectives. While searching for a graduate school that would accommodate my interdisciplinary approach, I was thrilled to find a program that approaches world literature with a cross-disciplinary focus, recognizing that the written word has the potential to be an entry point for social and cultural inquiry.

The level of scholarly research produced by the department also attracts me. Akhil Gupta's "Culture, Power, Place", for instance, was one of my first and most influential experiences with the field of cultural anthropology. Professor Gupta's analysis of the local, national, and foreign realms, achieved through a discussion of post-colonial displacement and mixed identifications, has led me to believe that -- given the complexity of modern societies -- comparative literature's focus on borders (national and linguistic) has been excessively arbitrary. Even more significant is the accurate rendering of individually-lived realities that may then be synthesized with other experiences. I believe that I could greatly benefit from Professor Gupta's teaching and guidance in applying these ideas to the literary arena, and I believe that his work is representative of the rigorous yet creative approach I would pursue upon joining the department.

Similarly, [this applicant](#), after describing how her laboratory experience has led to a heightened interest in neurological diseases and their underlying causes, demonstrates in detail how Mt. Sinai's Ph.D. program is an excellent fit for her. She is clearly familiar with Mt. Sinai's faculty, which includes many experts in her field of interest, several of whom she mentions by name. Note, however, that mentioning several professors is not as effective as describing one in further depth. The previous applicant left no doubt that she knew Dr. Gupta's work well, while it's not clear that this applicant did anything more than superficially research the areas of specialization of four professors.

My long-term goal is to dedicate myself to the research field of neuroscience. In order to achieve this goal, I hope to acquire my Ph.D. at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine starting in the fall of 2000.

In 1992, I obtained my MA degree in Molecular Microbiology from Indiana University, Bloomington. At I.U., I received intensive training by Dr. Roger Innes in experimental design, logical thinking, and molecular genetics techniques. After I graduated from I.U., I became a lab supervisor in the clinical cytogenetic laboratory at Tzu Chi College of Medicine, Taiwan. The lab is part of TCCM's newly established genetic research team directed by Dr. Ming-Liang Lee. My responsibilities at the lab included training lab technicians, improving testing accuracy by consistently improving technical skills and knowledge, and managing the lab's day-to-day operations. At TCCM, I also taught several fundamental biology courses, including general biology, cell biology, and medical genetics laboratory.

After five years of working, I decided to pursue more advanced research training in the latest techniques of microbiology. Since the fall of 1998, I have been taking several Ph.D.-level courses at New York University. I have performed very well in my studies there, which have been supported by a fellowship from Taiwan's National Science Council. My courses at NYU are Biochemistry I and II, Molecular Principles of Evolution, Cell Biology, Molecular Controls of Organism Form and Function, Neuroimmunology Journal Club, and Physiology Basis of Behavior. I am also researching in Dr. Joseph LeDoux's lab for credit. At this lab, I have been using immunohistochemistry to detect the activation of track receptors in rat brains after fear conditioning. One of the tracks, trkB, responds to BDNF, which is related to synaptogenesis and LTP induction in the processes of learning and memory. My results have shown that the phosphorylation peak of trk appears in the hippocampal CA1 area 24 hours after fear conditioning. Further blocking experiments using trk antagonist need to be performed in order to confirm this result.

My laboratory experience has triggered my strong interest in studying cellular and molecular mechanisms underlying neurological diseases. The majority of patients with these diseases have chromosomal and genetic abnormalities. Most genetic diseases lead to neurological symptoms, and several neurological diseases are associated with strong genetic predispositions. The genetic defects associated with Alzheimer's Disease, alcoholism, Fragile-X Syndrome, Neurofibromatosis, and Parkinson's Disease have already been mapped. However, the links between genes, gene products, neuronal circuits, brain functions, and diseases are still unclear. I am eager to help uncover these links.

I think that Mt. Sinai's Ph.D. program perfectly suits my interests. The faculty includes experts in several divisions of neuroscience. There is an especially large group studying neurological diseases. The group uses various approaches, animal models, and behavioral paradigms to search for the causes of diseases on the molecular, cellular, physiological, and system levels. I am particularly interested in working in Dr. John Morrison's lab, which studies cortical organizations, glutamate receptors, and neurodegenerative disorders; Dr. Patrick Hof's lab, which uses comparative neuroanatomy to study aging; Dr. Giulio Pasinetti's lab, which studies cyclooxygenase and inflammation in Alzheimer's Disease; and Dr. Charles Mobbs's lab, which

uses molecular, histological, behavioral, and electrophysiological methods to study basic mechanisms underlying metabolic diseases and aging.

Mt. Sinai School of Medicine also attracts me because of its location in an extremely nice area of Manhattan. In addition, the strong collaboration between its neuroscience program and its other departments, its affiliated hospital, and many other outstanding New York laboratories will enable me to receive much technical and academic support.

In order to sponsor my Ph.D. education, I have obtained a competitive Ph.D. fellowship from the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu-Chi Foundation, the largest nonprofit organization in Taiwan. The foundation is dedicated to helping needy all over the world, regardless of age, sex, race, and religion. Over the past decades, it has provided worldwide relief and assistance. Its missions focus on charity, medical care, education, and international relief. The founder, Master Chang Yang, was once nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The foundation will support my Ph.D. education for at least four years.

After completing my Ph.D. education, I plan to continue my research and teaching in neuroscience. Thus far, most of the detailed work in studying neurological disease has of necessity been performed in experimental animal systems. However, the progress of human genome mapping might eventually make it possible to test whether the disease mechanisms discovered in animals function in comparable ways in humans. Consequently, in the future, I hope to apply my knowledge of the genes and proteins involved in neurological diseases to develop pharmacological treatment or genetic therapies. I am confident that one day we will have effective drugs to prevent memory loss or aging. We may even be able to cure currently intractable neurological diseases through gene therapies, either in utero or in live humans.

I am confident that Mount Sinai School of Medicine's graduate program will enable me to successfully meet my goals. I also believe that if I am accepted to your Ph.D. program, I will contribute greatly to Mount Sinai's learning environment.



## Why Qualified?

Your academic performance will play the most significant role in exhibiting to the admissions committee your qualification for admission. However, the personal statement gives you the opportunity to analyze your background and offer the insight and interpretation that you want your readers to take away from your application.

The best way to prove your qualification is to discuss concrete experiences that show your abilities and qualities. **Details about the process are paramount.** What we mean by the "process" is the path to achievement. The rest of the application has already summarized your accomplishments and activities. Show the reader what you did in concrete terms, and most importantly, **highlight your active roles.**

The experiences that demonstrate your qualification are not necessarily distinct from those that explain your motivation. You shouldn't plan on dividing the essay into two separate sections for each, but rather organize the structure by topic and extrapolate insights as they develop. We will cover structure in greater depth in its own section, but it is important that you begin thinking in terms of an integrated essay.

## **Research Experience**

The best way to demonstrate your qualification for graduate school is to focus on research experience, since research will be your main job for the duration of your studies. Be specific about what you did. If you worked for a year under a professor, you might consider emphasizing one particular project and exploring that in depth. The experience does not have to have been a major undertaking: Any practical experience can be used as long as you demonstrate your enthusiasm and aptitude for the field of study.

Remember to keep the discussion personal. Do not become bogged down in minute details and jargon. Ultimately, the focus of the story should remain on you and your growth or success.

[This applicant](#) cites specific projects to demonstrate both the growth of his interest in psychology research and the skills he has honed in the process. Note, in the third paragraph, that he does not jump to the end result of presenting his paper at a conference. Rather, he shows the work he did--the active role he played--to make that accomplishment possible. Moreover, he concludes this paragraph not with a final word about his research, but with an explanation of what he has gained: "Again, I was involved in all aspects of the experiment, from typing the protocol and administering it to the subjects, to analyzing the data and finally presenting my results."

## **Sample Essay**

Ever since my first psychology lecture, I have been fascinated by the nature of human memory. Indeed, human memory is one of the most tenacious and enigmatic problems ever faced by philosophers and psychologists. The discussion of memory dates back to the early Greeks when Plato and Aristotle originally likened it to a "wax tablet." In 1890, pioneer William James adopted the metaphorical framework and equated memory to a "house" to which thirty years later Sigmund Freud chimed that memory was closer to "rooms in a house." In 1968, Atkinson and Shrifren retained the metaphorical framework but referred to memory as "stores". The fact that the controversy surrounding human memory has been marked more by analogy than definition suggests, however, that memory is a far more complex phenomenon than has been uncovered thus far. I intend to spend the rest of my professional life researching the nature of human memory and solving the riddle posed yet cunningly dodged by generations of philosophers and psychologists.

When I first came to psychology, however, I wanted to be a clinical psychologist. Only upon enrolling in Dr. Helga Noice's Cognitive Psychology course, did I discover the excitement of doing research. The course required us to test our own autobiographical memory by conducting an experiment similar to the one run in 1986 by W. Wagenaar. Over the course of the term, I recorded events from my personal life on event cards and set them aside without reviewing them. After studying the effect serial position on the recollection of autobiographical memories, I hypothesized that events that, when I sat down at the end of term to recall those same events I had described on the event cards, that events that had occurred later in the term would be recalled with greater frequency than events that had occurred earlier. Although the experiment was of simple design and predictable results, I found the processes incredibly exciting. Autobiographical memory in particular fascinated me because I realized how crucial, yet fragile, memory is. Why was my memory of even ten weeks so imperfect? What factors contributed to that imperfection? Could such factors be controlled?

I had ignited my passion for experimental psychology. Suddenly, I had many pressing questions about memory that I wanted to research. Under the guidance of Dr. Noice, I continued to study human memory. I worked closely with Dr. Noice on several research experiments involving expert memory, specifically the memory of professional actors. Dr. Noice would select a scene from a play and then a professional actor would score it for beats, that is, go through the scene grouping sections of dialogue together according to the intent of the character. Some actors use this method to learn dialogue rather than rote memorization. After they were finished, I would type up the scene and the cued recall test. Next, I would moderate the experimental sessions by scoring the actor's cued recall for accuracy and then helping with the statistical analysis. My work culminated with my paper, "Teaching Students to Remember Complex Material Through the Use of Professional Actors' Learning Strategies." My paper accompanied a poster presentation at the Third Annual Tri-State Undergraduate Psychology

Conference. In addition, I presented a related paper entitled "Type of Learning Strategy and Verbatim Retention of Complex Material" at the ILLOWA (Illinois-Iowa) Conference the following year. Again, I was involved in all aspects of the experiment, from typing the protocol and administering it to the subjects, to analyzing the data and finally presenting my results.

The opportunity to perform this research was invaluable, particularly as I began taking independent research seminars in my senior year. For the seminars, I was required to write an extensive review of the literature and then design a research proposal on any topic of my choice. Although I had participated in all aspects of research previously, this was my first opportunity to select my own topic. I was immediately certain that I wanted to explore human memory. But I spent a long time considering what aspect of memory I found most intriguing and possible to tackle within the confines of the research seminar. I had always been interested in the legal implications of memory, so I to investigate eyewitness memory.

In retrospect, my choice was also informed by my recollection about an experiment I had read about several years earlier. In the experiment, subjects read about Helen Keller. Later they were given a recall test. Still later they were given an additional test to determine the source of

their knowledge about Helen Keller. The authors discovered that subjects could not determine the source of their knowledge, that is, they could not distinguish whether specific details of their knowledge about Helen Keller came from the information provided by the experimenters or if the details came from another source at an earlier time. Once their new knowledge about Helen Keller had been assimilated into their previous knowledge about Helen Keller, there was no way to separate the information according to the source it came from.

I wondered what the implications of that conclusion would be for eyewitnesses. I wondered if an eyewitness account could be corrupted by misleading post-event information. My research proposal was entitled "The Rate of Memory Trace Decay and its Effect on Eyewitness Accuracy." While I was not able to complete the experiment in its entirety, I was excited by the fact that I created a possible research protocol. Immediately, I knew I wanted to pursue the field of experimental psychology. My success in course work and my passion for research demonstrated to me that I had both the interest and ability to enter this challenging and rewording field.

I have dedicated my undergraduate years to preparing myself for graduate work in experimental psychology. Once receive my doctorate, I intend to pursue research on human memory while teaching psychology to undergraduates at a small, liberal arts college, similar to the one I attended. It was, after all, my undergraduate research experience that gave me the opportunity to come to psychology with an interest in counseling people, but to leave with a passion for investigating the nature of human thinking. Undergraduates at smaller liberal arts colleges are often left out of research, which makes my desire to provide such experiences that much stronger. In the years ahead, I look forward to teaching as well as continuing my research. In the company of such greats as Aristotle, James, and Freud, I endeavor to leave behind my own contribution on the nature of human memory.

## **Field Experience**

If the program you're applying to is more practice-oriented, then demonstrating real-world experience can be just as important as academic pursuits.

[This applicant](#) is applying to a computer science program, and he has a couple years of work experience. He explains one specific achievement as follows: "As an MS student at DePaul University, I worked as a network support technician and project manager for Information Services. My most significant accomplishment in this capacity involved the re-wiring of over a thousand dormitory rooms to enable the students to have Internet access with a link to the other four campuses. In doing so, I had to investigate the existing needs of a high-speed Internet network, as well as the transport of bandwidth to support future demands, which are almost impossible to determine." He starts by describing the end result, which in this case is acceptable because he poses it almost as a challenge that he faced, and then he proceeds to explain the concrete tasks he had to perform. In this applicant's case, it's clear that citing

academic work could not prove the same level of skill that he has done by drawing on real-world experiences.

## **Sample Essay**

For the past two and a half years, I have been a professional in the technology field, but now I am preparing to become a professional corporate information officer. Although my work has introduced me to specific areas of information technology, (including telecommunications, network wiring and databases) I have recently become intrigued with the field of information security. I am concerned about the vulnerability of the company I work for, particularly with regard to employee and client information. The specialty phase of your Professional program appears to be well endowed with the resources needed to address such concerns.

While my undergraduate and MS curriculum exposed me to a wide variety of computer science topics, I have gained extensive knowledge in the area of network infrastructure development. As an MS student at DePaul University, I worked as a network support technician and project manager for Information Services. My most significant accomplishment in this capacity involved the re-wiring of over a thousand dormitory rooms to enable the students to have Internet access with a link to the other four campuses. In doing so, I had to investigate the existing needs of a high-speed Internet network, as well as the transport of bandwidth to support future demands, which are almost impossible to determine.

As a result of my experiences in the dormitory project, I was well prepared for the challenges that awaited me as the manager of Information Services at the Transportation Center at Northwestern University. My primary task was to build a state-of-the-art network infrastructure that would support a leading graduate research center in the transportation field. In a succinct and convincing manner, I had to demonstrate my vision in building the foundation and developing the budget, as well as managing the project, purchasing, installation and finally, deployment of my plan. My success in leading this project and utilizing the newly installed technical tools to empower the Center's goals led to the realization of similar goals and projects in a corporate environment.

Currently, I am the manager of Information Systems at Active Screw and Fastener, where I am responsible for the entire IT unit. Although my strengths are concentrated in the area of Information Technology, I do not want to limit myself to building and maintaining data networks. Through a focused program of study, my goal is to develop expertise in information security, an area that is becoming more and more critical to all information systems managers. As my company grows, I must also be capable of providing the necessary growth in its IT functions to enable people to share information with confidence. It is imperative that sensitive data assets, be it personal or corporate, will not be vulnerable to Cybercrime or compromised by unauthorized users.

The key to becoming a successful Tech manager and future CIO is the ability to demonstrate that a company's secret information resources are in alignment with corporate priorities. The



Chicago Professional Programs in Computer Science will give me extensive exposure to information security, and will allow me to take a step toward securing the infrastructures that I have already built. With its strong cadre of experienced faculty, Chicago will prepare me to become a solid senior technical manager and partner with an enlightened vision towards the new directions manifesting in the information security field.

### **Unrelated Work Experience**

The skill sets needed to thrive in various fields often overlap, and some qualities are essential everywhere. If you have a strong record in an unrelated field, you should not hesitate to discuss this, though the more you can tie the discussion in with your current objectives, the better.

[This applicant](#) is applying to a graduate program in geology, but he devotes some space to his work experience in computers: "During the past 18 months I have had firsthand experience with computers in a wide array of business applications. This has stimulated me to think about ways in which computers could be used for scientific research. One idea that particularly fascinates me is mathematical modeling of natural systems, and I think those kinds of techniques could be put to good use in geological science." This particular link is not only relevant, but also offers a unique angle, since few geology students would think to emphasize computers and mathematical modeling. Note, however, that the applicant could have described his work in computers in further depth before returning to geology. You should explore experiences on their own terms before trying to force connections.

### **Sample Essay**

I have been planning a career in geological sciences for several years, but as an undergraduate I concentrated on getting a solid background in math and science. After graduation, I took a job to allow myself time to thoroughly think through my plans and to expose myself to a variety of work situations. This strategy has been very valuable to me in rounding out my career plans.

During the past 18 months I have had firsthand experience with computers in a wide array of business applications. This has stimulated me to think about ways in which computers could be used for scientific research. One idea that particularly fascinates me is mathematical modeling of natural systems, and I think those kinds of techniques could be put to good use in geological science. I have always enjoyed and been strong in areas that require logical, analytical thought, and I am anxious to combine my interest in earth science with my knowledge of, and aptitude for, computer-related work. There are several specific areas that I have already studied that I think would lend themselves to research based on computing techniques, including mineral phase relations in igneous petrology and several topics in structural geology.

I have had both lecture/lab and field courses in structural geology, as well as a short module dealing with plate tectonics, and I am very interested in the whole area. I would like to explore structural geology and tectonics further at the graduate level. I am also interested in learning more about geophysics. I plan to focus on all these areas in graduate school while at the same time continuing to build up my overall knowledge of geology.

My ultimate academic goal is to earn a Ph.D., but enrolling first in a master's program will enable me to explore my various interests and make a more informed decision about which specific discipline I will want to study in depth.

As far as long-term plans, I hope to get a position at a university or other institution where I can indulge my primary impulse, which is to be involved in scientific research, and also try my hand at teaching.

The links provided by [this applicant](#) are far broader, but still effective. Though she is applying to a Master of Library Service program, she discusses volunteer experience in a nonprofit organization: "My work for the organization has taken a number of forms over the years, but can be summed up as gathering information, both practical and technical, and using human relations skills to make it accessible to others." Basic qualities such as "human relations skills" could have a wide variety of applications, but that fact doesn't diminish their relevance to the applicant's future in library service.



## Sample Essay

*Notice how this successful applicant avoids the expository-resume approach by focusing on two or three particular experiences and evaluating them in terms of her current outlook and educational goals. Also notice how the discussion about her children's activities, while seemingly unnecessary to make her central point, helps to bring the essay down to a more personal level.*

My first employment in a library was in a work-study project during college. My duties included some shelving and a lot of typing of catalog cards. I remember the sturdy metal stacks, with so many captivating books tempting me as I tried to reshelve all that were on the carts. Mostly I remember the typing; agonizingly laborious since I was not a skilled typist, and formatting was so important. I came to understand much about the way the cataloguing system worked, and was grateful in the years to come when I needed to locate things for my own studies . . . or for my children.

For more than fifteen years now I have been working as a volunteer for La Leche League International, a grass roots, non-profit, self-help organization supporting and promoting breastfeeding. My work for the organization has taken a number of forms over the years, but can be summed up as gathering information, both practical and technical, and using human

relations skills to make it accessible to others. My experience helping women access breast-feeding information and empowering them to use that information has convinced me that information alone is not nearly as useful as information plus a skilled guide.

One of my greatest pleasures in recent years has been writing a regular column-"Keeping Up-to-Date"-for La Leche League's bimonthly international newsletter. Through this experience I have seen a vivid contrast between the substantive quality of information formally prepared-with the discipline and rigor of a traditional publishing and review schedule and with clear authorship-and the casual unstructured nature of electronic bulletin board postings, faxes, e-mail, and other products of newer technologies. I am practically, though peripherally, aware of some of the problems our society faces in an era when intellectual property suddenly has so many new forms. I am eager to be a well-informed participant in the discussion of intellectual participation.

This week I found myself intrigued again by cataloguing when I needed to outfit my youngest son, now twelve, with a juggler's outfit for the school play. An initial subject search for "costumes" in the OPAC system at our township library was fruitless. Only when I thought to enter "costume" without the plural "s" did the system yield all the information I needed. What frustration! This confluence of technology and information, especially as it affects accessibility, fascinates me.

The degree to which your School of Communication, Information and Library Studies openly accepts the challenge to explore and lead in the information revolution is seductive. What a serendipity that this school is practically in my backyard! The strengths and attributes I bring to your school are a caring and careful nature, proven academic excellence, experience in writing and speaking for a variety of audiences, and a practical knowledge of working with volunteers and professionals. The durability of my enthusiasm for libraries and the people who work in and love them convinces me that the Master of Library Service program is indeed the right way for me to continue my formal education.

### **Extracurricular Activities**

It is very possible to demonstrate the relevant qualities you possess for graduate school through extracurricular activities. The approaches you take will essentially be the same as those we discussed in the above two sections, Field Experience and Unrelated Work Experience, depending on whether the activity is related or not. In the Library Service case cited above, for example, the applicant was drawing on volunteer rather than work experiences, but the purposes were the same.



You cannot rely on uniqueness to outweigh a mediocre academic record, but it can often give you an edge. Admissions officers are interested in assembling a diverse class of unique perspectives, so you should highlight rather than downplay your differences. To an extent, all types of diversity will help, but you should aim to focus on how unique aspects of your background will enable you to contribute to the academic community.

The purpose of this lesson is to show you examples of how other people capitalized on their unique qualities. When it comes to your own essay, only you can identify the optimal strategy for making yourself stand out. One way to start is to look over your answers to the brainstorming questions and try to find aspects of your background that separate you from your peers. Ultimately, however, what will make the difference is your ability to assess yourself honestly and thoughtfully.

The examples that follow are not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, they represent the efforts of particular individuals to recognize the unique elements of their background and use them to their advantage. You should notice that these unique elements are often directly related to their academic interests, but can still be tied effectively to the applicants' goals or integrated with their character and background.

This applicant starts by noting the diversity of his ethnic and religious background. When mentioning such points, you should not assume that such diversity is an end in itself. Rather, you should show how your background and culture have shaped your perspective and given you something unique to offer. This applicant does a good job of noting how Zoroastrianism has given him guiding principles, but he never follows through to discuss concrete examples. This essay would have benefited from more details to show his diversity in more tangible terms.



### **Sample Essay**

*In responding to a question that asked the applicant to describe experiences, events, or persons that have been important in his or her development, this applicant successfully correlated his influences to his current outlook on life.*

Perhaps the most important influence that has shaped the person I am today is my upbringing in a traditional family-oriented Persian and Zoroastrian culture. My family has been an important source of support in all of the decisions I have made, and Zoroastrianism's three basic tenets—good words, good deeds, and good thoughts—have been my guiding principles in life. Not only do I try to do things for others, but I always push myself to be the best that I can be in all aspects of my life. I saw early the doors and opportunities that a good education can open up; thus, I particularly tried hard to do well in school.

Another important experience that has had a large influence on me the past few years has been college. Going from high school to college was a significant change. College required a major overhaul of my time-management techniques as the number of things to do

mushroomed. In high school, I was in the honors program, with the same cohort of students in all my classes. Thus, I was exposed little to people very different from myself. College, on the other hand, is full of diversity. I have people of all backgrounds and abilities in my classes, and I have been fortunate enough to meet quite a few of them. This experience has made me more tolerant of differences. Furthermore, a variety of classes such as the Humanities Core Course, in which we specifically studied differences in race, gender, and belief systems, have liberalized my world view.

My undergraduate research has occupied a large portion of my time in college. Along with this experience have come knowledge and skills that could never be gained in the classroom. I have gained a better appreciation for the medical discoverers and discoveries of the past and the years of frustration endured and satisfaction enjoyed by scientists. I have also learned to deal better with the disappointments and frustrations that result when things do not always go as one expects them to. My research experience was also important to me in that it broadened my view of the medical field. Research permitted me to meet a few medical doctors who have clinical practices and yet are able to conduct research at the university. This has made me seriously consider combining research with a clinical practice in my own career.

From my earliest memories, I can always remember being interested in meteorology. I believe that this interest sparked my love for the outdoors, while my interest in medicine molded my desire for healthy living. As a result of these two influences, I try to follow an active exercise routine taking place mostly in the outdoors. I enjoy running and mountain biking in the local hills and mountains, along with hiking and backpacking. All of these activities have made me concerned about the environment and my place in it.

This applicant's story is fascinating, at times harrowing, and ultimately triumphant. From committed social activism to drug and alcohol addiction to a reengagement with the world, the author pulls no punches in telling his unique tale. While he does not whitewash his experience with drugs and alcohol, notice how he situates it in a larger context, showing both how it made him oblivious to the things he really cared about (Third World injustices) and how his reintroduction to those things helped him pull himself out of his downward spiral. In doing so, he demonstrates both a strong social conscience and a dedication to his beliefs. Additionally, his story makes him very hard for an admissions committee to forget. Just be careful that any discussion of past mistakes or difficulties leads to an indubitably positive conclusion.

## **Sample Essay**

My longtime fascination with politics and international affairs is reflected in my participation, starting in high school, in activities such as student council, school board meetings, Vietnam war protests, the McCarthy campaign, and the grape boycott. As each new cause came along, I was always ready to go to Washington or the state capital to wave a sign or chant slogans. Although I look back on these activities today with some chagrin, I realize they did help me to

develop, at an early age, a sense of concern for social and political issues and a genuine desire to play a role.

As an undergraduate, I was more interested in social than academic development. During my last two years, I became involved with drugs and alcohol and devoted little time to my studies, doing only as much as was necessary to maintain a B average. After graduation my drug use became progressively worse; without the motivation or ability to look for a career job, I worked for a time in a factory and then, for three years, as a cab driver in New York City.

In 1980 I finally "hit bottom" and became willing to accept help. I joined both Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, and for the next several years the primary business of my life was recovery. Although I had several "slips" in the beginning, I have now enjoyed nearly seven years of complete freedom from drug and alcohol use. I mention my bout with addiction because I think it is important in answering two issues that presumably will be of concern to the admissions committee: my lackluster undergraduate record and the fact that I have waited until the age of 34 to begin preparing academically for a career in public policy. It would be an oversimplification to call addiction the cause for either of these things; rather I would say it was the most obvious manifestation of an underlying immaturity that characterized my post adolescent years. More importantly, the discipline of recovery has had a significant impact on my overall emotional growth.

During the last years of my addiction I was completely oblivious to the world around me. Until 1983 I didn't even realize that there had been a revolution in Nicaragua or that one was going on in El Salvador. Then I rejoined the Quaker Meeting, in which I had been raised as a child, and quickly gravitated to its Peace and Social Order Committee. They were just then initiating a project to help refugees from Central America, and I joined enthusiastically in the work. I began reading about Central America and, later, teaching myself Spanish. I got to know refugees who were victims of poverty and oppression, became more grateful for my own economic and educational advantages, and developed a strong desire to give something back by working to provide opportunities to those who have not been so lucky.

In 1986 I went to Nicaragua to pick coffee for two weeks. This trip changed my whole outlook on both the United States and the underdeveloped world. The combination of living for two weeks amid poverty and engaging in long political discussions with my fellow coffee pickers, including several well-educated professionals who held views significantly to the left of mine, profoundly shook my world view. I came back humbled, aware of how little I knew about the world and eager to learn more. I began raiding the public library for everything I could find on the Third World and started subscribing to a wide variety of periodicals, from scholarly journals such as Foreign Affairs and Asian Survey to obscure newsletters such as Through Our Eyes (published by U.S. citizens living in Nicaragua).

Over the intervening two years, my interest has gradually focused on economics. I have come to realize that economic development (including equitable distribution of wealth) is the key to peace and social justice, both at home and in the Third World. I didn't study economics in college and have found it difficult to understand the economic issues that are at the heart of

many policy decisions. At the same time, though, I am fascinated by the subject. Given my belief that basic economic needs are among the most fundamental of human rights, how can society best go about providing for them? Although I call myself an idealist, I'm convinced that true idealism must be pragmatic. I am not impressed, for example, by simplistic formulations that require people to be better than they are. As a Quaker I believe that the means are inseparable from the end; as an American I believe that democracy and freedom of expression are essential elements of a just society, though I'm not wedded to the idea that our version of democracy is the only legitimate one.

Although I have carved out a comfortable niche in my present job, with a responsible position and a good salary, I have become increasingly dissatisfied with the prospect of a career in business applications programming. More and more of my time and energy is now being absorbed by community activities. After getting my master's in public administration, I would like to work in the area of economic development in the Third World, particularly Latin America. The setting might be a private (possibly church-based) development agency, the UN, the OAS, one of the multilateral development banks, or a government agency. What I need from graduate school is the academic foundation for such a career. What I offer in return is a perspective that comes from significant involvement in policy issues at the grass roots level, where they originate and ultimately must be resolved.

[This applicant](#) shows that you do not need to be a true one-of-a-kind to demonstrate uniqueness in the admissions process. In fact, what sets him apart is a rather typical job in the computer industry. What makes his application unique, however, is that he is applying to a geological sciences program. His interest in mathematical modeling gives him a novel area of specialization to offer to the intellectual diversity of the program.

## Sample Essay

I have been planning a career in geological sciences for several years, but as an undergraduate I concentrated on getting a solid background in math and science. After graduation, I took a job to allow myself time to thoroughly think through my plans and to expose myself to a variety of work situations. This strategy has been very valuable to me in rounding out my career plans.

During the past 18 months I have had firsthand experience with computers in a wide array of business applications. This has stimulated me to think about ways in which computers could be used for scientific research. One idea that particularly fascinates me is mathematical modeling of natural systems, and I think those kinds of techniques could be put to good use in geological science. I have always enjoyed and been strong in areas that require logical, analytical thought, and I am anxious to combine my interest in earth science with my knowledge of, and aptitude for, computer-related work. There are several specific areas that I have already studied that I think would lend themselves to research based on computing

techniques, including mineral phase relations in igneous petrology and several topics in structural geology.

I have had both lecture/lab and field courses in structural geology, as well as a short module dealing with plate tectonics, and I am very interested in the whole area. I would like to explore structural geology and tectonics further at the graduate level. I am also interested in learning more about geophysics. I plan to focus on all these areas in graduate school while at the same time continuing to build up my overall knowledge of geology.

My ultimate academic goal is to earn a Ph.D., but enrolling first in a master's program will enable me to explore my various interests and make a more informed decision about which specific discipline I will want to study in depth.

As far as long-term plans, I hope to get a position at a university or other institution where I can indulge my primary impulse, which is to be involved in scientific research, and also try my hand at teaching.

Finally, [this applicant](#) shows that a personal, revealing story can be enough to set someone apart. By recounting a particular episode that sparked her epiphany as a writer, she gives us an in-depth look at her unique approach to her craft. Again, this essay does not discuss exotic experiences, but instead succeeds by painting a detailed, deeply personal portrait that no one else could have written.



## Sample Essay

*This applicant recounts a particular incident that gives the reader real insight into what makes her "tick." Notice, by the way, that the discussion of religion is handled in a way that is not likely to offend any reader.*

Two years ago, when I was a junior in college, I wrote a story entitled "It Came from Catholic School." My friends, fellow veterans of plaid uniforms and daily masses, liked it and encouraged me to submit it when the English department magazine made its annual call for stories. They published the story and asked me to read from it at a reading primarily devoted to student poetry. Well, I was pretty nervous about this. The only readings I'd done before a crowd were Paul's letters to the Ephesians and the occasional Responsorial Psalm-and that wasn't my writing on the line. I grew more nervous as I sat there that night, listening to poem after poem on angst and ennui. I couldn't imagine how the students and faculty around me, who were all listening intently with properly contorted faces, would respond to my grotesque little girl. But I stood up and read a passage, a little shaky at first. Then I heard laughs, where I'd hoped I would, and also in places that surprised me. After the reading, people wanted to shake my hand. One woman thanked me for injecting a little levity into the proceedings. I felt satisfaction in my work as never before.



At that reading, I realized I could write things that made people laugh-not just friends who felt obligated, but complete strangers. I really liked that feeling, and it's the promise of that laughter that motivates me to continue writing. I also realized that my work wasn't frivolous, that I could influence a reader, that my characters seemed real. For the first time, I felt that I could do what I really wanted to do-write.

I look forward to progressing through a series of intimate workshops en route to an MFA degree at your school. The interdisciplinary nature of the program appeals to me. Although I want to concentrate on Fiction, I would like to take screenwriting electives as well. I think my humor translates well to teleplays, and I would like to explore that avenue through the comedy writing courses your school offers. I aim to develop my natural strengths- humor, voice, and dialogue, while experimenting with the genres.

Because I'm generally at the mercy of my characters, I can't outline a specific writing goal. I do envision myself producing a collection of short stories featuring female protagonists. Women's issues are implicit in my writing, and I would welcome the chance to study with [faculty name]. My stories feature a range of women-from the precocious heroine of the aforementioned story to a "white trash" cashier, and I plan to cover a still broader scope. Mainly, I'm looking to devote myself to the work. And I hope to make some people laugh along the way.



## **Explain Blemishes**

Certain parts of your application may call for an explanation. Such aspects might include any of the following:

- Undergraduate grades
- Entrance exam scores
- Deficiency in the number of letters of recommendation submitted
- Lack of work experience
- Lack of extracurricular activities
- Why you are applying again after being denied previously
- Gaps in the chronological account of your education or employment
- Disciplinary action by an institution of higher education
- Criminal record

Under what circumstances should you use your personal statement to explain a particular deficiency, weakness, or other blemish? First of all, the application might explicitly invite you to explain deficiencies, weaknesses, aberrations, or any other aspect of the application that might not accurately reflect your abilities or potential and fitness for graduate study. Schools almost without exception ask specifically about the last two items above (see [Disclosing Skeletons in Your Closet](#) below). Although most applications do not explicitly provide room for such explanations of the other items, the schools nevertheless permit and generally

encourage applicants to provide brief explanations. Most schools suggest that you attach an addendum to your personal statement for this purpose while reserving the personal statement itself for positive information about yourself. If you are in doubt about the policy and preferred procedure of a particular school, contact the school directly.

Another point you should keep in mind is whether you have a valid reason. Staying up late the night before the GRE is not a legitimate reason for a bad performance, while documented sickness could be. A particularly bad semester could be explained by a death or illness in the family. If you lack research experience, you might point out the number of hours you had to work to make college more affordable for you and your family.

There are many more gray areas. For example, is it worth noting that you simply have a bad history of standardized testing? Doing so tactfully (in other words, don't rail against the arbitrariness of tests or demand the right to be considered for your grades alone) can help the schools understand your exact situation, but it most likely won't have a substantial effect on their perspective, since they know to take into account the imprecision of standardized tests.

What about the class for which you simply did not grasp the material, or a sub-par GPA during your freshman year? Again, what you have to say won't constitute an extenuating circumstance, since everyone has weaknesses and faces the same challenge of adjusting to college. Your best approach might be to try to transform such blemishes into something positive by pointing out particular courses in which you performed well, especially those that were more advanced, more relevant to your intended career path, or more recent.

Finally, make sure that you do not take a contentious tone. Don't accuse your teachers of unfair grading standards or complain about lack of extracurricular opportunities at your school. Be clear that you're not trying to excuse yourself of responsibility, but emphasize that you simply want the schools to have the complete picture.

[This applicant](#) clarifies one aberrant semester by explaining his decision to switch majors. Everyone recognizes the rigors of the pre-med curriculum, so his justification seems legitimate. Although it's not essential to include a positive statement when explaining blemishes, notice that the following sentence helps to ensure that the reader will not conclude that the applicant is making excuses or protesting too much: "The difficulty I faced in that advanced history course and in maintaining my status in chemistry and ecology courses affected my grades for the semester, but was a crucible out of which emerged a renewed love for and pursuit of the study of history throughout the rest of my college education." Moreover, it's important that he can point to an upward trend--"I proceeded to improve my cumulative grade point average in each successive semester"--as evidence that this poor semester was indeed an aberration.



## Sample Essay

*This applicant's cumulative GPA suffered a bit due largely to one difficult semester. He wisely addressed this issue rather than ignoring it, recounting that semester's events in a way that would win over any school's admissions committee.*

My grades during the second semester of my freshman year of college declined because of several factors. I had been pursuing a premedical major in biology up to that time, and the spring saw me taking my first college history course which began quickly to erode my interest in pursuing a biology major. I had enjoyed and excelled in history during high school, but upon entry into college decided to take a different direction in my studies. I made the decision to change majors after several more history courses during the following semesters, as I reconciled head and heart. That first history course—a formidable "intellectual history" oriented seminar on the French Enlightenment—was comprised of juniors, seniors and myself, the only freshman. The difficulty I faced in that advanced history course and in maintaining my status in severe and involved chemistry and ecology courses affected my grades for the semester, but was a crucible out of which emerged a renewed love for and pursuit of the study of history throughout the rest of my college education.

Tackling an intellectual history seminar so early made it much easier for me to successfully complete an Honors Thesis in a later Military History seminar. My educational base is, as well, much broader because of my exploration of several different disciplines during college, including the natural sciences, archaeology, art, art history, psychology, and history. Without a tough semester to make me weigh my possibilities, I might not have continued to explore the educational options available and might have remained narrowly focused on medicine. Having temporarily performed below the expectations I had of myself, I proceeded to improve my cumulative grade point average in each successive semester.

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### **EssayEdge Extra: Disclosing Skeletons In Your Closet**

Perhaps you were once the subject of disciplinary action at your undergraduate college. Should you inform the school about this in your application? If so, should you include this discussion in your personal statement? In all likelihood, the application will inquire about academic discipline as well as a criminal record. You will undoubtedly be denied admission (or expelled if you are already matriculating) if the school discovers that you have intentionally concealed disciplinary action or criminal conviction. The admissions committee may very well overlook that indiscretion of youth (e.g., during your freshman year of college) if you bring it into the open and explain the circumstances. Many applicants do not fully appreciate that admissions officials make every effort to afford applicants the benefit of the doubt in such cases.