

## Lesson Three: Essay Structures

Now that you have seen the complex themes with which you must engage the reader and have begun thinking about the personal details you will use, it's time to begin the daunting task of structuring your essay.

Your first concern should be **clarity**. If your essay is haphazardly structured, the reader simply will not be able to follow your ideas, and your whole purpose will be lost.

Your second concern is focus. An essay could be clear on the sentence or paragraph level, but still lack overall coherence. Perhaps you have written three paragraphs each clearly devoted to one topic, but you haven't shown how each topic contributes to some larger point. The basic focus of every essay is why you should be admitted to the school, but a more specific theme can be helpful. You want your reader to take a clear point away as he or she puts your essay down.

Your third concern is **impact**. Even a clear and coherent essay can fail to achieve the optimal structure that would maximize the essay's overall impact. For example, the overarching theme of an essay might be your desire to help people. After outlining this clear focus in your first paragraph, you go on to write three clear paragraphs each independently offering evidence of your desire to help people. What's lacking is a sense of progression: the reader sees not growth but repetition. To maximize impact, your structure must allow each point to build upon previous points, thereby improving not only your essay's flow, but also the overall force of your argument.

It's important to remember that these three areas overlap. You don't achieve the optimal structure by treating each one as an isolated step, but must keep each one in mind as you plan out your essay.

The first subtopic, **Overarching Themes**, explains how to identify and incorporate the underlying principles or fundamental ideas that will give your essay focus. The second subtopic, **Organization**, details specific approaches to integrating your content in a clear and logical way. The third subtopic, **Narratives**, deals with the tricky issue of incorporating stories and anecdotes in an admissions essay and getting the most out of your details. The final subtopic, **Paragraphs**, explains how to structure individual paragraphs for maximum effectiveness and how to write the important transitions that affect your essay's coherence and impact.

### Select One:

- [Overarching Themes](#)
- [Organization](#)
- [Narratives](#)

- [Paragraphs](#)



### **EssayEdge Extra: The Deceptive Appeal of a Chronological Structure**

At face value, the chronological approach seems great for all parties involved. The writer has the easy job of reconstructing his personal history precisely as it happened; the reader can follow the resulting piece with little effort. It's very possible that a chronological essay will turn out to be ideal for your material because your life unfolded in a way that complements your themes, but you should not feel bound to tell your story in the order in which it happened. Here are some specific pitfalls of which you should be aware:

- 1. You may be including too much:** If you start with "I was born on..." and proceed to recite your life's history, you've probably included a great deal of unnecessary information.
- 2. Your essay might be boring and monotonous:** The most enjoyable essays have a sense of drama, which usually requires a more creative structure. Perhaps the introductory paragraph sets up some problem, and the subsequent paragraphs detail attempts to solve that problem. On the other hand, a chronological structure seems inherently like a list.
- 3. You show less thought and effort:** It's obvious to the reader when an essay has been crafted with care and insight. Chronological essays might seem too effortless if there's no authorial imprint.
- 4. You separate naturally related points:** A thematically structured essay puts related points together and allows them to build upon each other. Unless your life developed along thematic lines, a chronological essay would sacrifice the synergy that juxtaposing these points would create.



### **Overarching Themes**

The reason we start with themes is the same reason we suggested you start your brainstorming by thinking about your long-term vision. The overarching theme you decide on

will inform the manner in which you organize the rest of your content. This theme is analogous to the thesis of an academic essay, though it's often less explicitly stated.

When we use the term "theme," we mean something that usually has multiple layers. A strong essay will never boil down to a statement as simple as the following: "My reason for pursuing a graduate degree is X." That kind of theme would invite a repetitive structure that merely includes a series of paragraphs offering evidence for a single point. Instead, your theme should introduce complexities, as in the following: "While Experience A demonstrates my commitment to B Aspect of my chosen field, Experience C drives me toward Objective D."

There are essentially two ways to set forth your theme. The first is to bring it up in the introduction, usually at the end of the first paragraph. At this stage, since you haven't explored your concrete evidence, the theme should subtly indicate the direction the essay will take rather than try to tell the whole story.

The second approach is to ensure a strong flow between paragraphs, connecting each point with previous ones so the underlying theme gradually emerges. Then the conclusion wraps these individual themes together and includes some kind of encapsulation of the material that preceded it. Below we will use examples to illustrate these two tactics:

### **The Upfront Approach**

The theme of [this essay](#) comes at the end of the first paragraph: "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." At this point, he is referring to specific activities that he somewhat regrets, but this sets the tone for a running contrast between internal struggles and outward concerns.



### **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.

The next two paragraphs discuss the writer's battles with addiction. Then the applicant shows how his emotional recovery coincides with a growing awareness of political issues: "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."

What makes this theme sophisticated is that it does not merely state, "I am concerned about Third World economic development." Rather, it ties social concerns to issues of personal development and creates a coherent portrait of a multifaceted individual. The Upfront Approach is effective in this case because it helps us to see where the writer is going when he delves into his history of addiction and prevents an overly negative undertone.

### **The Gradual Approach**

[This essay](#) does not give away much in the opening paragraph. His first paragraph serves as a distinct point rather than establishing a framework for the rest of the essay. The next three paragraphs each also have independent points: the intersection of computers and geology; his coursework experience; and his career goals. Effective topic sentences help to ensure a strong underlying flow. For example, in the third paragraph, he identifies structural geology as an area of interest and an area in which he has some background, after describing in the second paragraph how he would apply his computer expertise to that field.



### **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.

Although there is an implicit overarching theme emerging, the writer waits until the conclusion to make that explicit: "My decision to focus on math and science as an undergraduate and to explore the computer industry after college has equipped me with a unique set of strengths to offer this program. The depth of my interest in geology has only grown in my time away from academia, and although I have identified several possible areas of specialization through prior studies, I look forward to contributing my fresh perspective on all subjects." As you can see, this theme does not lend itself to a one-sentence synthesis because the various points are broader. Nevertheless, this conclusion helps to connect these points for the reader, so she can walk away with a clear formulation of what she has just learned.

Whether you choose the Upfront or Gradual approach depends on the nature of your overarching theme and the substance it encompasses. When, as in the first example, there is a more defined framework that lends itself to succinct expression, you can provide more direction at the beginning and make a more focused point. But if your topic is broader and your ideas need to be developed before being tied together, then you should let them unfold naturally and save the integration for a nice, forceful ending. Whichever route you choose, make sure your theme is multi-layered and sophisticated. Any oversimplification would not do justice to your candidacy.

## Organization

The purpose of this section is not to delineate one structural approach that will work for everyone's individual essays, but rather to discuss principles of organization that should guide you in constructing your argument. In previous sections, we have cautioned that the criteria we set forth could not be used as steps to be followed, because there was so much overlap and interdependence. Here your task grows even more challenging, because some of the principles can be mutually exclusive, and you may have to decide between them to determine which approach best suits your material.

### Hierarchy of Evidence

Because your reader will be reading quickly and looking for the main points, it is often a good idea to start with your strongest evidence. You may even highlight your most interesting experience in the introduction.

[This applicant](#) decides to open with some comments on her ethnic and religious background. Although this is neither an accomplishment nor directly related to her intended field, the writer correctly recognizes that it is a unique element that will distinguish her from other candidates. By establishing this point early on, she immediately has the reader interested in learning more about her. Unfortunately, as we noted in another section, the applicant does not go on to illustrate how her diverse background has influenced her life through more concrete examples.

## 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.

### **Showing Progress**

This approach might invite a chronological order, but we maintain that chronology should not be reason in itself (as explained in the sidebar of the Essay Structures introduction) to organize material in a particular manner. The guiding principle here is to structure your evidence in a way that demonstrates your growth, from a general initial curiosity to a current definite passion, or from an early aptitude to a refined set of skills. It differs from the Hierarchy of Evidence approach because your strongest point might come at the end, but its strength lies precisely in the sense of culmination that it creates. Chronology might not apply if you choose to show progress within a number of self-contained areas, thereby combining this approach with the Juxtaposing Themes approach described later.

[This applicant](#) chronicles the evolution of her interest in library service. The progress she describes is not merely a matter of accumulating one experience after another, but rather a process of enrichment by which she learns from fresh perspectives, adding new layers each time. In the second paragraph she discusses her work for a nonprofit organization, emphasizing her interest in "gathering information" and "using human relations skills" to show how this experience is relevant to her current goals. The following paragraph discusses her role as a column writer for that same organization, at which point she states a more defined issue that has caught her attention: "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." As a result, we see the level of depth that she has reached in her peripheral investigation of the dynamics of information.

## 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.

In writing this essay, the writer moves effectively from experience to experience; the result does not feel like a list or a haphazard construction, but rather a logically flowing piece. Moreover, the applicant's points in the final two paragraphs have more force because we have witnessed a process of growth. Her individual ideas combine to have a synergistic effect.

### **Juxtaposing Themes**

The strongest argument against a straight chronological order is the value of juxtaposing related themes and ideas. If two experiences are closely related but occurred years apart, it makes more sense to develop them as one set of ideas than to interrupt them with unrelated points.

[This applicant](#) uses the first three paragraphs to establish his goals in public service. In the third paragraph, he offers some childhood anecdotes, then jumps to present career interests. What unites these two chronologically separated points is the connection between his early "humanitarian kindness to animals" and his desire to provide "health care to 44 million uninsured Americans."



### **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.

The four subsequent paragraphs cover all the ground in between these two points, describing his practical experience in politics. Thus, the opening three paragraphs form a self-contained unit, and although the essay as a whole is not linear, there is a definite logic to grouping his ideas in the way that he did.

### **Dramatic Appeal**

Not all essays will have potential in this area, but if you've undergone dramatic experiences, then you should by all means set your essay up to reflect that. The most effective way to accomplish this is to use the introduction to sketch some kind of problem or question, and then use each subsequent paragraph to engage with that problem until a resolution is gradually reached.

In his opening paragraph, [this applicant](#) sets the reader up for a compelling tale that we immediately understand will entail a good bit of hardship and difficulty. It is clear that at the beginning of his story, the writer is preparing to head down the wrong path. As readers, we are interested to see where he goes and how he rediscovers his proper direction. Through use of specific detail, he effectively conveys both the attraction of a musician's lifestyle and its more unpleasant side. While he takes us step by step through his progress as a musician (and his parallel failure as a student), notice how he has already planted the seeds of his ultimate rejection of this lifestyle in the first paragraph with his description of the older musicians who populate the scene. He returns to this image at his point of transition, saying, "I came to realize that I was well on my way to becoming one of those bitter old burnouts that I used to play with when I was in high school." He has built the tension nicely, and then offered a resolution that brings a sense of closure to that period of his life. In his final paragraph, it is clear that he is ready to make a fresh start.



### **Sample Essay**

*This applicant knew better than to hide his "misspent youth." His unique background provided just what the admissions committee welcomed-a lively story that reveals an engaging and interesting person.*

One of my biggest aspirations as a child was to become a rock star. At age 14 my band performed at my school's Valentine's Day dance. I went from being the smartest kid in the school to being the coolest. By the age of 17, I was spending my weekends in bars playing with much older musicians. At the time it didn't bother me that these older musicians all led lives that were anything but glamorous. In fact, they always seemed to be broke and were usually under the influence of drugs or alcohol (a great way of escaping reality).

It was always understood by my parents that I would attend college immediately after graduating high school. College provided me with the perfect opportunity to leave San Antonio in pursuit of stardom. Austin is well known for its music scene and just happens to have a university-the perfect choice. I was awarded a generous endowment from a private foundation that I could use at any Texas university. Within two months after starting college, I was well on my way to becoming a star. I joined a top-40 cover band and spent my weekends performing at fraternity parties and night clubs all over Texas. The band soon began performing an average of four nights a week and was earning average gross revenues in excess of \$125,000. My rigorous traveling left little time for school, not that I really minded, and by the end of my second semester the University kindly informed me that I was no longer welcome as a student. Needless to say, the Foundation decided that if I wasn't going to school then I wouldn't need their money.

I spent two years as a member of the band, and during that time I lived a life that exceeded even my wildest dreams. However, the dreams of a 14-year-old boy are far different than the harsh realities of a 21-year-old adult. I came to realize that I was well on my way to becoming one of those bitter old burnouts that I used to play with when I was in high school.

I left the band and moved back to San Antonio. I began working full-time and enrolled at a junior college the following January. For the next two-and-a-half years, I worked more than forty hours per week while enrolled in nine to twelve hours per semester. Not only did my grades dramatically improve, but I also mastered the art of time management. In the past two-and-a-half years, I have learned more than just how to calculate a corporation's alternative minimum- tax liability and how to assess control risk in an EDP environment. I have learned to appreciate the rewards of hard work and the power that comes with possessing knowledge.

## **Narratives**

Stories can be the heart of your essay--if you handle them effectively. Below are some tips on how to maximize their value.

## How to Incorporate a Narrative

Integrating your story effectively ensures that it flows well within the essay and has a strong impact. Failing to do so could lead to choppy or confusing text on the reader's part. Here are some possible approaches, but what you ultimately use depends on your content:

**1. The Origin:** The most common approach is to start from the beginning. Many people have a story to tell about their early interests in their particular field. This tactic can be an effective way to grab the reader's attention and offer insight into your fundamental attraction to your area of interest. You should be aware, however, of two concerns: a) It has been done many times before, and if you don't offer any unique or personal insights, you won't stand out; b) Most early stories revolve around passive observation and therefore offer limited insight into your character and abilities. Despite these concerns, there is still much potential in this approach if you have a compelling, original story to tell.

**2. The Flash Forward:** Sometimes your essay's main focus will be showing the progression or growth of your interests and abilities. That doesn't mean, however, that your essay must start from the beginning. Often it can be effective to open with a more recent episode to accomplish three purposes: a) establishing a clear context for the rest of the material; b) demonstrating a strong interest in your particular field from the beginning; c) bringing to the forefront a significant experience with depth you could not have achieved in an earlier stage. It's the last point that distinguishes this approach from the previous one. Using a Flash Forward opening enables you to highlight your strongest points, as in the Hierarchy of Evidence structure, but then move backward to show your growth process.

**3. The Bookend:** Like the first two, this approach involves using a story in the introduction, but it leaves that story unfinished until the conclusion. For example, you might stop within the story to reflect on how you found yourself in that position. The body of the essay would then be a flashback to the experiences that led you to the place of the introduction, and the conclusion would return to complete the story. Another possibility would be a story that involved two distinct phases; the body of such an essay might discuss what you learned between the phases, and the conclusion would show how you applied what you learned to the second phase. Again, the precise approach depends on your content, but the Bookend method can be a very effective way to create a flowing, coherent piece.

**4. Within the Body:** Regardless of whether you choose to open with a narrative, you may find opportunities and reasons to insert a story within the body of the essay. This is the approach for which you have to worry most about integration. Unlike introductory anecdotes, you should not jump right into these stories without preface. You will need at least one sentence to make the transition from the previous paragraph and briefly hint at what themes your story will illustrate. Actually beginning your story will usually require some introductory phrase, such as the following: "One memorable incident involved..."

After the story, you should have some significant insight with which to conclude in order to justify the story's inclusion. This line should not be a mere repetition of the transition from the

beginning of the paragraph, because you now should have more concrete details from which to draw more in-depth conclusions.

### **What to Include**

The basic rule here is the same as always: **include specific details**. The purpose of using stories is to illustrate your points with concrete evidence, thereby giving your ideas force and context. Telling one specific story enables you to achieve depth and convey personality beyond what you could achieve in brief, isolated descriptions. It's not enough, however, merely to decide to include a story. Some writers will start on the right track but end up conveying nothing meaningful. For example, they might name a specific personal incident and then jump to generic conclusions without demonstrating anything substantive about their character. Here are some more specific tips that have come up in other contexts but are especially important for stories:

**1. Show Active Contribution:** Many people tell stories in which the payoff is a lesson learned. While this can have some value, it does not say as much about your character because you are only responding passively.

**2. Emphasize the Process:** Don't set up a problem and jump to the solution. Show us the process of reaching that solution. Give details about your approach and your reasoning.

**3. Paint a Vivid Picture:** Try to draw the reader into your story by including details that bring the story alive. One effective way to accomplish this is to think visually. Of course, you should not get carried away and go down tangents or become monotonous. For example, if you're recalling a conversation, don't bother recounting all the pleasantries with which it began.

### **Gleaning Insights**

Anecdotes should serve some clear purpose, but you have to be careful about sounding contrived. One common mistake is to start citing lessons before you've finished the story. This kind of interruption adulterates the force of the story itself. Be careful that your insights flow naturally from the details of your anecdote: stay close to your personal story and avoid making grand pronouncements based on a minor episode.

### **An Example**

To put the above suggestions in more concrete terms, we will analyze [one actual essay](#) from a critical perspective. First, this applicant tells an anecdote that's relatively recent, but still serves to illustrate the origin of her interest in creative writing. Note that the anecdote is largely concerned with the past, and even in her reminiscences, she uses vivid, concrete details. For example, she invokes the past she shared with her peers, "fellow veterans of plaid uniforms and daily masses." To demonstrate her inexperience, she reflects, "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."



## 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.

There's no real place for emphasizing contribution, per se, since this isn't a project or accomplishment. On the other hand, the writer does do an effective job of showing the process:

"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." Thus she does not simply jump to the point of receiving congratulations. Instead, she provides specific details that not only help us to empathize with her, but also make the results seem more meaningful.

She allows the story to develop on its own terms, instead of interrupting its flow with forced interpretations. The insight she draws comes only in the next paragraph: "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." The flow from story to insights is natural and fitting.

## Paragraphs

As in the case of those that include narratives, most of your paragraphs will have the same underlying structure. You begin with a transition, you offer supporting evidence, and you offer a resolution. Supporting evidence for the most part affects the strength of individual paragraphs, but transitions and resolutions are even more crucial because they affect the coherence and impact of the essay as a whole. The beginnings and endings of each paragraph are the places to draw connections between experiences, demonstrate progression, and highlight your key themes.

Not every paragraph you write will have these three distinct parts, but it's worthwhile to look at how typical paragraphs are structured so you know how to evaluate your essay on this level.

### Transitions

The basic purpose of a transition is to serve as a topic sentence; it should give enough direction so the reader knows what to expect. When your essay is following not only a chronological order but also a single train of thought, the paragraphs may flow smoothly anyway. For example, in [this essay](#), note the ways in which paragraphs 3-5 begin: with clear references to time, continuing the account of his the writer's recovery from addiction. The step-by-step process is therefore logical and easy to follow.

## 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.

The topic sentence has more work to do when you move from theme to theme or experience to experience. The reader has to know where you're going next. [This applicant](#) prefaces her fifth paragraph as follows: "I also gained valuable research experience during my sophomore year by working twenty hours a week as a behavior therapist with autistic pre-school-aged children at the Children's Behavior Therapy Unit (CBTU)." The sentence sounds natural, a distinct idea in itself but also one that intimates what is to follow. Note that the transition is smooth because it takes a step back and makes a somewhat general point. If she had skipped the first half of the sentence and instead jumped to saying, "I worked twenty hours a week," we would not know that the topic of the paragraph was her research experience. Jumping too abruptly to a new point leaves the reader lost in the gap.



## **Sample Essay**

A. Describe the three most significant professional experiences you have had.

I have had three particularly significant professional experiences: my participation as mentor and supervisor in a supplemental Instruction program; my work and research as a behavior therapist with autistic children through the Psychology Senior Thesis Program; and serving as a Service-Learning Teaching Assistant.

For the past two and a half years, I have been involved with the Supplemental Instruction (SI) program, a project founded to provide assistance for students in freshman level classes who need help with study skills. I am, at the moment, the SI Leader for Psychology 101. As an SI Leader, I attend class every day, which means that I have in effect attended the Psychology 101 class daily for two and a half years. By now I know the lectures by heart, which is essential because my job involves teaching the material three times a week in one-hour sessions.

Through the SI program, I have gained far more than accumulated academic knowledge: I have developed insight into how to teach psychology to groups of three to fifty people. I have learned that, in order to teach, one must first understand how someone approaches a subject, and then adapt the teaching to that approach. More specifically, I have noticed that students learn best by relating a concept to their own lives. Thus, not only do I give examples that relate directly to the material, I also teach students how to apply the concepts to their own lives.

I have become an integral part of the SI program and, as a result of my hard work, this year I was promoted to the position of SI Supervisor. In that capacity, I attend supervisor meetings to assist in organizing the program, and I help conduct hiring and training for new SI Leaders. One of my most rewarding responsibilities as supervisor is to attend sessions conducted by SI Leaders and, based upon my observations, to assist them with their teaching, interaction, and group discussion skills.

I also gained valuable research experience during my sophomore year by working twenty hours a week as a behavior therapist with autistic pre-school-aged children at the Children's Behavior Therapy Unit (CBTU). Because CBTU possesses an extensive data-based assessment system, I had the opportunity to acquire practical research-related experience. As a behavior therapist, I focused on basic "learning to learn" skills, such as attention to the environment. I accomplished this using the classical conditioning techniques of positive and negative reinforcement, as well as punishment.

As a researcher, I was required to record each child's range of responses until that child developed a certain success rate with a behavior. One such success was shaping a child's behavior to the point where the child felt comfortable with direct eye contact.

As a behavior therapist, I presented bi-monthly progress reports to the CBTU staff. The purpose of the reports was to inform the parents, doctors, and teachers about whether a particular child was ready to move to a higher level in the "learning to learn" program. More specifically, I reported on the progress of children's behavior over time, which allowed me to trace development and compare individual responses.

CBTU provided me with an introduction to research, which led me to pursue further research opportunities through the Psychology Senior Thesis Program. I spent a year and a half experiencing the entire process: designing my research project, formulating hypotheses, conducting the research, and writing it up.

While serving as research assistant to Dr. John Kircher, who was conducting polygraph research, I began to wonder whether individuals with lower skin conductance readings would

also score higher on the Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES). My interest stemmed from the fact that individuals with higher DES scores, even when lying, are able to pass polygraph tests more easily than individuals who have lower DES scores. I wanted to explore whether they had this ability because their skin conductance readings were less reactive.

Through extensive study, I learned a great deal about the research process.

I researched dissociation, skin conductance, and how the two are related. This knowledge enabled me to develop my hypothesis. It was expected that high scores on the DES would be associated with low levels of electrodermal activity, resulting in a negative correlation. The results did not provide support for the idea that dissociative individuals have diminished skin conductance readings while experiencing a stressful situation.

Analysis of variance became the focus of the statistical analysis. This score was tested via a t-test. Through this process of compiling data and through statistical analysis, I came to recognize the importance of accuracy and attention to detail. Overall, through conducting research and writing a thesis, I strengthened my research and writing skills.

The greatest supplement to my academic experience has been the opportunity to be part of service-learning. This is the concept of students volunteering in the community, accumulating responsibilities that allow them to acquire hands-on experience in course materials. My first experience with service-learning happened a year and a half ago, when I was offered the job of Service-Learning Teaching Assistant (TA) in Psychology 101. After rigorous evaluation of several agencies, we chose ones that would best suit the students' needs. We also developed a lesson plan that would enhance the learning experience, and we created contracts by which the agencies and students would abide. We gained valuable experience the first semester, including how to successfully conduct the Service-Learning class.

By the next semester, we had developed a system for keeping the students motivated. Our method involved asking students to keep reflective journals and conducting reflective sessions, which not only allowed students to tell about their Service-Learning experiences, but also to think critically about their experiences at their agency. We discovered that, in order for students and agencies to have a fulfilling experience in Service-Learning class, the program had to involve students in community service that addresses local needs and that allowed them to develop their academic skills, sense of civil responsibility, and commitment to the community. We also kept the students motivated by compiling the total number of hours in which they served in the community. These hours reached into the thousands, and keeping a record allowed students to see how their combined efforts made a difference.

This year, I am the Service-Learning TA in a Nurse-Practitioners graduate class. This has given me the opportunity to show the instructor what I have learned about Service-Learning, specifically how to successfully implement a service-learning course without the aid of a Service-Learning TA. Next semester, I will be a Service-Learning TA in an Environmental Ethics class, in which students will serve at activist-centered agencies. These agencies, whose purpose is to make a difference in the community, demonstrate a high need for service-learning students who can assist them in the effort.

The strongest transitions will not only introduce the ensuing material but will also draw connections to prior paragraphs. These connections can note both similarities and differences. The link does not even have to be intrinsic to the subjects themselves. For example, [this applicant](#) compares the breadth of his interests to the concentration of his strengths: "Although my strengths are concentrated in these areas, my curiosity is by no means limited to these topics." Thus, after discussing specific research areas, he makes a transition to other topics by noting the broader scope of his curiosity. This is one of the most basic transitions you can use when there's no obvious link between the two topics.



## Sample Essay

*In this Statement of Purpose, the applicant communicated clear focus and direction while remaining flexible in terms of academic pursuits and long-term career plans. The essay's technical nature is perfectly appropriate for application to a graduate program in the natural sciences.*

While my undergraduate and Master's curriculum have provided exposure to a wide variety of environmental engineering topics, I have gained extensive knowledge in relatively few areas. I have, however, found an area in which my curiosity and my ability are suitably paired. As an M.S. student I have held a research assistantship position for the last year and a half, working both at the university and at a national laboratory. The strengths of the Civil (Environmental) Engineering Department at the university, as well as those of the group at the laboratory, lie in the investigation of the fate and transport of subsurface contaminants, along with general groundwater quality and flow characteristics, and it is also within these areas that my research interests reside.

[Here the applicant describes his specific research experience.]

Although my strengths are concentrated in these areas, my curiosity is by no means limited to these topics. I believe that I have a solid foundation, but through a program of graduate study and research I hope to develop expertise in these and other related areas. One such area of interest is the remediation of contaminated groundwater and contaminant plumes by incorporating microbial processes with in situ treatment techniques. I also find the interdisciplinary relationship between environmental engineering and ecology to be of great personal interest. One particular example is the growing trend toward identifying and controlling diffuse source contamination from areas of heavy agricultural activity. The processes involved in this contamination, as well as the resultant heavy down-gradient nutrient loadings, play an extensive role in the ecological development of receiving waters and need to be understood more comprehensively. The curriculum in the Environmental Engineering Program, particularly through interactions involving the Studies in Physical & Chemical Hydrogeology program, provides an opportunity to expand my knowledge in these areas while pursuing my ambitions in the area of subterranean contaminant transport processes. Further,

your graduate program would permit me to incorporate my areas of interest into an applied research project under the mentorship of the faculty in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering.

Ultimately, I aim to gain a faculty position at a university and to continue my involvement in innovative research in the field while directly encouraging the development of aspiring engineers, both in the classroom and laboratory. In this manner I believe I can make a significant and purposeful contribution to the scientific community while gaining a great deal of personal satisfaction.

Of course, you should seek more in-depth transitions to strengthen the forcefulness of your points. [This applicant](#) uses this transition to show how the experience he's about to describe builds on previous points: "As a result of the in-depth exposure to networks I gained 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." Now we are reminded that the previous paragraph demonstrated the "in-depth exposure to networks" he had gained, and we see that the ensuing paragraph will continue to describe the progress he has made.

## **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.

### **What Not to Do**

The most common mistake - other than not including transitions at all - is to rely on words like "also" or "further," which don't provide any thematic link. Using such substance-less transitions makes your essay sound like a list instead of a logical argument. For example:

**Bad:** "Doing research for my departmental adviser also provided a great deal of useful experience."

**Good:** "Although classroom debates sparked my interest in this obscure area, the chance to do hands-on research for my departmental adviser exposed me to the detail-oriented nature of academic inquiry."

Whenever possible, you should aim to create transitions with as much depth as this one has. When you can make a substantive statement both about what's to follow and what preceded, then you not only ensure a smooth flow, but you also reiterate and highlight your key themes.

### **Supporting Evidence**

While the transition statement can be general to orient the reader, your very next sentence should be specific. The movement within each paragraph should be from specific to general, rather than vice versa. There are two main reasons for this approach: 1) The reader will be more interested in the specifics of your situation than in generic, broad themes; 2) You can draw much more interesting, in-depth insights after you have laid out the evidence out. The principles here are therefore the same as for stories.

Consider the following paragraph, taken from [this essay](#):

"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."

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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.

The reader-friendly orientation comes in the first sentence, but immediately after, the writer focuses on the details of his experience: the nature of his task and the roles he fulfilled. Only in the final sentence does he begin to expand to the broader lesson. Looking at this example, you might think that this is the natural, obvious approach, and it seems that way because it works so seamlessly. But writers who aren't conscious of what they're doing will often go the exact opposite route. Their paragraph might include something like the following as the second sentence: "In this position, I learned many valuable skills while refining my career vision."

Writers who make this mistake will be wise enough to keep the resolution at the end, but they'll state a general point closer to the top. Their reasoning is that the big lesson needs to be highlighted, but they don't realize that bringing it up prematurely gives it less weight and in turn downplays the uniqueness of their personal details.

## **Resolutions**

It's a shame to see a paragraph with vivid, powerful details end on a flat note, but that's precisely what happens even in otherwise strong essays. The challenge is to say something both meaningful and personal. Most resolutions are too broad and superficial.

The other mistake that writers tend to make is just to state the obvious. For example, every paragraph will end with some form of the following: "This experience reaffirmed my passion for

history." Such a poor attempt not only hurts the impact of the paragraph but also makes the writer appear simple-minded and superficial.

[This applicant](#) concludes a paragraph on her experience with a nonprofit organization as follows: "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." What makes this resolution effective is that it makes a clear, meaningful point that is closely tied to the evidence presented within the paragraph.

## 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.

Ultimately, your approach to writing resolutions should follow the same basic principles you use for other areas: be detailed, personal, specific, and concrete. The additional challenge arises from the fact that you also must speak to some broader significance, and it's tempting either to get carried away and write too generically, or to take the easy way out and conclude with something superficial.