

## Lesson Five: Intros and Conclusions

In the Graduate Statement Themes section, we touched on some of the purposes of the introduction and conclusion. Specifically, we discussed how an introduction can orient the reader to the ideas the essay will undertake, and, more briefly, how the conclusion can be useful in synthesizing those ideas. At that point, we were most concerned about the coherence of your essay's structure.

In this section, our focus is slightly narrower for the introduction and broader for the conclusion. That is, having covered one of the two major aspects of the introduction already, we will now focus on the other: how to draw in the reader. Conversely, since we have not yet covered the conclusion in depth, we will focus here on defining its purpose and offering tips on how to achieve that purpose.

 **Select One:**

- [Introductions](#)
- [Conclusions](#)

### **EssayEdge Extra: Opening With a Quotation**

There is no approach more hackneyed than opening with a quotation. The ones we see at EssayEdge are almost always just marginally clever expressions of the most obvious lessons about hard work, persistence, and fulfilling one's dreams--often barely relevant to the rest of the essay. Occasionally, someone will find a quote that's worth a pause, but even then the reader will not be impressed. The very sight of quotation marks at the beginning of your essay may very well elicit a cringe or a sigh.

The admissions committee is far more interested in hearing what you have to say. If you happen upon a fascinating or pithy quotation by another person, using it will not make your case for admission any more compelling. In fact, an impatient reader might simply write you off as unoriginal. Additionally, quoting a philosopher or Shakespeare will not make you appear well-read, because anyone can open *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* to find something that appears intelligent and insightful.

Finally, even quoting your grandmother or some other wise relative has been overdone. This is not to say that you shouldn't use dialogue if you're describing a particular episode, but anything that sounds like an aphorism will only make your essay seem trite, no matter how perfectly it sums up your theme.

## Introductions

The introduction is the most important part of your essay, and its one purpose above all others is to draw in the reader. Ideally, your introduction should grab the reader's attention right from the first sentence. If the introduction can proceed to orient the reader to the focus of the essay, that can be very helpful. But orientation is not an essential purpose because that can be achieved gradually throughout the course of the essay.

Many students make the mistake of over-explaining in the introductory paragraph what they will be talking about in the rest of the essay. Such paragraphs may include something similar to the following: "My journey toward graduate school has been shaped by a variety of experiences, including academic studies, volunteer work, and extracurricular activities." This is quite simply a waste of time and space. The reader already knows that you will be addressing these things and is most likely thinking, "Get to the point."

If your essay opens with a paragraph such as this, the best move would be to delete it. Often, your second paragraph, which begins to discuss a specific experience, will work much better as an introduction. You may also find that a later paragraph works even better. In general, you should bring your most compelling experience to the forefront and then structure your essay around it.

The following is a list of possible approaches to the introduction, with an emphasis on the opening sentence itself.

### **Jump Right In**

Some people will start with a compelling experience but will insist on prefacing that experience with a very generic statement such as: "From the first time I looked through a microscope, I knew that science was my calling." Often, the reason people will open with such a statement is that they feel compelled to restate the question in some way. This is unnecessary and more than likely to bore your reader right out of the gate. You should be able to demonstrate your reasons without relying on such a bland summary sentence.

If, on the other hand, you are tempted to use the first sentence to explain context, you should respect the reader's intelligence enough to save that context for later, once you have grabbed the reader's attention. Consider the following example, taken from [this essay](#):

"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."

Although the question asks the applicant to describe his influences, he need not restate that line. Moreover, he can delay explaining the context of his upbringing. Review the following restructure, which grabs the reader's attention more immediately and conveys the necessary context in time:

"Good words, good deeds, and good thoughts--these are the three basic Zoroastrian tenets that have shaped my guiding principles. Indeed, my upbringing in a traditional Persian and Zoroastrian culture and all the family support that entails have come to define me more than any other influence."

The advice to jump right in also applies to anecdotes. Rather than set the stage for a story with boring exposition, beginning your essay with some interesting action is often an effective way to draw in your reader.

## 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.

### **Show Your Originality**

If you can make yourself stand out right from the first sentence, then you will have significantly improved your chances for admission. You should not, of course, just throw out random facts about yourself. The inclusion of such statements should fall within the larger context of your essay. But if you are going to emphasize a unique aspect of your life, then, by all means, it should come up right away.

### **State a problem**

By stating a problem, you create instant curiosity because the reader will want to see how you address it. [This applicant](#) actually opens with a rhetorical question, wasting no time. The remainder of the essay explores the concept of "middleware" and its relevance to the applicant's career.



### **Sample Essay**

*Please state your purpose in applying for graduate study, your particular area of specialization within the major field, and any additional information that may aid the selection committee in evaluating your preparation and potential for graduate study at UCSD.*

What, exactly, is middleware? According to Level8 Systems, the term refers to any programming which serves to "glue together" two separate programs - localized or distributed. I like to think that the word also embodies my abilities as a software "glue" engineer in the field of embedded systems, and illustrates my capacity to tackle two fields at once.

For many people, imagining their career and contributions five to ten years from college is a daunting task. I have never hesitated to make projections, yet -- since graduating from Cal Poly with a BSEE degree -- my path has taken an interesting, and somewhat unexpected, direction: from hardware to software. Because of my background in electronic engineering and my participation in both the Cal Poly Pomona Solar Energy Team racecar project and the development of simulation software, I was offered a position as system test engineer by the U.S. Naval Research, Development, Test, and Evaluation command. The position introduced me to various engineering disciplines, including modeling and simulation, software systems engineering, real-time performance analysis, and communication (LAN, WAN, wireless) systems.

After a few years, the exposure strengthened my resolve to specialize in embedded software development. Initially, the transition to software engineer was challenging. Despite my lack of formal training in computer science, I enrolled in courses at UCSD Extension to study languages like C and C++. With the skills I acquired from the courses and self-teaching materials, I accepted a position as software engineer on a project called the Battle Force Tactical Training (BFTT) System. The project's main goal was to provide a common synthetic environment to the various ships' on-board trainer (OBT) systems and shore site training centers using the Distributive Interactive Simulation (DIS) protocol (IEEE 1278.1). Since our prime directive was to use commercial off-the-shelf technology, we selected the VMEbus architecture and the VxWorks real-time operating system. My task was to develop software on a VME board, which interfaced with each OBT system and the synthetic environment network - LAN and WAN. The software provided the following functions:

- 1) It received real-time high fidelity track information from each different OBT,
- 2) It translated the data into the DIS Protocol Data Units (PDUs),
- 3) It distributed the PDUs to all nodes on the networks,
- 4) It synchronized and modeled the PDUs at each site in a course database, and
- 5) It translated the PDU information into OBT specific data messages.

With the successful deployment of the distributive training system, BFTT, I am currently involved with a new project, the Distributive Engineering Plant (DEP). DEP is in the process of connecting Command, Control, Communication, and Intelligence (C4I) land base test sites from around the country for total ship test events - T&E and Verification, Validation, and Accreditation (VV&A). My responsibility lies in the design and development of the Common Scenario Common Environment (CSCE) simulation, which will stimulate the whole spectrum of a ship's C4I systems in a coordinated synthetic environment. One aspect of the design is the use of TAO, Real-Time CORBA from University of Washington at St. Louis, as the communication infrastructure for object distribution between the embedded computers.

This type of middleware, as well as other technologies unheard of in embedded systems just a few years ago, will become more prevalent in the future. As an engineer catching a glimpse of the future and its technological possibilities, I am eager to continue my involvement in this field.

Specializing in distributive simulation and real-time embedded systems, I have come to realize that working with embedded systems demands comprehensive knowledge of both hardware and software. Designing drivers and application software requires attention to detail with respect to the hardware devices (DSP, PLD, Flash Memory), buses (VME, PCI), and network interfaces (Ethernet, FDDI, ATM). The current trend in embedded systems is system-on-a-chip (SOC) implementations, which can incorporate microprocessor cores (ARM, MIPS), memory (DRAM, SRAM), peripherals (USB), DSP cores, communication protocol stacks (TCP/IP), and applications (MPEG).

Thinking about hardware and software as mutually exclusive is a thing of the past. The convergence of these two aspects will present both opportunities and challenges for embedded software engineers to "glue" together new technologies, and only those willing to educate themselves and to use this cutting-edge technology will benefit from it. I believe that my ability to learn quickly and to switch fields -- evident from my transition to software engineering -- will allow me to approach these developments with creative and rigorous thinking. I plan to focus my graduate studies in Electronic Circuits and Systems, but I will also be taking courses in Communication and Signal Analysis as part of the breadth requirements. UCSD's Master of Engineering program will provide me with the perfect chance to study new concepts and remain in a working environment, while participating in the university's vibrant community. I can think of no better way to build on my professional and academic experiences than pursuing the program's demanding and innovative course of studies.

[This applicant](#), on the other hand, deals with a more urgent social issue that has affected her personally. The remainder of the essay does not purport to solve the problem, but rather to demonstrate her in-depth understanding of it and the level of her commitment to her cause.

Instead of dealing with external issues, you can also discuss personal difficulties and how you have struggled through them. There are many possibilities here, but what unites them is the element of drama, and you should use that to your advantage in creating a strong lead.

## **Sample Essay**

Despite our advances in science, technology, and living standards, I have learnt first-hand that many women are denied the opportunities arising from such progress. Some are denied even the most fundamental rights, imprisoned by a religion whose tenets call for their protection.

I have long been concerned with the terrible plight of Afghani women, who have been subjected to inhumane conditions by their "liberators," the Taleban. Women in Afghanistan are refused an education, banned from working, and denied freedom of movement. As a woman, I find such treatment unacceptable. As a Muslim, I have always been taught that Islam preaches equality, not the humiliation and torture of women. Unfortunately, the Taleban's treatment of women is not entirely foreign to me. In my native Pakistan, women are often said to live "sheltered" lives; the term is nothing more than a euphemism for "living in a prison" -- a gilded prison, perhaps, but a prison nonetheless.

Yet my situation could have been a lot worse had I been born on the other side of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. I have heard several Afghani refugee women describe the brutalities which they endured at home. Last year, I volunteered at a camp on the outskirts of Karachi. The camp was a fly-infested, rubbish-strewn hellhole. Dirty, unkempt children played in the dust, and emaciated women sat staring into the distance. There I met a refugee called Ferooza, and I asked her why they put up with these depressing, unsanitary conditions instead of trying to improve their surroundings. Ferooza's answer shocked me, but in retrospect I realize that to her, life after Afghanistan held no meaning. Her words still ring in my ears:

"After the Soviets left, we thought we could finally be a free people. How wrong we were!" She laughed bitterly. "The Soviets were nothing compared to the Taleban. I had a job then, a family then, a life then. Under the Taleban I have nothing. They stoned my son in front of me -- for listening to music! My daughter--" she started sobbing, and I held her. "They raped her in front of me," she continued. "She was just fifteen. The local Mullah said that his men were not at fault. He claimed my daughter had acted promiscuous by not wearing a veil and had gotten what she deserved." At this point, Ferooza broke down, and I found myself unable to hold back my own tears.

I didn't go back to the camp for a long time after I meet Ferooza -- I couldn't face the horrors. When I finally regained the courage and returned to the camp, I was told that Ferooza had died just a few weeks earlier; the other women whispered that she simply lost the will to live.

My sadness is accompanied by a fear that such brutalities will become matter-of-fact. But I have developed a firm conviction: I want to do something to help these women -- not hide from them, as I did with Ferooza. I am determined to make a difference, and now I know that even individual effort makes a world of difference.

### **Being Offbeat**

This type of approach is risky, but because it has the potential to be so effective, it is worth considering. The same warnings apply here that we enumerated for humor in the Tone section. Try to be subtly and creatively clever rather than outrageous.

[This applicant](#) begins with a joke about his prospective institution: "You'd think I would have had my fill of Indiana winters. But, here I am, applying to go back, ready to dig my parka out of storage. It's not like I've been gone long enough to forget the cold, either. In some ways, I feel as if that permacloud is still hanging over me." The introduction goes on to make some jokes about the applicant's potential concerns. These musings don't serve much of a substantive purpose except to establish the writer's familiarity with the school. On the other hand, they do make the reader more comfortable with the writer's style as he goes on to make more serious points.



## Sample Essay

*This applicant immediately engaged the reader with a witty and almost conversational style, then segued gracefully into a Statement of Purpose.*

You'd think I would have had my fill of Indiana winters. But, here I am, applying to go back, ready to dig my parka out of storage. It's not like I've been gone long enough to forget the cold, either. In some ways, I feel as if that permacloud is still hanging over me. I graduated this past May, and I think my toes just stopped tingling a couple of weeks ago. But I can deal with the winters. I can handle the Hoosiers. I don't mind if the football team loses even more games next year.

So, why come back to my alma mater? To be honest, I'll never fit the profile of the plaid-clad, legacy-bred alum who looks back on his/her undergrad experience as "da best four years of my life." I do, however, feel very grateful for the education. I majored in English and Communication, programs which complemented each other well. The time I spent in writing workshops was productive and rewarding. Also, the validation I received-the stories accepted for RE:VISIONS, the laughter and compliments at Juggler readings- inspired me to keep writing.

I feel that your program provides a nurturing and challenging environment. I aim to develop my talent, to take more risks, and to let my characters lead me, and I know I can work toward these goals in a graduate workshop setting with fewer distractions and a more committed community. I learned quite a bit from [faculty name]. He made me question certain decisions but resisted the temptation to lecture or exert too strong an influence. I regret that I didn't get to study with [faculty name]. I think we have similar styles and concerns, Catholicism for one. A survivor of seventeen years of Catholic school, I find a wealth of material in confessionals, virgin births, and splinters of the true cross. I know I can write funny stuff, but I want to focus my wit as pointedly as she does.

Mainly, I'm looking for two years to devote to the work. I expect to be inspired by other members of the writing community and to form closer working relationships with the faculty. I'm looking forward to criticism, camaraderie, and even the cold. It builds character, so they say.



## **Conclusions**

The second most important part of your essay, behind only the introduction, is the conclusion. Just as the introduction had the purpose of drawing in the reader, the conclusion's foremost function should be to leave the reader with a lasting impression. This section offers guidelines on ways you can maximize the impact of that impression. These guidelines can be grouped into three categories, each of which encompasses a lesson on what not to do.

### **Synthesize, Don't Summarize**

The chief difference between these two tactics is that the former deals with themes while the latter deals with facts/experiences, though there is some overlap. You do not need to recap the essay paragraph-by-paragraph. You do not need to remind the reader of the experiences you have discussed (except as individual experiences might be tied to certain themes you want to synthesize).

You do want to reiterate key themes, but preferably not in a way that merely repeats them. Instead, in synthesizing these key themes in your conclusion, you should ideally be adding a fresh perspective. Try to tie themes together and demonstrate how they complement each other. In doing so, you should always avoid trite and clichéd generalizations.

In this essay, [this applicant](#) uses the conclusion to synthesize the second half of the essay. It's worth noting that he does not mention the content about recovering from addiction, because he could have tied this in with his renewed interest in public policy. Nevertheless, the concluding sentences do an effective job of linking his past experiences with his career goals: "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 grassroots level, where they originate and ultimately must be resolved."

## **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.

Seeing how the pieces fit together leaves us with a clear point to take away. Moreover, the last sentence is key to the lasting impression he creates, as it provides a fresh interpretation of the significance of his work at the grassroots level.

If in the process of synthesizing you are able to invoke your introduction, you will add to your essay a further sense of cohesion and closure. There are a number of different ways this can be accomplished. For example, you might complete a story you started in the introduction, as in [this essay](#), or you might show how something has changed in your present since the timeframe of the introduction.

## Sample Essay

*This applicant successfully told about overcoming cultural disadvantage by creating an interesting short story for the reader.*

The spring quarter had just ended in my second year of college. As I sat in the airplane, waiting for it to take off, I was terrified. If man was meant to fly he would have been given wings, and since I did not have a pair of wings, flying was very uncomfortable for me. Although the excitement of backpacking through Europe slowly began to dissipate this feeling of flight anxiety, the roar of the engines and the sluggish movement towards the runway sent my fear sky high. With death impending, my thoughts turned retrospective, reviewing moments of my past and how they would affect the future that I would not have.

This was not my first flight on an airplane, so I could not explain this deathly fear of flying. My initial introduction to flying came when I was four, traveling half way across the world from

South Korea to meet my new family in America. Although I was flying alone, I soon met several passengers who were happy to keep an eye on me and help me pass the time. When the flight was over, I was introduced to my new family; there were Thomas and Penny, a.k.a. Dad and Mom, and two boys and two girls, who I am proud to call brothers and sisters.

I don't know about reincarnation or anything like that, but I felt that I had known this group of people forever. It was as if I was a piece of a jigsaw puzzle; I was a piece, and combined with others, we made a nice "picture." From the first day, I gave them as much love as a person could give, and received it back tenfold. There were the usual family problems-fighting siblings and parental confrontations- but we were a great family. I never really thought that I or my family was different until we moved to a small town on the coast.

The town was predominantly filled with white, middle class people. When I arrived I was 12 and the only Asian in the entire school. It never occurred to me that I was different, but as people started to harass me about my looks, I was devastated that I did not fit in. My family gave me a lot of support, and with a lot of determination, I was soon accepted as one of the guys. These initial experiences, however, imprinted an image about the naiveté of people, and how quick people are to judge a person without getting to know him first. However bad the experience was, it did make me a better person, making me more prone to give people a chance before passing judgment on them.

All I had to do was survive the airplane flight. After a few moments of turbulence and very dangerous levels of anxiety, the plane began to fly smoothly. I finally settled down as I began reviewing my makeshift plan of attack to see Europe. My life was in order, unlike the points of Europe I wanted to see, but then, who wants to follow a set plan when there is so much to see!

### **Expand on Broader Significance-Within Reason**

One way to ensure that your closing paragraph is effective is to tie your ideas to some broader implications, whether about yourself or your field. However, do not get carried away. Some applicants feel they must make reference to changing the world or derive some grand philosophical truths from their experiences. Remember to stay grounded and focused on your personal details.

[This applicant's](#) conclusion ties his goals in teaching to a broader issue about research limitations at smaller liberal arts colleges. He does not express the goal of revolutionizing education, but instead simply wants to make a contribution that has personal significance to him. The final sentence invokes the tradition of scholars before him. Such a tactic is not usually advisable, because it can sound forced and generic, but in this case, the applicant has established his focus on a specific intellectual topic-human memory-so it's not as vaguely trite as invoking Plato, Descartes, and Kant in the search for truth.

## Sample Essay

**Note: This essay appears unedited for instructional purposes. Essays edited by EssayEdge are dramatically improved. For samples of EssayEdge editing, please [click here](#).**

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 Shiffrin 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.

### **Don't Add Entirely New Information-Except to Look Ahead**

We have used the word "fresh" here several times, and what we're mainly talking about is perspectives and ideas. You should avoid adding entirely new information about your experiences. In shorter essays, you may have to pack details everywhere, but in general, if it's an important experience, it should come earlier.

That said, writing about your future goals is a strong way to end. After you have established your background and qualifications in the previous paragraphs, delineating your goals can help synthesize these topics, because you are tying your themes together in the context of where you will go next.

[This applicant's](#) conclusion is a straightforward, well thought out description of her professional goals. Such an ending demonstrates to the reader that she has given much consideration to her future and the role a Ph.D. in literature can play in it. Moreover, she makes clear that while she has definite career goals in mind, she also appreciates literature for its own sake. This kind of natural affinity for her subject of study serves to make her a dedicated and genuinely engaged student, and, therefore, a more attractive candidate to the admissions committee.

### **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.