

grad  map

7 Practical Tips on Essay Writing

How to Write a Clear, Coherent, and
Compelling Essay with Authenticity



1. Use the active voice whenever possible.

Your application essay should be about *you*. The active voice provides a sense of responsibility by highlighting the person doing the action. By using the active voice, you can better emphasize your interests, skills, experiences, & achievements.

In contrast, the passive voice tends to be indirect and vague about your actual contribution to the action being described.

Passive Voice	Active Voice
There were novel mutations in Gene X identified in my thesis.	As part of my thesis, I identified novel mutations in Gene X.
Several academic seminars featuring local scientists were organized while I was head of the department.	As head of the department, I organized several university-wide seminars that featured local scientists as speakers.
Research was done on the mechanisms behind volcanic and seismic events.	I investigated mechanisms behind volcanic and seismic events.

2. Describe experiences concretely.

Be **specific** as much as possible. Also, avoid assuming that the reader will easily relate to what you write; instead, **provide context** and **measurable quantities** when discussing important experiences or key outcomes.

Vague Description	Concrete Description
I learned how to interpret results and think critically.	Intrigued by our findings, I then proposed a new model and tested its validity by designing and performing two crucial experiments.
I am technically capable in sequencing technologies.	During my first year, I optimized a nucleic acid extraction protocol and established a workflow for single cell RNA sequencing in our lab.
I was awarded the Chemistry Department's ATOM prize.	I won the Chemistry Department's annual prize for being the top graduating student in our class of 30 students.
I had a very fruitful collaboration in the area of metabolomics.	I offered my expertise on assay development and collaborated with two PhD students from a partner lab to develop an improved method for measuring the quantity of secreted metabolites.

3. Articulate meaning behind experiences.

Reflect on the meaning of your most important experiences and explicitly state how these helped you prepare for graduate school. In this way, you highlight your personal takeaways while preventing the sentences from sounding dull and generic.

Experience Only	Experience and Meaning
I was employed as a research assistant for two years in the chromatin remodeling lab.	During my two-year stint in the lab, I learned about the many open scientific questions concerning chromatin remodeling.
I attended a practical training course on flow cytometry for two semesters.	Over the course of two semesters, I mastered the skill of designing, performing, and analyzing flow cytometry experiments.
I was the vice president of our organization during my fourth year.	I further developed my leadership skills when I served as the vice president of our organization during my fourth year.

4. Create a clear and coherent narrative.

Follow the first three tips, then couple it with **chronological markers**, **transitional expressions**, and **varied sentence length** and **structure**, and voila! You can easily come up with a story that is pleasing to read.

Plain Narrative	Clear, Coherent Flow and Compelling Narrative
<p>I love science because I am curious and logical. In fact, I did a lot of research work during college. I also organized webinars about biology.</p> <p>Now, I am pursuing a Master's degree in biology focusing on bacteria. My thesis is about quorum sensing. It is very interesting because it can help us develop novel drugs against bacteria.</p>	<p>Being very curious and analytical, I was captivated by wonder and the inherent logic behind the scientific method. Soon enough, I found myself grabbing every research-related opportunity I could get. During my senior year, for example, I opted to take a research-based practicum course on top of the normal thesis requirement. I also organized monthly webinars to further the communication of recent advancements in biology within our community.</p> <p>This passion for research eventually led me to pursue postgraduate training in biology at my current university. Here, I became part of the Microbiology laboratory, where I study a form of bacterial communication called quorum sensing (QS). Specifically, I am investigating how this process can be inhibited by novel anti-QS compounds. My ultimate goal is to apply my curiosity to discover new ways of combating the growing problem of antibiotic resistance.</p>

5. Know your audience.

Research on your target program(s) to know what they want in an applicant. Based on this, point out how you fit well into that mold. (Caveat: see Tip#7!)

For example, a hypothetical applicant who is broadly interested in brain diseases but is applying to programs with slightly different areas of focus may tailor his/her statements in this manner:

Generic Statement	Tailored-Fit Statement
I am broadly interested in the diseases of the nervous system.	<p>Target Program 1: Cell and Molecular Biology Program</p> <p>I am interested in investigating the molecular mechanisms behind neurodegenerative disorders. In particular, I am curious about the potential role of misfolded proteins in these diseases.</p>
	<p>Target Program 2: Neuroscience Program</p> <p>I am fascinated by the role of glial cells in neurodevelopmental diseases. Specifically, I am intrigued by how glial cells can affect neuronal circuitry and function.</p>
	<p>Target Program 3: Translational Medicine Program</p> <p>I am excited about the potential application of emerging immunotherapies in brain tumors.</p>

6. Be professional by avoiding these topics.

A study that surveyed 88 graduate admissions chairs (Appleby and Appleby, 2006) identified 4 major things to avoid in personal statements:

Personal Mental Health

Discussions about any untreated mental illness, emotional instability, or any indication that the student is drawn to graduate school due to significant problems are generally looked down upon.

Excessive Altruism

Graduate committees assume that every student wants to help people in one way or the other. Focus instead on your research interests, academic strengths, professional experience, etc.

Excessive Self-Disclosure

Avoid writing long, dramatic, and very personal stories (e.g. overcoming extraordinary odds, family or financial troubles, etc.).

Unprofessional Gimmicks

Excessive humor, “cutesy/clever stuff”, and religious references are typically perceived negatively by admission committees.

7. Always be genuine.

Arguably the most important thing that you should achieve in your essay is to write—*in an authentic manner*—about your self and how you match well with your program of interest.

DO NOT exaggerate facts or tell fake stories for the sake of matching with or impressing an admission committee.

Examples

Don't write about a family member's disease inspiring you to do research if it didn't (but if it *truly* did, then by all means write about it!)

Don't express interest in a field or a subject you're not genuinely interested in (if this happens, then maybe you should re-evaluate why you are applying to that program in the first place)

In the end, you would want to be in a graduate school that accepts you for who you truly are!