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The Statement of Purpose

Just what are they looking for anyway?
And a few tough truths on how schools evaluate candidates...

How schools use the statement of purpose in the selection process.

In interviewing hundreds of admissions officers from graduate schools and programs throughout the United States as part of my research for a book on graduate admissions, I learned that every school is a little different. Every school, program, and individual admissions officer will give different weight to the same evidence presented by the student.

One admissions officer told me, "I never look at the grades or the test scores until after I read the essay. I like to know the candidate as a person before I look at the hard data." Another told me, I skip everything else and go right to the letters of recommendation. If I don't see evidence of a real spark between this student and his or her recommenders, I have to assume that this student is nobody special."

Yet another said, "I'll overlook bad scores with good grades, or bad grades with strong test scores, but there is nothing anybody can say in a statement of purpose that will make me overlook bad test scores and bad grades." Each of these readers gave a very different emphasis to the information in candidates' admissions essays.

With the major caveat that every school, program, and officer is a little bit different, what can we say generally about the essay or statement of purpose? A lot.

Word for word, the graduate admissions essay is perhaps the single most important prose anyone will ever write. In ways that students rarely understand, it can be the ticket to the future of your choice, or not.

Before you agonize over this for weeks and make dozens of drafts of your statement, give some thought to how that statement is used by the typical admissions reader.

Admissions officers use four types of data to decide whether to admit you to their programs: grades, test scores, letters of recommendation, and the essays and the other information you provide on your application. Your grades and scores will be

quantitative data, and are commonly used as criteria for a first round of elimination. Letters of recommendation and essays are qualitative data, and are used as "tie breakers" to make finer distinctions about students' appropriateness for a program.

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(Although schools like to give students the assurance that every application is considered in its entirety, in practice those applications that do not come close quantitatively often fail to get a full hearing. Even an outstanding essay may go unnoticed, and a perfectly reasonable explanation could even be overlooked.)

Once you realize that satisfactory quantitative data only qualifies you for further evaluation, you will begin to see the true importance of the letters of recommendation and essays. That is, of those students who have the potential to be admitted at all, the data left to evaluate are qualitative. Furthermore, the more competitive the academic program is, the more weight the admissions decision-maker will have to place on qualitative factors, having a large number of students that are indistinguishable statistically.

From your point of view as a candidate, the essay is particularly important for another reason: By the time you apply your grades and test scores are an established fact, and the letters of recommendation are out of your hands. The only part of the process you can influence, the only one that is entirely under your control at that stage in the process, is the essay.

So what are those admissions readers looking for?

What admissions readers look for in the statement of purpose.

Admissions readers told me that they are looking for a personality, for a statement from the student that will give meaning to the other data they have to evaluate. Most schools request information on your honors, awards, grades, employment, test scores, publications, sports, and other activities outside the statement of purpose, so they want you to use the statement of purpose in addition to that other data, that is: Why did you pursue these activities? How did you come to the conclusion that

you wanted to pursue this educational direction? What will you do with this degree you are pursuing?

Ironically, it is sometimes the very best students who fail to give them what they want. If you fill up your entire statement of purpose with lists of accomplishments, awards, and activities, often redundant to information elsewhere in your application, you may fail to convey any sense of who you are as a person, what makes you tick, and what it might be like to work with you. Remember, graduate students work much more closely with professors than do undergraduates. Professors, in particular, will want to get an idea of what it might be like to work with you on a daily basis.

Be sure to consider including in your essay the evolution of your interest in this particular field of study; particular professors, books, or papers that swayed that interest; family or personal background that influenced either your capacity or your interest in this field; how you have prepared yourself to succeed in graduate studies; and evidence, from any arena, of your strong drive and determination.

Many admissions readers told me they were more attracted to students with specific career goals in mind. Interestingly enough, this was true even of academicians involved in the least vocational of subject matters. One department chair put it this way, "I'm tired of training mathematicians who end up doing something else. This is too big an investment for our society and for me personally to see it poorly utilized." Students who demonstrate a clear and realistic understanding of their future career goals have an advantage over students who lack that understanding, regardless of scholarly ability.

Of course, all admissions readers are looking for evidence of your writing and communication skills, as well as your reasoning ability. An essay that is logical and well written is tremendously to your advantage, regardless of content. One reader told me, "A well written essay stands out, just by that fact alone." Another said, "I read these ten and twenty at a time. I'm always grateful for those that are well presented."

Some admissions readers told me that they are receptive to evidence that will help them better interpret the student's grades and test scores. If you had to work full time during college, or if you had a personal or family tragedy that interrupted your studies, or if you have severe test anxiety, these are issues of interest to many admissions readers. It helps if you have corroborating evidence or if one of your recommenders can, perhaps tangentially, address the same issue in a letter of recommendation. Admissions counselors told me time and time again of students with extraordinary circumstances that caused them to reevaluate the student's entire application. On the other hand, if your circumstances are not extraordinary, it is probably best to skip any reference to them. Such claims need to be dramatic and sincere, or they can come off as whining (see below).

In short, admissions readers want to know (1) that you can do the work, (2) that you will finish the program, (3) that you will be decent, or pleasant, or even exciting to work with, and (4) that you will represent the program as a future alumnus of merit. That's a lot to jam into an essay of a few hundred words, but that is indeed what they are trying to ascertain when they read your essay.

What else are they looking for? Reasons not to admit you!

What admissions readers *don't* want to see in your essay.

Even as they search your essay for reasons to admit you, admissions officers are seeking reasons to withhold that offer. In response to the question, What do you hate to see in an essays?, one officer responded: "Errors and sloppiness, words and phrases crossed out, even handwritten essays. You have to wonder how they made the grades on their transcripts." The number one complaint admissions readers have about essays in general is the easiest for you to avoid: mistakes in spelling, grammar, and punctuation!

Before you turn in your essay, make sure it is grammatically perfect. No matter how good or poor your language skills, a little time with a dictionary and a usage guide is definitely in order. Even if this is the top complaint of admissions readers, you can make sure it is not a complaint about your essay.

The ultimate error of this sort was reported by several admission professionals: "Every year there is always at least one essay from someone who tell us how proud he would be to be admitted to _____, but this isn't that school."

Avoid the temptation to manufacture a philanthropic nature if you don't have one. Claims that you are going to medical school to serve inner-city homeless ring hollow if you have no background working with that population to date. Schools now request duration of involvement with volunteer organizations to counter the eleventh hour conversion to

volunteerism that attacks some applicants. And whatever you do, never tell a lie, even the tiniest fib, because information is routinely verified.

Admissions officers also hate it when you don't answer the question that was asked. This reveals that you cannot follow instructions, which is bad enough, or you don't understand instructions, which is even worse. One student with top grades and top scores submitted a country and western song as his essay to a graduate program. He was not admitted.

If your essay is over-length, don't replace good editing with a smaller and smaller size font. Admissions readers complained about the use of laser printers to shrink more and more words onto the recommended space limitations. If they can't read it, they won't.

Also, they don't want to hear a lot of whining about how you could have made much better grades or test scores, except that the exam interfered with your beach time, your golf game, or some other trivial pastime. Look around you. Were you really disadvantaged because you didn't get to go to Europe with the rest of your high school's art history class? Whining is not an attractive trait, and sine most academicians view their own programs as rigorous, they anticipate that you would only be intolerable were you to be admitted.

Finally, be careful in revealing your weaknesses. Even if they ask you, What are your weaknesses?, remember that whatever you say can and will be used against you. Focus on the positive, and avoid admitting that you haven't met a deadline since freshman comp.

Admissions readers want to believe in you. Give them every

reason to believe that you can do the work, will be an asset to have around for a few years, will graduate on time, and will be a credit to the institution in the years that follow. Good luck.

Donald Asher is the author of Graduate Admissions Essays: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why. He wrote his book on graduate admissions after interviewing hundreds of admissions officers and graduate students at institutions as diverse as Oxford and the University of Arkansas. He also lectures at colleges and universities from coast to coast on the admissions process. For book orders call Ten Speed Press at 800-841-2665, for lecture information call Asher Associates at 415-543-7130.