

Making Your Statement

Remember that the application essay for an academic program, fellowship, and internship (and the cover letter for a job opportunity) should be a compelling *argument* for your intended path, not simply an accounting of your past activities or a description of your character attributes.

Essays of this genre take so many different forms that there are no universal rules, no single ideal style or approach. In general, the following guidelines are useful:

You should:

Read the essay prompt. Before finalizing your essay, read the prompt again to be sure you followed it, both in terms of format and content.

Write many drafts. Many applicants write a first draft as a warm-up exercise, then delete it entirely. The second version is almost always much better. Allow time to write four, six, or even ten drafts before submitting.

Use your own voice. While maintaining a professional tone, write in a way that shows how you think, using the type of language that is comfortable for you.

Include details. Your academic and professional experiences in the science fields can demonstrate certain qualifications, while other experiences might be outside of science, but still relevant to show your work ethic, creativity, or problem-solving abilities, for example.

Use action verbs. In the course of your studies, work, and research, you analyzed, designed, interpreted, predicted, constructed, supervised, mentored, created, presented, and learned, etc. Action verbs demonstrate with clarity your role in past projects.

Address serious inconsistencies in your background. Medical problems, family demands, financial hardships, and other concerns might leave a mark on a transcript or résumé that you feel needs explaining. A few lines in an essay can adequately do this, as long as the message is one of positive resolution. *Alternatively, this type of issue might be handled by a supportive reference person / letter writer.*

Check thoroughly for errors of spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

You should not:

Make bold declarations beyond your experience and training. Don't demand change in your academic discipline, complain about problems, or propose to do something huge and unlikely (such as solve the climate crisis, eliminate fossil fuels, and so forth). Instead, offer solutions, especially incremental and reasonable ones.

Use jargon. Your reader may or may not be an expert in your field. Spell out acronyms the first time you use them, and avoid relying on overly technical language as a substitute for substantive discussion of your skills and accomplishments.

Employ empty words. Adjectives such as *amazing, beautiful, unique* and intensifiers such as *always, very, completely, totally* are often wasted space in an essay. Instead: details!

Lavish praise on the university, agency, or company. The organization sponsoring the opportunity is aware of its status, prestige, rank, etc.

Strategies that (usually) go wrong:

Quotes and idols. Including a snippet of wisdom from a famous scientist, educator, civil rights leader, or pop musician generally doesn't make you come across as any more clever or compassionate, and it takes up precious space that you could instead use to write about your own beliefs, accomplishments, and plans. Nor does dropping the name of someone you respect, idolize, and want to be like. Hopefully, you will want to be like you.

Childhood epiphanies. While some experiences early in life may have, in your assessment, "set you on your course" to your present ambitions, describing them in an essay introduces you to your reader as a child with a certain naïve wonder that you feel might be attractive to an employer or selection committee. In fact, the reader is probably more interested in knowing you as an educated, responsible, probably still curious and wondering, adult.

Humor. Your reader might not understand your sense of humor, and in any case, is probably scanning the essay too quickly to tease out the nuance of your wit. If a joke falls flat, it could harm your prospects more than help.

Gimmicks. Rhyming, unconventional punctuation, anagrams, unusual fonts, and the like might not demonstrate your creativity in a way the reader appreciates.

Lazy introduction and conclusion. Opening lines such as "My name is...", "The prompt asks me to write about...", "I am applying to your program because..." and concluding lines such as "It is my sincere hope that you will grant me the privilege of attending your fine university" are boring.

Partisan advocacy. It is best not to use the essay as a platform to express controversial political or religious views unless relevant to your candidacy.

Catharsis. It's generally not a good idea to use the essay to unload your emotional burden about financial difficulties, victim-survivorship, family discord, crimes committed, etc. In some cases, such stories are important and material to your candidacy, so you should talk with a trusted advisor or mentor for the best way to deal with these delicate issues.