

Writing Application Essays

This handout was prepared after discussions with admission officers in several of the professional schools at USC.

I. Why are essays required on these applications?

Admissions officers want to know more about you personally. Since personal interviews are not conducted, your essay can provide insights about you that will help admission officers obtain a more in-depth view of who you are and how you see yourself as a prospective professional in the area you have selected.

II. How important is the essay?

If you don't write it you will not be accepted. That much is obvious. But more importantly, admission officers are judging how professionally you represent yourself to people who are completely anonymous. Your application essays are further evidence validating your worthiness as a candidate for one of the professional schools.

III. What should I write about?

Do not call them and ask this same question. You can call for help about filling out the application itself, but don't ask them to tell you what to say. They will perceive you as a person lacking imagination, initiative and self-confidence. They are willing to advise you on just about everything else except what to write about and how to go about doing it. That's what this handout is for.

1) Select an area of your life that relates to the expertise that will be required of your particular profession. You might, for instance, begin with an anecdote about a class you once had that you excelled in because of your exceptional abilities as a student. Or mention an extracurricular activity, a special job or hobby you engage in that requires special skills on your part pertinent to the profession you hope to pursue later in your life.

2) Since admission officers are interested in you as a serious student, especially if you are applying as an undergrad, mention things that demonstrate your sincerity and dedication as a student. For example, if you are applying to law school, don't tell them why you always wanted to be a lawyer to protect the rights of the little guy in the street. They have probably heard this sentiment a thousand times before. This does not mean it is not a noble sentiment, but expressing it does not separate you from the other thousand or so applicants expressing the very same sentiment. What exactly has propelled you to apply for this particular professional school?

IV. How should I organize my essay?

The safest and surest way is to have a clear focus from the very beginning. This way your readers will know where you are going in the rest of your paper, and they will be more willing to follow along. Remember, each admissions officer is reading hundreds of applications. Don't waste their time. Some of the applications ask for short essays and their questions are specific. If this is the case, do what the question asks of you. If the question asks you what your career objectives are and how a USC education can help you obtain those goals, think about it and then tell them straight out. Readers can often tell a good deal about you by the significance and relevance of your response. If you just want to make money, it won't really matter what activity you pursue in order to reach that goal. So spend some time reflecting upon why you really do want to enter the school of your choice. Length is not important as long as you answer the question with enough detail that readers who don't know you can now know you a little better. The opposite of this is to go on and on without remaining relevant.

V. Should I do anything extra in my application?

Yes. You should write optional essays if such options are available on the application. This will vary from school to school. But remember, you are trying to provide admission officers with an insightful description of who you are, a description that sets you apart from other candidates and one that helps you stand out.

Cover letters are also recommended. In these you can include details about yourself that do not fit anywhere else in the application.

VI. Complete the entire application.

This seems self-evident, but you would be surprised at how many people neglect or overlook a section in the application. So check and recheck your work. If you are serious about getting into this particular professional school, then you will take all the time necessary in order to do a professional job in completing the application. Go that extra step. It may be the one element that finally wins you the admission to the school you desire.

VII. Edit, edit, edit.

This is crucial, crucial, crucial. Similar to VI above, if you want to be perceived as a professional, then you had better present yourself as one. Neatness of your application is important. Type it or have somebody type it for you. Check your grammar, punctuation, spelling. You should do this editing yourself, but if you are not sure about some of these things, go to the Writing Center and have a consultant advise you while you do this editing in front of them.

VIII. Last but not least: GET THE APPLICATION IN ON TIME!