

Be prepared to produce many drafts. These essays are among the most difficult pieces of writing you may do related to graduate school (other than your dissertation and your first job letter) because you must make so many strategic decisions on how to present yourself in such a short amount of space. Allow yourself a lot of time for drafts, and do not get frustrated because of the many times you will need to rewrite. Making multiple revisions is an inevitable part of the process.

Show your drafts to faculty members, particularly those writing letters of recommendation, fellow students, and others. Accept criticisms with as little defensiveness as possible. On occasion you will get conflicting opinions on the presentation of your ideas and you will have to decide which direction to take. If you have a leading faculty mentor, you may defer to his or her opinion over others.

into exchange. Readers want to get a feeling of your intellect, and in a successful essay they have initiated, which they can only do if they admit you into their program. They will want you to be a part of their community of scholars because you have something to offer.

Concentrate on demonstrating what you know about your field and what you hope to accomplish in graduate school and even beyond. Is there a particular area of the field that you find interesting? What do you hope to contribute to the field? Avoid digressions.

Demonstrate your knowledge of the field by making appropriate references to leading scholars, major writers, and current debates or concerns, employing appropriate technical terminology. Avoid jargon that you believe is fashionable in order to appear flashy: most committees can tell superficial use of buzz words. You usually do not need to explain concepts in depth, since admission committees are usually already familiar with the field (although brief explanations for a more general reader may be necessary for fellowship applications). If you do write about an aspect of the field that may be somewhat unusual, your ability to briefly explain technical or theoretical aspects is a crucial component of how your essay is judged. You are not simply offering a summary of a field, so your ability to present your own arguments demonstrates how creatively you engage the entire field.

Make concrete references to the program you are applying to and to the faculty you would like to study with. However, make sure these references are sufficiently broad so that you do not sound as if you want to study with just one person or have an excessively narrow interest in the field. Investigate the program – review their web site, talk to graduate students, visit in person – to discover its focus, how graduate students are involved in research, – à-vis the field. Do not inadvertently position yourself on one or other side of a controversy within the department or field. Often, the discussion of the particular program is at the very end of the essay (which allows you to simply place the appropriate paragraph for each school). However, references to a particular program can be woven into the body of the text, as well.

Poofread the essay, roofpread the essay, prufreed the essay. Have your friends proofread it. While this is not a grammar test, excessive typos and other mechanical errors indicate poor work habits and do not make a good impression.

After all this advice and warning, keep in mind that this is actually an exciting process. Perhaps for the first time in years you are attempting to present a coherent intellectual portrait of yourself. In the process you may actually gain a clearer vision of your interests and goals and feel even more confident that graduate study is the direction you want to go.