

# Application Essays

Application essays are an important tool admissions committees use to evaluate candidates. Essays are often required when applying to graduate school, scholarships, fellowships, and other programs. The essay forms a central part of the application and allows the admissions committee to develop a richer and more complete understanding of the candidate.

## Types of Application Essays

All application essays are persuasive essays arguing that the candidate should be granted admission. There are two main types of application essays. A **letter of intent**, also called a **statement of purpose**, is a formal document in which you explain your academic and professional skills and accomplishments and discuss your future goals. You can think of it as an academic cover letter. It features a detailed discussion of your relevant educational and professional experience, your reasons for applying to the program, and how you hope to contribute to the field or profession. This type of essay includes little to no discussion of personal matters and life experience. Letters of intent should be written in a direct, professional, no-frills style, similar to the style in which you might write a literature review.

A **personal statement** is a work of creative nonfiction in which you tell a story about who you are and why you belong in this program. You can think of it as a brief professional memoir of your life story as viewed through the lens of your current goal. In a personal statement, it is appropriate to discuss personal matters like your family and childhood, your faith and convictions, and challenges, hardships, and formative experiences. A personal statement will also include a discussion of your relevant educational and professional experience and your motivations for applying to the program. A range of tones and styles are suitable for a personal statement, keeping in mind that it is a professional writing sample.

Programs sometimes use different terms or even use these terms incorrectly. You may also be asked to write a hybrid of these two types of essays. The most important guide for your essay is the instructions provided in the application. Look to the prompt to learn what kind of essay the admissions committee expects. Be sure to follow the prompt closely and answer all questions completely.

## The Writing Process

Writing a strong application essay takes a lot of time and effort. It is important to allow yourself plenty of time to brainstorm ideas, get feedback, and work through many different drafts. Expect to do a lot of rewriting. Keep in mind that this essay also serves as a writing sample. The final product must be impeccable. Take advantage of resources like [Career Services](#), the [Graduate Resource Center](#), and professors and

mentors to help you develop and edit your essay. Plan to spend a minimum of six to eight weeks actively working on your essay.

### **What Does the Committee Want to Know?**

The application instructions are your best guide, and programs sometimes have very specific requirements. Oddly enough, it is also common for programs to provide almost no instruction! In general, admissions committees want to know:

- Are you qualified for this program? How can you show that you have the necessary skills and experience?
- Do you have what it takes to complete the program? How do your past accomplishments demonstrate that you will be successful?
- Who are you? How does your life experience shape who you are as a candidate and who you will be as a professional?
- What are some ways you are unique or special as a candidate? What important information about you is not contained in your CV, transcripts and test scores?
- Are you well-informed about this field or profession? Why are you pursuing this profession instead of other similar professions?
- Why do you want to attend this specific program?
- What are your future goals, and how do they align with the program?

### **Length and Formatting**

Programs sometimes provide specific length requirements, which should be followed carefully. Application essays are usually about 500 to 750 words. Follow any formatting instructions provided. In general, there is no special format required. Use 1" margins, Times New Roman or a similar font at size 12, and a simple heading stating your name and the name of the program. Some candidates begin a letter of intent with a salutation such as "Dear Admissions Committee."

### **Organization**

All application essays should be well-organized. Letters of intent should follow standard essay structure with clear introduction, body and conclusion sections. The recommended outline for a letter of intent is:

#### **I. Introduction**

- a. Direct statement of the purpose of the letter
- b. Brief overview of qualifications and goals

#### **II. Body**

- a. Detailed discussion of relevant academic and professional experience
- b. Use one paragraph for each experience

#### **III. Conclusion**

- a. Discussion of research interests and professional goals
- b. Discussion of specific interest in this program, often mentioning faculty members by name

There is no set organization for a personal statement. There are many possible structures you can use if you are so inspired. When in doubt, it is always effective to use standard essay structure with introduction, body and conclusion sections. Here is a possible outline for a personal statement:

**I. Introduction**

- a. Captivating opening line that grabs the readers' attention
- b. Powerful personal story or statement of personal mission that illustrates your reasons for applying
- c. Direct statement of goals

**II. Body**

- a. Detailed discussion of relevant academic, professional and personal experience
- b. Use one paragraph for each experience

**III. Conclusion**

- a. Restatement of personal mission as it relates to the program
- b. Brief discussion of future goals

**Examples**

On the following pages, you will find examples of a letter of intent and a personal statement. The letter of intent provides a professional, technical overview of the candidate's skills, experience and goals, persuading the admissions committee that the candidate is highly qualified for doctoral study and will make meaningful contributions to scientific research. The personal statement draws connections between the candidate's family life and the goal of attending law school, giving the admissions committee a window into the candidate's motivations and lived experience, while also addressing academic and professional qualifications.

*Note: The following examples are teaching tools developed by UNM Career Services. They represent fictional candidates and are to be used for educational purposes only.*

## Letter of Intent Example: PhD in Clinical Psychology

Anna Nguyen  
Letter of Intent

Department of Psychology and Neuroscience  
San Luis University

Dear Selection Committee,

I am writing to express my enthusiastic interest in pursuing a PhD in Clinical Psychology in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at San Luis University. My goal is to use the scientific tools of neuropsychology to illuminate how pain operates in the brain, ultimately contributing to the development of new treatments. I believe my academic record, research experience, and professional experience demonstrate that I am an excellent fit for this program.

This May, I will complete a Bachelor of Science in Psychology with a double major in Biochemistry at The University of New Mexico. I have developed foundational knowledge of the field of psychology, including research methods, current theories, and clinical practice. Through my second major, I also undertook extensive study of biomedical science. My coursework in molecular biology, toxicology, immunology and genetics provide me with a strong understanding of the fundamental biological processes underlying human behavior. I will draw on this interdisciplinary foundation to contribute to research in your department.

For the past two years, I have served as a research assistant in the Freeman Brain Imaging Lab under the supervision of Dr. Marcus Freeman. I have had the privilege of assisting with several studies investigating chronic pain using both electrophysiological and hemodynamic functional imaging. I contributed to research on the acute pain response in chronic pain patients and the long-term effects of cognitive behavioral therapy on both cerebral pain processes and reported subjective pain in patients diagnosed with fibromyalgia. I assisted with the administration, analysis and interpretation of several imaging modalities, including fMRI, structural MRI and EEG. I also conducted structured clinical interviews to track and evaluate subjects' self-reported pain. In addition to these technical skills, I gained experience with every stage of the research process, including grant writing, IRB authorization, and informed consent procedures. I am confident that this research experience has prepared me well for doctoral study in your program.

I have sought to ground my research experience in clinical practice. I currently work as a behavior management specialist for children with autism spectrum disorder. This role allows me to implement evidence-based best practices in a real-world treatment setting. I have witnessed the power of psychological research as I see my clients gain new skills and independence. I have also developed an appreciation for the messy, unpredictable realities of treatment, which allows me to approach scientific research with greater flexibility and nuance. Finally, I have gained experience working on an interdisciplinary care team in which I collaborate each day with psychologists, social workers, counselors, occupational therapists and teachers. I have tremendous respect for the distinctive roles of these dedicated professionals, and find myself

further convinced that I am best suited to contribute my skills and abilities as a professional psychologist.

My primary research interests are in the neuropsychology of pain. In particular, I want to examine the effects of psychological interventions on cerebral pain processes. I believe that psychological treatments hold a unique potential to bring relief to individuals suffering from chronic pain. In the wake of the devastation of the opioid crisis, uncovering effective nonpharmacological treatments for chronic pain is more urgent than ever.

I am very interested in the work of Dr. Harold Meyers and Dr. Emily Chen. Dr. Meyers' work using brain imaging to investigate substance abuse and recovery is closely connected to my interest in understanding how psychological interventions function at the level of the brain. I have heard about Dr. Meyers' innovative graduate seminars and would love to study under him. I am also extremely interested in Dr. Chen's work on neuroplasticity, particularly her recent research investigating the effects of a mindfulness meditation protocol in a clinical population. I believe this is among the most promising areas of investigation in pain management.

Thank you for your consideration.

## Personal Statement Example: Law School

Antonio Ramirez

Personal Statement

UNM School of Law

My life was turned upside-down by a knock on the front door. One moment, I was sitting at the kitchen table working on an essay for my 8th grade history class. My mom was getting my little brothers ready for bed, and my dad was trying to fix our perpetually leaky kitchen sink. Minutes later, my dad was being led away in handcuffs by agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement. I wouldn't see my dad again for nearly two years. That was the day I began to understand the profound impact of the law on families and communities. My goal is to become an attorney to ensure that all New Mexicans have access to crucial information and professional representation when dealing with the legal system.

I recently completed my Bachelor's degree in Sociology with a minor in Spanish at The University of New Mexico. As a first-generation college student, it was overwhelming to navigate a large university. I proactively sought out resources, from student clubs to tutoring, to help me find community and reach my goals. My studies in Sociology, with a concentration in Human Services and Social Policy, provided me with an in-depth understanding of the multilayered social services systems and policy environments that shape people's lives. Through my advanced coursework in Spanish, I honed my language skills, allowing me to engage in high-level professional communication in the Spanish language with confidence. With the support of my family, mentors, and friends, I am proud to have become the first person in my family to graduate from college.

As a volunteer at the New Mexico Immigrant Law Center for the past two years, I have helped immigrants understand the process of applying for US citizenship and provided extensive translation services for Spanish speakers. I have also traveled to the Cibola Detention Center to provide support to people currently in detention. I have assisted detainees with completing forms and led informational workshops for asylum seekers. These experiences have shown me the urgent need for immigration lawyers in New Mexico. I learned that it is not just my family, but countless families struggling to navigate the immigration system without adequate information or representation.

Last semester, I had the opportunity to intern at the New Mexico Public Defender's Office. I worked extensively with the legal team to interview clients, conduct background research, summarize police reports, write arguments, prepare exhibits and attend court proceedings. I also worked with social workers as they gathered information and prepared psychosocial assessments of clients. This eye-opening experience taught me that our Constitutional rights don't just happen on their own. Dedicated professionals must fight every day to ensure them. I want to be part of that fight.

I will never forget the attorney who worked with my family when my dad was placed in immigration detention. Thanks to her hard work, my dad was there to cheer me on this spring on my graduation day. My goal now is to provide that kind of life-changing service to the community as an attorney.