

Writing to your audience: grad school admissions essays

Who will be reading them? The admissions committee, which is usually made up of professors from the department you're applying to.

Why are they reading them? To figure out if you're a "good fit" for their program. In other words, it helps them figure out whether your research interests and preparation match well with the focus, mission, and culture of their particular program.

For example, suppose you're applying to a PhD program in English, and your research interests are in an exciting, edgy, interdisciplinary field (e.g. postcolonial Medieval studies with a focus on gender). In that case, you're probably not a good fit for a somewhat conservative or traditionalist department whose faculty publish mostly on certain narrow, language-focused topics like vowel shifts in Anglo-Saxon. But you'll probably be a good fit for programs whose faculty tend to publish papers in your intended area (or similar areas).

Your goal in writing the essay, then, is to show the admissions committee that your interests and preparation fit well with the goals and expectations of the department (and if they don't fit well, then you probably shouldn't be applying to that school).

So, when you have questions like, "Should I include an anecdote?" or "Should I tell them about all the times I switched majors before settling on my current major field?" ask yourself: Will including this information help my audience (the admissions committee) figure out whether I'm a good fit for the program?

Take the anecdote example. If you're applying to a people-centered profession (e.g. education, therapy, counseling, medicine), then it might be useful to share a story that illustrates your abilities in working with people in your field (e.g. a story that illustrates your excellent "bedside manner" with patients or your cultural competence in reaching students from a diverse array of different backgrounds). But if you're applying to an MS in applied physics, a story is probably not necessary and might even be viewed as trite or gimmicky. For physical science programs, the admissions committee readers are probably much more interested in your research interests, research experiences, conference presentations, and other examples of professional, specialized involvement in your field—not what a kind person you are or how well you get along with people.

In fact, even in people-centered "helping professions," the essay readers are not very interested in general "soft skills" like "I am very empathetic," "I work well in teams," or "I am a good listener." Such skills are assumed. If you were a criminally-violent sociopath who couldn't get along with people, you probably would not be able to finish a college degree, hold down a job or clinical internship, or secure letters of recommendation. There are always exceptions, of course. But possible exceptions underscore an even more important point: ANYONE can SAY that they are a good listener. How will you "show" this rather than just saying it? **Answer:** By being more specific and focusing on professional skills. For example, *"One of the achievements I'm most proud about is using my cultural competence and language abilities to forge connections with my diverse inner-city students, who come from disparate backgrounds. For example, one of my*

students last year, call her Chen, is a recent immigrant from Shanghai. I was able to immediately make a connection with her because of my years studying Mandarin..." The story will go on to show a specific example that illustrates your people skills, rather than just stating them. For more information on this topic, see my page on "[Admissions Essays](#)."

Finally, the essay readers are almost **never** interested in stories like this:

"First, I majored in English, because I was interested in people's motives and how they think. But eventually I realized that I was more interested in the mentality of real, rather than fictional, people, so I switched to psychology. I liked my psychology courses, but then I realized that I'm most interested in the psychological features of whole populations, not individuals, so I finally switched to a major in sociology with a minor in social psychology. Now, I'm applying to the master's in social work (MSW) program so that I can put my fascination with sociology into practice helping real people."

Does this narrative help the admissions committee determine whether you're a good fit for their program? Absolutely not. I understand why students are tempted to include such narratives: they think that they need to explain their transcripts. But admissions committees simply don't care that much if you switched your major a few times. What they care about is whether you today are actually prepared (and a good fit) for the program that you're applying to. So don't include a long, rambling, boring narrative of your evolving interests and abandoned majors. Instead, focus on how you today are prepared for your next steps:

"To prepare myself for graduate study in social work, I completed my BA in sociology with a minor in social psychology..."

Original source: [Writing to your audience](#).