

So you wanna get into grad school? (Part I)

Here is some advice from someone who has to read many applications.

1. Don't ask for recommendation letters from people who are self-absorbed, pompous narcissists. If their letter is about them and not you, it reflects badly upon you as a judge of character.
2. It is perfectly ok to give people "talking points" in a letter. Not everyone is a good letter writer. Help them promote who you really are.
3. If there is a gap in your academic record, or your grades are spotty, explain it unapologetically, but don't let us wonder. Honesty is good policy. This is a place where you don't want the committee's imagination to go wild.
4. Read directions and call and ask if you don't understand something. If you submit the wrong stuff in the wrong place, you lose points, always.
5. You can be laconic in your essay responses if you are a brilliant essayist. If you are laconic without any true substance, you will come off as lazy or arrogant. Everyone else made an effort. Why should you be excepted from the task?
6. Your personal statement tells us something about your personality and your passions, and any capacity for originality. Be authentic, and try not to be procedural and boring. We don't want to read your resume or life history in chronological order. We also don't want to read the word "passionate" one more time. That should come through reading about your deeds and how you describe the things you love. The proof is in the pudding.

7. If you have to describe an “emotional moment”, don’t choose one from which you haven’t learned anything and don’t emotionally barf all over the letter. Also, “emotional moment” doesn’t mean “sad”. Explore the many emotions humans can feel. Choose an event from which you have some objective distance. This is not your moment to confess you have untreated PTSD. Bonus points for truly learning from something, but none for learning nothing and just telling us about it.
8. Grad school requires some capacity for analytic and critical thinking. One of your writing samples needs to convey that. If you don’t know what I am talking about, maybe you are not ready for grad school.
9. If you are submitting a creative sample, try to include something that frames your sample with some information about your intention and inspiration. We need context to properly process what we are looking at.
10. Men tend to ‘brag’ and women tend to ‘ramble’: this is the perception of you when you list your skills and accomplishments. Re-read your personal statements trying to iron out the implicit biases we all have. Do some research on implicit biases about gender, race and ethnicity and even out your writing.