

What is a writing sample for graduate school and why is it important?

Writing samples are a key part of most graduate school applications. They show the admissions committee the quality of your previous work and demonstrate interest and proficiency in your chosen field.

- ❖ **Solid writing skills:** Is all spelling and grammar accurate? Is it free of typos?
- ❖ **Organization and clarity:** Is there a logical flow to the ideas presented? Is the purpose of the sample clearly identified and accomplished?
- ❖ **Critical thinking:** Does it demonstrate a thorough understanding of the topic, including consideration of alternate theories or approaches? Are all claims backed by reliable research?
- ❖ **Consistent citations and references:** Have sources been properly cited throughout the work? Do all citations have a corresponding reference?

Components of a good graduate school writing sample:

Now that you know how you will be evaluated and what kind of sample to submit, you need to make sure your work is as polished as possible. Whether you choose an academic paper or other professional work, apply these writing sample tips before submitting:

- ❖ Have someone you trust read it and provide feedback.
- ❖ Run the entire paper through a spelling and grammar check multiple times. You could also consider using a free tool like the one available at Grammarly.com.
- ❖ Make sure there are no typos, formatting discrepancies, comments or tracked changes, run-on sentences, repeated paragraphs, etc., in the final version.
- ❖ Rename your document to include valuable information that will make it easier for busy admissions staff to find. (Try using the following example: Writing sample_Name of applicant_Title of paper or project.)
- ❖ Make sure your citation style is consistent and correct throughout the entire document.

Your writing sample format will vary depending on the type of sample you choose. But if you are submitting an academic paper, make sure it contains all the following sections, at minimum:

- ❖ Title page
- ❖ Abstract
- ❖ Introduction
- ❖ Body
- ❖ Conclusion
- ❖ List of references

Tips for Choosing an Appropriate Writing Sample

Choose a writing sample that reflects the type of writing you will do in your graduate program.

- ❖ Some common writing sample examples include essays, dissertations, theses, journal articles, capstone projects or research papers. If possible, you want to submit a piece that demonstrates your proficiency in analyzing a topic in the same (or related) field as the program for which you are applying.
- ❖ There are some professions and corresponding graduate school programs that accept work-related writing samples (white papers, policy briefs, news articles and grant applications). If you are pursuing higher education in marketing, communications, public relations, public policy, or other similar fields, these could be good writing sample ideas.
- ❖ If you do send in materials you wrote for work, make sure you are the only author — and write a secondary note explaining the context and authorship. Reviewers are evaluating **you**, not your team.

Don't write something new but update your writing sample if necessary.

- ❖ If you have done undergraduate research, you could submit portions of a research proposal or final paper (like an honor's thesis). This type of writing is a good example of your research-based writing. Have someone outside of the field read your writing sample. Even if you received a favorable grade for it in a class, does not mean it highlights your strengths as a writer. Your writing sample does not need to be on a topic related to your major or proposed future research. Select the best example you have from your academic portfolio.

Read the instructions!

- ❖ If a program requires a writing sample, they will typically give specific requirements on the type and/or length of the sample. Pay very close attention to these requirements and do not deviate from the instructions. You can contact the graduate coordinator or secretary of that school if you need additional clarity on the instructions.

How long should a writing sample be?

There is no simple answer for this question, as the target length depends on the program you are applying for. The importance of reading and following all the instructions carefully throughout your application cannot be overstated. If your desired school does not state specific requirements, try choosing an academic paper. Or better yet, you can take the initiative to reach out for clarification.

What are common mistakes to avoid in a graduate school writing sample?

Common mistakes to avoid in a graduate school writing sample include:

- ❖ **Poor Organization:** Ensure your paper is well-structured with clear headings and logical flow.
- ❖ **Weak Thesis:** Present a strong and focused thesis or research question.
- ❖ **Insufficient Analysis:** Provide thorough analysis and avoid simply summarizing sources.
- ❖ **Lack of Clarity:** Write clearly and concisely, avoiding jargon and overly complex sentences.
- ❖ **Grammatical Errors:** Proofread your sample multiple times to eliminate any spelling or grammatical errors. This really should not happen. For a paper of this importance, you should go over it a dozen or more times, looking for any errors.

How can I make my writing sample stand out?

To make your writing sample stand out, focus on the following aspects:

- ❖ **Originality:** Present original ideas and perspectives that demonstrate your intellectual curiosity and critical thinking skills.
- ❖ **Clarity:** Write clearly and concisely, ensuring your arguments are easy to follow.
- ❖ **Relevance:** Choose a topic that is relevant to your field of study and showcases your expertise.
- ❖ **Analysis:** Provide thorough and insightful analysis that goes beyond surface-level observations.
- ❖ **Professionalism:** Ensure your sample is polished, well-formatted, and free of errors.

How should I format my graduate school writing sample?

Personally, I don't think this one matters much. As long as your formatting is clean and consistent, you should be fine. That said, some people believe that you should format your graduate school writing sample following academic standards and any specific guidelines provided by the program.

Here are some general tips:

- ❖ **Font and Spacing:** Use a standard font such as Times New Roman, 12-point size, and double-spacing.
- ❖ **Margins:** Use 1-inch margins on all sides.
- ❖ **Headings:** Use clear headings and subheadings to organize your paper.
- ❖ **Citations:** Follow a consistent citation style (e.g., APA, MLA, Chicago) and include a bibliography or reference list.
- ❖ **Title Page:** Include a title page with your name, the title of the paper, and any other required information.