



FIVE FATAL FLAWS TO AVOID IN YOUR GRAD SCHOOL STATEMENT OF PURPOSE



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**Get Your Game On:
Prepping for Your Grad
School Application**

ABOUT ACCEPTED

Accepted is THE premiere professional admissions consulting firm, helping applicants get accepted to colleges, graduate schools, business schools, law schools, and medical schools, as well as other healthcare programs, for the past 30 years. We have guided thousands of candidates through the entire application process to gain acceptance at the world's top programs.

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We invite you to [meet our team](#) and [read what our past clients have to say about us](#).

When you are ready to take the next step in your application process, sign up for a free consultation. We look forward to speaking with you about your goals and helping you achieve them!

SPEAK WITH AN ADMISSIONS EXPERT!

INTRODUCTION

Your grad school personal statement or statement of purpose is your first chance to show the adcom who you are beyond your stats, and an engaging, well-written essay will get the job done. We know it's easy to make mistakes in writing this essay. After all, you probably aren't used to writing about yourself in this way. We've seen an endless number of essays that include some potentially detrimental – yet totally avoidable – flaws.

In this guide, you will learn how to avoid the five most common essay killers so you can submit a successful, acceptance-worthy statement of purpose or personal statement for graduate school. Sound good? Let's get started.

FATAL FLAW #1: LACK OF SUBSTANCE

An essay without substance will bore your readers. And if you bore your admissions reader – even though they're obligated to slog through (I mean *read*) your essay, you'll lose their meaningful attention and with it, any serious consideration of you as a candidate. It's that simple.

Kindle your readers' interest and hold on to it with an essay full of the following:

1. Substantive self-reflection

How well do you know yourself? No Google search is necessary to find the real "you," but you do have to create an environment of quiet space in which to seriously think about your goals, experiences, and dreams. What are the most formative experiences that have made you who you are? Search your head and your heart. This is where you will find the solid substance that the schools want to know about.

2. Vivid and lively anecdotes, examples, and specifics

Now that you have collected your thoughts and gotten to know yourself a bit better, you'll need to show the adcom that your dreams are grounded in experience. Write about real-life situations with colorful specifics, short scenes with dialogue (if appropriate and space permits), and the context of the situation you're describing. These examples add life to your essays and capture the reader's attention.

Here's one before-and-after to illustrate what we mean:

Before: "I volunteered at a local women's shelter last summer so I could give back to my community."

After: "I had wanted to volunteer at a local women's shelter to give back to my community, but I had no idea how tiring it would be to stand behind the buffet table, ladling out mac and cheese to mothers and children in 90+ degree weather."

3. Revelations of your thought processes and feelings

While lively examples and anecdotes tell the "what" of your life, they don't convey the "why." The adcoms want to learn about how your experiences have informed and changed you. How have your thinking, values, and motivations evolved over time as a result of the experiences you've had and the lessons you've learned about yourself, your strengths, and your career vision?

Let's return to the women's shelter example we just introduced. You could mention that you "built relationships by talking to some of the women." But that's a bland fact. Alternatively, you could describe a particular conversation you had with a 25-year-old mother of two who was trying to

earn her cosmetology license, and then elaborate on how that conversation affected, motivated, or changed you. It's a no-brainer to choose the path that includes detail, context, and reflections.

How to avoid Fatal Flaw #1

When you construct your essays on a foundation of self-reflection and astute examples balanced by analysis, you will keep your readers' sustained interest. Not sure how to do that? [Working one-on-one with an expert advisor](#) will help you organize your thoughts and ideas into a cohesive, compelling essay that will get you ACCEPTED!

FATAL FLAW #2: FAILURE TO ANSWER THE QUESTION

Applicants often ask, “What does the adcom want?” It’s really simple: **they want you to answer their question.** Too frequently, applicants don’t comply with this straightforward request.

In particular, you might feel especially queasy about discussing a failure, a time when you really blew it. You might (wrongly) think that if you admit to a failure, it will somehow make YOU a failure in the eyes of the adcom. This has it exactly backward.

Learning from failures is a stress test that (ideally) leads to maturity and growth. That’s why schools ask this kind of question. They want to see that you took lemons and made lemonade, so to speak. Don’t fear the question; ride the wave. Answer the question directly, without apologies. Then share what lessons you learned, and – this is key – prove that you learned them by showing the difference in how you handled a similar situation later. Voila! Your “failure” has become a success.

If you are asked why you want to attend a given program, [provide specifics about how the program complements your interests and goals](#). Mention particular courses, specialty tracks, internship or research opportunities, and anything else that is school specific and relevant to your aspirations. If you’ve connected with alumni and students, make note of what you learned in these conversations that resonated with you. If your answer is so generic that it could apply to most programs in your field, you’ll probably get dinged. And don’t tell them why you are more qualified than anyone else to attend their program. [Be confident, but with some appropriate humility](#).

What if you encounter an open-ended question, with general instructions? Simple – enjoy the luxury of writing about what interests you and best presents your personality and qualifications.

How to avoid Fatal Flaw #2

Don’t assume that the adcom “really” wants to hear what you want to write about, rather than what is asked in the essay prompt. The grad school application is designed to elicit specific information about you and your potential to excel in the program and your future career. Answering the programs’ questions directly is the most effective way to give them what they want. Consider [working with one of our consultants](#) to ensure that your answers address the program’s question clearly and compellingly

FATAL FLAW #3: CLICHED WRITING

Don't hide your lucid answers to essay questions behind meaningless verbiage and overused cliches.

Take a look at this:

"As a new company in a new space, we plan to guide the customer journey in an optimized way and drill down so that we gain organic, scalable growth. I think outside the box, but my job in the health-care space also requires an internal focus, and I spend a ton of time both building and updating data-driven initiatives, working to attain buy-in, after I get all my ducks in a row."

Okay, we clearly exaggerated in dipping into our buzzword arsenal. But not by much! Do yourselves a favor and use simple, clear, jargon-free language. Write directly and clearly so people can understand you.

Now let's translate what this applicant was trying to say:

"As a new company entering a new market, we need to impress our clients with outstanding performance. I personally and creatively manage projects for customers in the healthcare industry. But in addition to serving our clients, I am striving to build our business by ensuring that all our systems – from personnel to invoicing – support our growth."

For more on what real writers (and readers) think of the latest in vapid jargon, check out our post ['Twas the Night before Deadlines: A Cautionary Tale of Cliches](#).

How to avoid Fatal Flaw #3

Write in straightforward, unvarnished language. Filling your essay with cliches, jargon, and meaningless verbiage will raise a big red flag indicating that you cannot communicate in clear, simple, precise language.

[Work one-on-one with a pro](#) who will help you make your ideas shine to create an essay that will get you ACCEPTED.

FATAL FLAW #4: SUPERFICIALITY

This fatal flaw is a close cousin to lack of substance and cliched writing. Superficial writing is so generic that the essay blends into the great mass of submissions by applicants who – on a surface level – are very much like you. They have similar goals, similar educations, and similar industry backgrounds. They have done generally the same type of prep you’ve done to gain acceptance.

But you are not those people. There is only one of you, and you cannot afford to blend in.

Here’s how to distinguish yourself

Use real-life examples to tell the story that only you can tell and that reveal you to be a distinctive and memorable individual. You also want to avoid umbrella words such as “leadership” without more precisely explaining what you mean. The word “leadership” has a broad definition that can cover any number of qualities that are desirable in the admissions process, so while you want to demonstrate leadership, you won’t get the job done by referring to your “leadership abilities” in a generic way. Instead, provide an example of a time when you were in a leadership role and demonstrated specific aspects of leadership that were key to your success.

Here is a partial list of leadership components that you can focus on:

1. Listening
2. Initiating
3. Mentoring
4. Teaching
5. Persuading
6. Organizing
7. Establishing a goal or vision
8. Motivating
9. Managing
10. Empowering

What other leadership elements can you think of that have played a part in your personal experiences and abilities? Not all leaders can claim these qualities, and at most, only a handful can write about the specific example you will provide.

How to avoid Fatal Flaw #4

Be real. Avoid vague umbrella words and use precise language instead to help banish superficiality from your statement of purpose. Check out our [blog posts about writing strong grad school personal statements](#) for more help.

FATAL FLAW #5: LACK OF FOCUS

Let's assess where we are now. You've dedicated quiet time to thinking about yourself and your goals, and as a result, you've succeeded in effectively answering the schools' essay questions directly and specifically. You've made sure to answer any questions-within-the-question and carefully avoided cliches and buzzwords, using lively details and specifics instead. Yet somehow, your essay still isn't working. It seems . . . unfocused and hard to follow.

Even if you have a clear goal or sense of direction, you need to structure your essay so that your reader can easily follow your thought process. Here are a few tips to help you create this logical structure and coherent presentation.

- 1. Have a core idea or theme.**

Every essay you write should have a single, principal message you are trying to convey. Just as a salesperson has a concise "elevator pitch" they make to prospective buyers, you should be able to succinctly state your theme in one sentence – or at most, two. Everything in your essay should support that theme.

- 2. Follow a chronological or thematic structure.**

You might have two or three examples in your essay and/or a few subtopics within your main point. That's fine, but your examples and subtopics need to be smoothly organized, either chronologically or thematically. Whichever approach you choose, there needs to be an architecture to your essay, and you need to stick to it.

- 3. Use smooth transitions.**

Transitions help your reader move from one example or subtopic to the next with logical, flowing connections or contrasts among them. Transitions are like signposts that guide your reader along the path of your essay.

Before you start writing your personal statement or essays, think about what you want to say, clearly and critically. As we discovered in Fatal Flaw #1, Lack of Substance, you need to give yourself the gift of time to examine your motivations and goals, based on your experiences and values. During that important exercise of self-reflection, and when you are writing the key points you want to make in your essay, consider the relationship between and among the experiences, insights, and subtopics you plan to write about. Making these connections will provide your reader with a much more gratifying reading experience – and help boost your candidacy.

How to avoid Fatal Flaw #5

Sketch out your core ideas and the examples you'll use to underscore your theme, choose either a thematic or chronological structure, and help your reader easily follow your narrative by using flowing transitions. The result will be a coherent, substantive essay that is a pleasure to read. Be sure to [read our sample essays](#) for ideas on different structures that work well.

WHY AVOIDING THESE FATAL FLAWS MATTERS SO MUCH

You only have one chance to make a first impression, as the saying goes. Your essay just might be how you make that first impression to the adcom and could be the difference between earning a coveted interview or acceptance – or receiving the dreaded rejection letter. We hope the guidance we've provided here helps you feel better prepared to start your thinking, planning, and writing process. We know you'll be able to avoid these killer mistakes now! Still, nothing beats working one-on-one with an expert on your application.

[Our consultants](#) will not only ensure that you avoid mistakes but also guide you in writing an outstanding, shining application that will get you accepted to grad school!

WHAT'S NEXT?




Thank you for reading Five Fatal Flaws to Avoid in Your Grad School Statement of Purpose.

Now it's time to move from general tips to personalized advice tailored just for you.

Sign up for a free consultation with one of our grad school admissions experts today!

GET STARTED!

Contact Us

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