

4 SAMPLE GRADUATE SCHOOL ESSAYS

#1. "From Working Poor to Elite Scholar"

One of the proudest accomplishments of my life was earning my college degree, despite the fact that my early adulthood pointed in the opposite direction, beginning with my marriage at the age of 19. Throughout the 1990s I lived as one of the "working poor," someone who slipped through the cracks of supposedly historic prosperity. By the age of 25 I was divorced and frustrated with menial, low-paying jobs: clerk, receptionist, and housecleaner. There is nothing like scrubbing someone else's toilet to inspire one with determination toward obtaining an education. Because of my absolute commitment toward earning my degree, I got a flexible shift at a retail warehouse which enabled me to acquire my degree while supporting myself financially.

Enrolled at the local community college, I experienced a different world opening up to me; excited by a new encouraging environment, I excelled academically. I learned that if I tried hard, I could succeed; if I wanted something badly enough, I possessed the ability to take advantage of these opportunities. I worked a minimum 35-hour workweek for five years to put myself through school without succumbing to the temptation of a student loan. I paid tuition up front with the money I earned. It was the example of my mother, a Puerto Rican immigrant working diligently to provide for her family, who instilled a work ethic into me that has stood me in good stead.

With a lifelong passion for history, I have developed an interest in the cultural history of early modern and modern Europeans, especially women's history. The experiences of ordinary women fascinate me: how they constitute their world through popular folk tales and literature; how the seemingly irrational paradoxes of the past to modern eyes are completely rational when taken within the historical context; and finally, how these historical changes and transformations in culture constitute the present. I enjoy studying the early modern period of English history, especially the Tudor- Stuart period, because of the tensions that existed between medieval philosophies and the rising Enlightenment intellectualism. My influences have been diverse. I read the popular historian Barbara Tuchman, not for her technical accuracy, but for her beautiful prose. Natalie Zemon Davis's research inspires me in the way that she cleverly picks out fresh life from tired sources. And finally, Michel Foucault's philosophies have profoundly influenced the way I write, for now I have a philosophical grounding that makes me highly sensitive to my own biases. In fact, Foucault's post-structuralist matrix has been instrumental in shaping my current project focusing on the 17th-century midwife Elizabeth Cellier. In this project, I am reexamining the current histories of English midwifery using Cellier as a case study, detecting a decided bias embedded within them. The underlying assumption of these histories is that pre-industrial professional women-and Cellier in particular- struggled against patriarchy and oppression from the male medical community, when in fact Cellier's literature shows that she utilized the accepted discourses of patriarchy available to her in her writing and turned them into useful tools of political and religious power.

As a student, I feel that my success lies in the fact that I approached my studies as if I were a professional (historian, not student, that is). I always enrolled in the most challenging courses and worked with professors I felt were the most qualified in my areas of interest. Never did I settle for an A- or B+. If I got one, I would ask what I could do to improve--and ultimately, I utilized the advice to strengthen my work. My personal academic milestone occurred while I was completing a research seminar on historical methods. This required course was taught by an Americanist-Dr. Julie Worth, director of the [school withheld] history department-so our research topics were limited to American sources. I was able to work within my main interest, which is marginalized women, while using the primary sources of *The New York Times*. The resulting paper, "Biologically Unsound: Women, Murder, and the Insanity Plea in the Progressive Era" examined the preponderant use of the insanity plea for women who went outside their "innate nature" and murdered, regardless of the circumstances which drove them to kill. Although the topic was outside my focus, which is European history, this paper was selected for publication in the Phi Alpha Theta journal, *The Historian*.

My focus as an undergraduate has always been with an eye toward graduate school and a career as a professional historian. Aware of the rigors of graduate study, I have not only completed an undergraduate language requirement in Spanish, but I am also currently enrolled in an accelerated French course. In addition, I have become active in the historical honor society, Phi Alpha Theta, including serving as chapter president. During my tenure our chapter hosted the Phi Alpha Theta Regional Conference, the largest regional conference in the nation. With the help of faculty adviser Dr. Judith Gaillard, I created the conference sessions, chose appropriate student commentators for those sessions, and gave a keynote speech. The experience taught me that I have a flair for organization as well as mediation. Under my leadership, our chapter also published its first journal, and hosted a variety of campus activities. This year I am working with the Computer Society in order to establish a Web site for students who need help succeeding in history courses; we are going to call it the Clio home page. My position as an authority figure both in classroom work and within these various organizations has awakened a desire to embrace teaching,

(OVER)

for I enjoy sharing the excitement of education with my peers, as well as helping them achieve their own academic success. I feel that my life experiences as well as my commitment to education would be an asset to Cornell's doctoral program in History. Cornell has an exciting interdisciplinary program that is exceptionally impressive. In particular, Dr. Rayna Wilhelm's specialty in Tudor-Stuart social and cultural history complements my own interest in studying the experiences of English pre-industrial women. This combination will provide the strong background I desire in order to shape my future research interests. I feel that Cornell is a premier institution for an aspiring Ph.D. candidate and as such, a very competitive program. But I know I have the tools and the determination to excel in such a stimulating and challenging environment.

Comments about Essay #1:

--This essay uses an outstanding combination of personal information and academic exposition. The personal information makes the reader interested in this young woman as a person, and the academic information proves that such interest is warranted. Notice that the woman is matter-of-fact about some rather large challenges she has faced in her life; she doesn't ask for special consideration, rather she explains certain decision-making processes and turning points in her development as a person and a scholar. This is an outstanding essay overall.

--Always name your advisors and mentors.

--Try and have a paper that you could submit for publication before you apply to graduate school.

--When you have identified specific professors at the graduate program who could be mentors to you, mention them by name.

#2. "Library Floors and Literature" (Personal Statement)

It happened two years ago as I lay sprawled out on the floor of the library lounge at the Universite de Grenoble in Grenoble, France. I was working on an *explication du texte* of Guillaume Apollinaire's poem "La Loreley" for my *Poemes et Proses du XXe Siecle* class when I suddenly put it together: this was *my* approach to literature. Close reading, formalism. Staying close, very close, to the text. I was certain.

Certainty, however, proved rather unstable. I knew it was important not to close myself off from other approaches to literature, so when I returned to Swarthmore from Grenoble, I took two courses which I knew would be highly theoretical—*Women Writers 1790-1830* and *Feminist Literary Criticism*. These courses brought me around to a kind of hybrid approach to literature which I find rich, effective, and enjoyable. In this approach I maintain a close connection to the text at the same time that I apply theoretical work.

I am using this approach to literature in two major projects this year.

First, I received a \$2,400 National Endowment for the Humanities Younger Scholars Summer Research Grant. I proposed to expand on a prior research project, looking at the use of silence in the novels of Elie Wiesel, and at the ways Wiesel both demonstrates and gets around the fact that conventional language simply breaks down when it is used to talk about the Holocaust. I plan to expand on the same project for my senior English thesis. For this thesis I am studying the ways Wiesel uses silence in the literal content of his novels and in his writing technique, and am working toward explanations as to how he gives these silences meaning. My fluency in French from my semester of study in Grenoble has been invaluable since most of Wiesel's works were written originally in French. My thesis involves close, formalist readings of Wiesel's novels, and is enriched by theoretical work. (This thesis appears as "Senior Essay" on my transcript; that designation will change next semester to "Thesis.")

My second major project this year is a self-designed research project which has just replaced comprehensive exams in the Swarthmore English Department. I am working with British poetry just following World War I, looking at how these poets write about a kind of war that truly had no precedent since it was the first war in which death could be so effectively and impersonally mass-produced. I am focusing on my observation that a surprising number of these poems rely heavily on biblical or mythical images, as though more contemporary images simply were not applicable any more.

I have known for several years that I want my graduate work to be in the field of English, but my approach to literature has been enriched by my double major in English and sociology-anthropology. Twice my interest in anthropology has led me to study literature of non-European cultures, both times with great personal satisfaction. My papers for *The Black African Writer* combine theoretical research with a good deal of formalist textual analysis and close reading. I had several long conversations about these papers with Prof. Wallace Mann, the R. Talbot Sondheim Professor of African Studies at Swarthmore. My second excursion into less-traveled territory was a paper I wrote for *Introduction to Hebrew Scriptures*. I chose to do an exegesis of Isaiah 65:17-25. I worked from the original Hebrew text since I had taken a course in biblical Hebrew (Religion 93) and have a moderate level of reading comprehension of the language. I had a marvelous time digging so deeply into each word, and sometimes even individual letters, as is required in an exegesis of a Hebrew passage.

My two major projects this year—my thesis and my senior project—are related by the theme of war literature, and my work on one project gives me new ideas for the other. I feel fortunate that this has worked out, and at the University of Colorado-Boulder I want to continue studying twentieth-century literature. However, I am also ready to start widening my base, casting out in some new directions. I have found over and over that if I have a long-standing gut-level enjoyment of some kind of literature I almost invariably have a wonderful time and do a particularly good job taking an academic approach to that literature. Old English literature is in this category for me.

I have never done academic work in Old English literature, but for years I have treasured a cassette tape on which are recorded in Old English the stories of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Caedmon*, and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*. And when I am feeling particularly harried, I often go to the Swarthmore library and treat myself to an old, scratchy recording of a reading of Beowulf, following along in the Old English text and in a modern English translation. By imitating the voice I hear and following in translation, I have taught myself a tiny amount of this language. I want to follow up on this interest.

My interest in studying at the University of Colorado-Boulder has grown out of conversations I have had with numerous people, including Prof. Laurie Langbauer who had a lot of specific information since she taught there one summer. When I spoke about my interests with Abbe Blum, another professor of English at Swarthmore, she recommended that I call Prof. Margaret Ferguson. I did so, and had a wonderful conversation which helped me to confirm that I would feel very much at home in the department. I am especially excited about the department's strength in twentieth-century, Renaissance, and Old English literature.

I am also genuinely pleased about the distribution requirements, since they will help me to explore areas that I did not or could not at Swarthmore. Only by doing that will I continue to learn new things about myself as a student of literature. I do not want my experience in the Université de Grenoble library to be a unique blip in my development. I want to continue changing, refining, playing around with the ways in which I approach literature. This ever-changing, ever-learning approach will help me to be a lifelong scholar and lover of literature.

Comments about Essay #2:

--This is a great experiential opening. The reader can "see" the student "sprawled out," and the essay offers an exotic setting. This candidate displays amazing breadth while leading the reader through distinct phases in her intellectual development. The masterful way the candidate weaves in theorists, theories, authors, and names of work lightens what could otherwise be a heavy exposition. The essay as a whole amounts to an intellectual argument, the point of which is this: This candidate's background points to the inevitable conclusion that this student is ready to excel at the targeted graduate program.

--This essay also shows depth of *specific* interests the student has in the *specific* graduate program. Be sure to customize your essays to this level of detail. Also note the use of professors' names, both at the undergraduate alma mater and the targeted graduate program.

#3. Personal Statement for Law School

I waited patiently by the bench in what all Harvey Mudd chemistry majors call the "Super Lab," staring for what seemed to be hours at a small flask bubbling with something that looked like a cross between Pepto-Bismol and whipped cream. I was waiting for the color to turn just the right shade of blue before I could go home for a late dinner, but it was obvious that this solution was as far from blue as baseball is from rugby. I realized then that "Super Lab" was not so Super, and neither was a career as a chemist.

Every summer since high school, I worked at Lawrence Livermore Laboratory as a research assistant. One of my major projects involved working on a team to develop probes for the detection of radioactive substances. When I turned in my final report, a computer program that would give the same results in five minutes four people would in a week, my pride turned into disappointment when my supervisor took credit for all of my hard work. Unbeknownst to me, somewhere in tiny print in the contract signed as an employee; it said something to the effect that as an employee I would relinquish all rights to everything that I developed at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. I felt that it was unfair for a company to claim such rights to its employees' innovations and wished to learn more about the issues that surround intellectual property.

I was introduced to the field of intellectual property law in industrial chemistry, taught by Professor Gerald Van Hecke. For my final report, I researched the development of the Gore-Tex fiber by procuring its patent from an online patent service. At that time, I was considering a career in the management sector of the chemical industry because I wanted to be able to use my knowledge of applied chemistry while at the same time work with people. However, once I was introduced to industrial chemistry law, I realized that a career in law would not only incorporate all of my skills but would give me more breadth than

(OVER)

management in a chemical company. Whereas management would limit me to a particular industry, IP law would expose me to a number of industries. IP law would also not confine me to a particular strategy in dealing with problems but force me to develop different strategies based on the industry and the problem that I am dealing with. Law school suddenly became a very attractive career path to me, especially because it would allow me to use my education creatively to help protect the product of peoples' ideas.

Although I am an applied chemistry major, what I have learned as an undergraduate can be applied in many ways to law. Because I have a strong technical background, I have been trained extensively in solving problems both alone and in teams. Although the problems themselves have been technical, the analytical skills that I have acquired in solving such problems can be applied to the world of law. Harvey Mudd's unique engineering clinic program allowed me to work on a team of five students to develop a project plan for General Electric Nuclear Energy to bring the concentration of toxic organic compounds in their waste system down to environmentally safe levels. I have also worked on student teams to solve problems for Habitat for Humanity, and during my summer internships to solve problems for the government. Because I am an applicant from a nontraditional background, I can provide a different perspective to problems encountered in law, and can even introduce vastly different but equally effective approaches to solving these problems.

My technical background is not the only factor that sets me apart from the traditional law school applicant. Because Harvey Mudd balances its technical program with an equally strong emphasis in the humanities, I am not only leaving Mudd with a great education in chemistry but I am leaving Mudd as a technically educated student who is skilled in writing and communication. In addition to possessing a liberal arts background that is unequaled by most technical applicants to law school, I also possess a back-ground that is unique even for a Harvey Mudd student. The typical Harvey Mudd student studies at Mudd for four years, then pursues graduate school in a science or engineering field, and then works in either industry or academia. Unlike the typical Mudd student, I have managed not only to perform well academically, but to take advantage of nonacademic opportunities in order to better balance my life. My experience as the resident assistant of my dorm has given me tools that are necessary to a lawyer such as time management, interpersonal and conflict resolution skills, as well as the ability to effectively deal with crisis situations. Having to juggle my responsibilities as a resident assistant, a student, and an athlete has increased my organizational skills by orders of magnitude. As freshman and sophomore class president, and team leader of an engineering project, I learned how to be more assertive and gained valuable leadership skills in the process. In addition, my membership the National Forensics League and participation in Lincoln-Douglas debates have provided me with the skills of impromptu speech, or communication, and the art of persuasion using sound facts as the basis for arguments.

I finally managed to completely break the mold of the typical Harvey Mudd student by attempting to study abroad for one semester. This was the greatest challenge of my undergraduate career because not many science and engineering majors, let alone Harvey Mudd students, leave to study at foreign institutions. Many attribute this to the specificity of the science curriculum and the resulting difficulty in finding compatible curricula at foreign institutions. After making use of all the resources possible, I realize that although it is indeed an arduous task to find a university abroad that matches our curriculum to a tee, it is not impossible to do so. After one year of persuading some reluctant administrators to make it easier for a Harvey Mudd student to leave for one semester, I found myself at the University of New South Wales in Australia where I had some of the most valuable experiences in my life. I returned much more independent, and especially aware of the world around me. Upon my return, and due in part to my own example, I discovered that the school had proposed many changes to allow more flexibility in the students' education so that studying abroad would be possible for others who follow me.

I once had the misperception that those who are educated in disciplines such as political science, public policy, or pre-law are more likely to be prepared for a graduate education in law than most other students. Now I believe that a student coming from a more nontraditional background can contribute in many ways to society as a lawyer. In a world where technology is the dominant means of progress and is advancing at such a breakneck pace, it can be a great advantage to society to have knowledgeable people working with laws concerning technology. I not only believe that I am qualified to perform this service to society as a lawyer, but I am convinced that [school withheld] possesses the quality of education and diversity in student body that can best help me fulfill these goals.

Comments about Essay #3:

--This essay has an outstanding and humorous opening paragraph, bringing the reader right into the story. An opening like this makes a promise: "I promise not to be boring; no matter how many essays you have read today and how tired you may be of brilliant accomplished candidates." The second paragraph traces the candidate's origin of interest in law. This is always a good topic to cover in an essay.

--Always name your advisors.

--This student provides a rationale for her transition from studying chemistry as an undergraduate to studying law as a graduate student. She follows two tracks to explain the transitions: first, explicating her personal transformation from being interested in chemistry to being interested in law, and second, exploring how her chemistry education could be useful in legal career.

Finally, not how she reveals herself as an interesting and independently willed person by recounting her experiences in debate and foreign study.

--Once you prove you can do the work, *then* you can address the issue of whether you are a nice or interesting person.

#4. "Sports, Presidents and Public Relations"

The Question: "What are the reasons you wish to pursue the graduate program and how does it relate to your career goals?"

Roger Belton

Applicant--Master of Arts in Strategic Public Relations

University of Southern California

The Catalyst A burst blood vessel in the brain of my former university president provided the tragic high and low point in my young public relations career.

It began with a jarring call at six A.M. on a Sunday morning. The president of George Fox University--where I serve as assistant director of public information--had suffered a life-threatening stroke caused by a brain tumor. I was called in to deal with the news media. I served as the university spokesperson, doing all media interviews, writing press releases, and recording a daily voicemail line with health updates. The situation was made even more hectic by the fact that two of my university relations colleagues were out of the office.

I found myself hurting for our president and his family but caught up in the action. Even when the director of public information returned, I remained as the media spokesperson. A year later cancer claimed the life of our president, and I was asked to summarize the personality of this remarkable man in our alumni newspaper. (See writing sample.)

That was one experience which has led me to apply to University of Southern California for further training in public relations.

Beyond Age 30 Although I am assistant director of public information, much of my time is consumed by my work as sports information director for George Fox's athletic program.

Not long ago, a co-worker asked me, "Are you going to be a sports information director when you're 65?" My instinctive reply surprised even myself: "I don't plan to be one when I'm 30." Since I'm 28 today, I've got two years to engineer a career change.

I feel I've gone about as far as I can in small-college sports information. Since 1992--when I moved from a 20-hour-a-week student position to a full-time employee--I've elevated the coverage of non-revenue sports by improving their publications and press releases.

When I began, media guides were produced only for men's basketball. Now all 13 varsity sports have a media guide. Many guides have received national honors. My women's basketball guide is perhaps my favorite. Created from scratch, it has been honored as the second best in the nation among colleges at our level of athletic competition. (I've enclosed the recent copy.)

With the assistance of student assistants, I produce weekly news releases for each sport. They often are used verbatim by local newspapers. While speaking about athletic media relations at a recent conference, a sports reporter from a Portland radio station declared George Fox the "King of News Releases."

At George Fox we strive to stand above the crowd. While most schools at our level photocopy their basketball programs, my office puts together a 12-page program that generates about \$7,000 in advertising revenue.

This year, I supervise a staff of up to seven students who assist me in stat keeping, ticket selling, ad selling, news release writing and office work. I also recruit and manage about a dozen volunteers to staff games during basketball season.

I enjoy my job. I like working with my student assistants and seeing them mature as writers and as persons. It's fun to be part of the "team" with coaches and student-athletes. I still find my palms sweaty in the ninth inning of a tight baseball game, but the amount of coverage available to small colleges is frustratingly small. So much work for so little return.

Stepping Outside the Sports Arena Although I often find myself consumed with the promotion of my athletic department, I don't want to be pigeon-holed as a sports fanatic.

After earning a number of state awards as a high school trumpet player, I received a music scholarship at George Fox. I

(OVER)

continue to play occasionally at weddings and church services and teach lessons.

The death of a college roommate from leukemia led me to volunteer at a camp for kids with cancer run by the American Cancer Society. For the past six summers, I've been known as the bugle-blowing counselor "Mr. Toad."

My Destination I still tell people I don't know what I want to be when I grow up, but I'd like it to be in the public relations field. I believe I have the talent for it.

I was recently honored with the "Rising Star" award in the field of communications by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) District VIII. It's an award given to professionals in their first five years in the field. The district is made up of development, alumni and public relations professionals at educational institutions in five states and six Canadian provinces. George Fox University-with 2,300 students-is one of the smallest colleges in CASE.

I take an active role in George Fox's weekly university relations meetings where we discuss potential news stories and a wide variety of PR issues. Topics have ranged from: "How can we improve internal communication on our campus intra net system?" to "What do we put in our alumni newspaper when one of our newly admitted freshmen has been arrested for a double homicide?"

I get a thrill out of trying to capture the interest of the news media with a story tip and have achieved local and national success. *U.S. News & World Report* magazine used one of my submissions about a unique George Fox campus tradition in its annual college ranking guide.

Although I don't believe I want to be a full-time writer, I consider writing one of my strengths. My story about a record-setting female pole vaulter this summer was used by the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) in the inaugural edition of its Internet magazine *NAIA News*. (See writing sample.) Another feature about a women's basketball senior citizen fan club received a national award from the College Sports Information Directors Association.

An Itch to Explore: After 11 years as a student and administrator at George Fox, I feel very comfortable here, but I want to broaden my horizons. It's an itch. Perhaps I picked it up from my father, who packed my family up when I was 12 and took us to live in Brazil for a year. Twenty countries later, I'm still hungry to explore. In the last three summers, I've had coffee at the home of a Bosnian war widow; seen Belfast, Northern Ireland, during Protestant marching season; and crossed from Hong Kong to China with a relief worker to see her work on an island inhabited by lepers. Travel has opened my eyes to a world larger than a basketball game.

I enjoy the academic environment. Going back to school excites me. Education always has been a part of my life. My parents are both teachers. Since I have an interest in possibly following in their footsteps later in life, I would appreciate being considered for a teaching assistantship. (See separate application packet.) I believe I would be an excellent candidate since I have spent the last seven years editing sports and general news releases written by college students.

Why USC? I believe USC would provide me with excellent training in my profession. After finding its high ranking in the *Gourman Report*, I visited the school's Web site for more information. The idea of receiving hands-on training from L.A.'s PR professionals is extremely attractive. I contacted Alan MacDonald, who earned his master's degree in PR from USC, and current journalism graduate student Jennifer Prosser, to ask about their experiences. Both gave the school and the professors high marks.

Although I could see myself returning to a public relations position at George Fox, I'm intrigued by the variety of options that would be available to me after graduation. Alan MacDonald told me that USC stood for University of Social Connections. In addition to my current experience, a degree from USC would give me additional credibility. During my January visit to USC, I met with Tim Burgess and was impressed that the Annenberg School of Communications had its own career advising office.

I have done quite a bit of research on master's degrees in communications, but USC's public relations program was the first and only one to excite me. I am applying to no other program.

I do not go into this application process halfheartedly. This has been my passionate intention for over a year. In preparation for the cost of full-time graduate school, I became frugal. I decided to continue driving my 12-year-old car, and I moved out of a house where I rented alone to save costs in a shared duplex with four roommates.

I feel that I am ready to perform in your program-mentally, financially, academically-and that I have honed the skills necessary to excel. I would like the opportunity to fulfill my capacity at USC

Thank you for considering my application.

Comments about Essay #4:

--This essay is a little chatty but does an excellent job of conveying the enthusiasm and decency of this remarkable man. One gets the impression that if life served him a bunch of lemons, he wouldn't start a lemonade stand; he'd start a franchise operation.

--This essay traces the history of his decision to pursue graduate education and details his preparations to succeed. This is a natural theme on which to organize an essay.

--Feel free to spice up your essay with direct quotes that support your points or advance your narrative, as demonstrated in the last paragraphs of the prior page.

--References to enclosed writing samples are highly effective, reminding the reader this is an accomplished professional applying.

--After you have established intellectual capacity, it is okay to throw in a human interest section.

--The more persuasive your answer to "Why here?" the more likely you'll be admitted. Students who do not customize their essays waste an opportunity to impress admissions decision makers.

--Preparing yourself for graduate school is just as important as preparing yourself intellectually. When you have made prudent financial preparations, let readers know.