Writing the Graduate School Essay

Writing an essay or personal statement is often the most difficult part of the application. It is the one portion of the application that allows you to set yourself apart and tell the admissions committee what you have to offer that is unique from other applicants. It should be something that only you could write and does not resemble what all other applicants are likely writing. It should be well thought out, well written grammatically and a clear, succinct statement showing that you have a definite sense of your goals.

Types of essays:
Some programs request only 1 or 2 paragraphs about why you want to pursue graduate study. Others require 5 or 6 separate essays in which you are expected to write at length about you motivation for graduate study, your strengths and weaknesses, your values and philosophies on a given topic, your greatest achievements, an influential life event and solutions to hypothetical problems.

Content:
• A graduate school essay should be essentially a statement of your ideas or goals. Usually it includes a certain amount of personal history, but you do not have to supply autobiographical information unless required by the school. In deciding whether or not to include personal history consider its influence on your future plans and ability to distinguish you further from other applicants.
• Keep your essay positive and upbeat. It is better not to mention low grades or test scores unless specifically asked to. If you wish to explain anything that could be construed as negative to help you avoid being eliminated from consideration, do this on a separate sheet of paper as an "Addendum" or address it in your cover letter. Be short and to the point. Avoid long, tedious excuses. You may also wish to ask one of your references to address this issue in their recommendation letter.

The admissions committee may try to evaluate some, or all, of the following things from your essay:
• A clear reflection of your writing abilities (both grammatical and creative).
• The clarity, focus and depth of your thinking.
• Level of maturity.
• Reasons for deciding to pursue graduate education in a particular field and at a particular institution.
• Motivation, commitment and enthusiasm to pursue a particular field of study.
• Major area of special interest.
• Expectations you have with regard to the program of study and career opportunities.
• Immediate and long-term goals.
• Previous research or work experience and how they relate to your future plans.
• Educational background and how it relates to your future plans.
• Personal uniqueness. What you can add to the diversity of the entering class and program reputation.

Approaches/ Tips:
• Outline the points you want to cover and then expand on them to yield an organized essay.
• Jot down ideas on paper as they come to you, go over them, eliminate certain sentences, and move others around until you achieve a logical sequence (more likely to yield an inspired piece of writing).
• Concentrate on the opening paragraph. It is here that you either grab the readers' attention - or lose it.
• Tell a story. Even if it includes autobiographical information (does not have to be chronological).
• Use a catchy title that's alluded to in the essay and gives your statement a "theme", tying it all together.
• Have a "hook" that emphasizes a distinguishing characteristic about you or an event in your life.
• Open or end with a quote that has particular relevance to you, your philosophies or the field.