

EMERGING LEADERS PROGRAM

Leadership Essay Guide

A practical guide to writing an authentic, reflective essay for ELP.

What the essay is for

Your professional biography tells us who you are and what you have done. Your leadership essay helps us understand how you think about leadership, what has shaped you, and where you want to grow.

RECOMMENDED LENGTH

Aim for approximately 750-1,000 words. Clear and thoughtful is more important than sounding formal or covering every detail of your career.

FOUR QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU SHAPE YOUR ESSAY

1. Background and aspirations

What experiences have shaped your career so far, and what kind of leader do you hope to become?

2. Leadership approach

How do you tend to lead, collaborate, influence, or support others? What principles guide you?

3. A meaningful leadership experience

Describe one situation that challenged or shaped you. What did you do, what happened, and what did you learn?

4. Growth goals

What leadership skills or perspectives do you want to strengthen next, and why does that matter now?

WHAT MAKES A STRONG ELP ESSAY

- Be specific. One concrete leadership experience is more revealing than a list of general qualities.
- Be reflective. We are interested less in whether a situation ended perfectly than in how you approached it, what you learned, and how it shaped you.
- Write in your own voice. Clear, candid writing is stronger than overly polished or generic leadership language.
- Show growth. Strong essays connect past experience to the leader you are becoming and the skills you want to build next.

A FEW THINGS YOU DO NOT NEED TO DO

- Repeat your resume or provide a full chronology of every role.
- Turn yourself into the hero of the story. Complexity, uncertainty, and imperfect outcomes are welcome.
- Use confidential or sensitive details. Protect people, organizations, and proprietary information where appropriate.
- Write a separate essay about why ELP is impressive. A brief connection to your development goals is enough.

The examples that follow are fictional composites inspired by common applicant approaches. They are meant to show range, not a required formula.

EXAMPLE 1 | DEVELOPING LEADER

Growing into leadership before feeling fully ready

Fictional composite | financial services / public mission

My professional path has been shaped by a desire to understand complex systems and contribute to work that serves a larger purpose. I began my career in financial services, where I developed strong analytical skills and learned how quickly decisions can move in a high-pressure environment. Over time, I realized that I was most energized by work that combined analysis with service, collaboration, and a clear public mission. That realization led me to my current role as a business analyst at a public-sector financial institution.

Although I do not currently manage a team, I have become increasingly interested in leadership because I see how much influence can come from the way a person shows up, communicates, and helps others move work forward. My natural style is facilitative rather than directive. I tend to ask questions, listen for the perspectives that are missing, and help groups turn competing viewpoints into a workable next step. I also know that I sometimes wait too long to speak when I am still building confidence in a room. Becoming more proactive and trusting my judgment are important areas of growth for me.

A meaningful leadership experience occurred less than a year into my current role, when a sudden vacancy created an opening to serve as secretary for a system-wide committee of senior leaders. I hesitated because I was relatively new and questioned whether I had enough context to support a group operating far above my level. At the same time, I recognized that the opportunity would require exactly the skills I wanted to build: executive communication, preparation, facilitation, judgment, and comfort with ambiguity. I accepted the role.

The transition was immediate. I had to learn the committee's work while coordinating agendas, preparing materials, tracking decisions, and serving as the main point of contact across multiple offices. Early on, I overprepared because I was afraid of missing something. Over time, I learned that preparation matters, but so does the confidence to ask a clarifying question, acknowledge what I do not know, and keep a discussion moving. I also learned that seniority does not eliminate ambiguity; experienced leaders still rely on clear processes, dependable follow-through, and colleagues who can surface the right information at the right time.

The experience changed my understanding of leadership. I had assumed that leadership began when someone was given authority over others. Instead, I saw that leadership can begin with ownership. I could not make decisions for the committee, but I could create the conditions for good decisions by being organized, responsive, thoughtful, and willing to speak up. I earned trust not by pretending to know everything, but by being reliable and curious.

Looking ahead, I want to continue developing the confidence and communication skills needed to move into a people-leadership role. I want to become better at giving feedback, guiding others through uncertainty, and making decisions when complete information is not available. I am especially interested in learning from peers whose leadership contexts are very different from my own. My goal is not simply to earn a title; it is to become the kind of leader who creates clarity, develops others, and strengthens the mission of the organization around me.

EXAMPLE 2 | PEOPLE LEADERSHIP

Learning from a difficult management experience

Fictional composite | legal / professional services

My career has been built around problem-solving, judgment, and service. I began in a support role while completing graduate school in the evenings, then moved into a professional position with increasing responsibility. My long-term aspiration is to lead a team, but one of the experiences that shaped me most taught me that leading people requires a different skill set from being good at the work itself.

Shortly after a promotion, I was asked to train a new employee who had been hired into the role I previously held. Although I was not the employee's official manager, I was responsible for transferring work, answering questions, and helping the person become independent. I approached the assignment the way I had approached most professional challenges: I explained the tasks carefully, made myself available, and assumed that more information and more practice would solve the problem.

As the weeks progressed, assignments continued to come back incomplete or incorrect. I increased the amount of time I spent reviewing work and answering questions, but the pattern did not improve. I became frustrated, partly because I was still learning my own new role and now felt responsible for two jobs at once. Eventually, I raised the issue with senior management and documented the recurring concerns. Human Resources became involved, and the employment relationship later ended.

I did not feel successful at the end of that experience. I had tried to be helpful and patient, but I kept asking myself whether I could have set clearer expectations earlier, provided feedback more directly, or recognized sooner that the employee needed a different kind of support. I realized that I had confused being available with actively managing performance. I was generous with time, but not always clear about standards, consequences, or what improvement needed to look like.

That experience continues to shape my leadership philosophy. I believe in giving people autonomy, treating them with respect, and creating room for different working styles. At the same time, I now understand that clarity is a form of support. People deserve to know what success looks like, where they stand, and what needs to change. Avoiding an uncomfortable conversation can feel kind in the moment, but it can ultimately create more uncertainty for everyone involved.

My current leadership style is collaborative and calm, but I want to become more adaptable. Some people thrive with broad goals and independence; others need more structure, frequent feedback, or coaching. I want to build the judgment to recognize those differences and respond effectively without lowering expectations. I also want to become more comfortable communicating difficult messages with both candor and empathy.

As I continue to grow, I hope to lead a team in a way that creates trust without avoiding accountability. I want people to experience me as someone who is clear, fair, thoughtful, and invested in their development. The difficult experience I described did not end the way I hoped, but it taught me more about leadership than many easier successes. It reminded me that leadership is not simply about helping people feel supported; it is also about taking responsibility for the conversations and decisions that allow people and organizations to move forward.

EXAMPLE 3 | EXPERIENCED LEADER

Leading through uncertainty without having every answer

Fictional composite | operations / public safety

I have spent much of my career in operational roles where decisions affect people quickly and where trust is built over time. As my responsibilities have grown, my understanding of leadership has shifted from being the person who can solve the problem to being the person who can create structure, use the expertise around me, and help others perform well under pressure.

My leadership style is collaborative, developmental, and service-oriented. I believe leaders need to set clear expectations and make decisions, but they also need to listen carefully, understand the people and systems involved, and recognize when someone else has the expertise the situation requires. I expect a great deal from the people I lead, and I see it as my responsibility to provide the information, resources, coaching, and clarity that allow them to succeed.

One of the most formative experiences of my career involved a rapidly evolving incident that required an immediate coordinated response. I was the first senior leader on scene and assumed responsibility for establishing structure, gathering information, and directing the initial response. The situation was changing quickly, and there was pressure to act before every fact was known.

My first priority was to slow the environment down enough to make sound decisions. I established clear roles, created a communication rhythm, and asked specialized personnel to advise on areas outside my expertise. At several points, I had to choose between acting quickly and waiting for additional information. I learned to separate decisions that were reversible from those that carried greater risk, and to communicate openly about what we knew, what we did not know, and what would cause us to change course.

The incident was ultimately resolved safely, but what stayed with me was how little of the outcome depended on one person having the answer. My responsibility was to hold the overall picture while creating space for others to contribute their knowledge. I had to be decisive without becoming closed off, and accountable without pretending that leadership meant doing everything myself. The experience reinforced that followership and leadership are not opposites. Strong leaders know when to direct, when to listen, and when to trust the expertise of others.

As I move into more senior leadership, I want to strengthen my ability to think strategically beyond the immediate operational problem. I am comfortable making decisions in the moment; my next challenge is to become equally strong at shaping culture, developing future leaders, and anticipating the organizational consequences of decisions over time. I want my impact to be measured not only by the situations I personally handle, but by the people I prepare to handle them after me.

I also want to continue developing my communication across different levels of an organization. Operational teams, executive leaders, community partners, and other stakeholders often need different information from the same situation. Learning to translate complexity without oversimplifying it will be essential as my scope expands. Ultimately, I hope to lead in a way that combines composure, accountability, humility, and trust - leaving the organization stronger because more people are prepared to lead.