

Writing a Strong Personal Statement for Graduate School

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What is a personal statement?

- A.K.A. "Professional Statement" or "Statement of Purpose"
- Introduction to you as a candidate for graduate school
- Your chance to "sell yourself" by telling your unique story
 - Maturity, self-knowledge, purpose, drive
 - Ability to succeed in graduate school and beyond
 - Writing skills and articulateness
 - Your fit with the program/mentor
- NOT just a rehash of your CV

Two types of personal statements

1. General, comprehensive personal statement
2. Response to a specific question posed by the review committee
 - *Ex:* "The unexamined life is not worth living." -Plato. In light of this quotation, please discuss a decision you have made which has had a profound influence on your present circumstances. In hindsight, would you have made a different decision? Please explain. (Haas School/Berkeley)
 - *Ex:* How would you characterize the effects of your contributions to the groups or organizations in which you have participated? (Yale)

Questions to ask yourself before you write your personal statement

(from Purdue OWL)

- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?

Questions, cont.

- How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?

Questions, cont.

- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, and/or persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

<h3>Principles of writing a good personal statement</h3> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Tell a story2. Be specific3. Concentrate on your opening paragraph4. Tell what you know5. Don't include some subjects6. Do some research7. Write well and correctly8. Avoid clichés	
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<h3>Principles of writing a good personal statement</h3> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Tell a story<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Show or demonstrate through concrete experience.• Don't bore the admissions committee!• Lively = memorable• <i>"The passing of my mother and grandmother from breast cancer when I was 15 years old opened my eyes to a new perspective on life. I became intensely interested in scientific research with aspirations to better understand and possibly find a cure for cancer."</i><ul style="list-style-type: none">• This is NOT just a sob story about life challenges; it shows a direct connection between the applicant's life experiences and their drive to excel in higher education and beyond.	
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<h3>Principles of writing a good personal statement</h3> <ol style="list-style-type: none">2. Be specific<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Generic is boring• Be clear how your desire to go into this field is the result of <u>specific</u> experience that is described in your statement• <i>"I am a hard worker"</i> vs.• <i>"In addition to my course load of 18 credits per semester in my junior and senior years, I work 20 hours per week at a local grocery store and have helped organize three service activities for my university's chapter of Psi Chi. Through all of this, I have maintained a 3.85 overall GPA."</i>• Good or bad? <i>"I've always wanted to be a doctor."</i>	
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<h2>Principles of writing a good personal statement</h2> <p>3. Concentrate on your opening paragraph</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grab the reader's attention or lose it forever • Framework for the rest of the statement. 	
<p>Instead of...</p> <p>"I was a sickly child and had difficulty excelling in school due to my illness."</p> <p>"I've had a lot of challenges personally and academically during my time in school."</p>	<p>Consider...</p> <p>"For the first 20 years of my life, my activities—and self-confidence—were circumscribed by the fact that I was a chronic, allergic, asthmatic."</p> <p>"At first glance, the most remarkable thing about me might seem to be the fact that I have the temerity to apply to law school in the first place. I have a blemished academic record that includes withdrawals and failing grades, and by the time I receive my degree in May, I will have spent six years as an undergraduate. Looking beyond these statistics, however, to the circumstances of my life, it becomes clear that what is more remarkable is the fact that I have survived at all."</p>

<h2>Principles of writing a good personal statement</h2> <p>4. Tell what you know (Middle section of your essay)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your interest & experience in your particular field • Show some of your knowledge of the field • Use the language professionals in the field use • Experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, books, seminars, etc. • How do you know you're suited to the field? 	
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<h2>Principles of writing a good personal statement</h2> <p>5. Don't include some subjects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences or accomplishments in high school or earlier • Potentially controversial subjects (e.g., controversial religious or political issues) • THERAPY! 	
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Principles of writing a good personal statement

6. Do some research

- Why do you want to go to THIS graduate program and work with THIS advisor?
- NOT about geographical or cultural change (“I want to live near the beach” or “I want to get out of Texas”)
 - Exception: Proximity to special population for research purposes (e.g., military base, particular immigrant population)

Principles of writing a good personal statement

7. Write well and correctly

- Be meticulous
- Be clear and concise
- Write in your OWN voice; don't show off your GRE vocab skillz
- Adhere to stated word limits
- Make it readable—white space, headings if needed, etc.
- NO TYPOS, NO GRAMMATICAL ERRORS!

Principles of writing a good personal statement

8. Avoid clichés

- *“I want to become a school psychologist because I love helping people and I love children”*

Personal Statement Do's

- Answer the questions that are asked
- Make the introduction "pop"
- Stay within the length limits (typically 1-2 pages)
- Describe SPECIFIC experiences
- Form conclusions that explain the value/meaning of your experience
 - E.g., What you learned about yourself, your field, or your future goals
- Use the funnel approach – start broad & become more specific as you go
- Talk about your research interests
- Close by referring back to your main theme
- CHECK FOR SPELLING AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS!
 - Read at least 3 times
 - Read aloud
 - Have others read it
 - Take it to the university's Writing Center
- **MAKE SURE YOU SEND THE CORRECT VERSION TO THE CORRECT PLACE!**

Personal Statement Don't's

- Send the same personal statement to every school
- Include high school achievements (unless they are absolutely remarkable!)
- Treat it as a list/resume of your accomplishments
- Focus on extracurriculars, life history, hobbies, general world view
- Over-share about your personal history (THERAPY!)
- "Stuff" your personal statement with big words or unnatural phrases to show off your GRE verbal skills
- Talk about controversial or political topics
- Use clichés
- Overexplain
- Be defensive or apologetic for weaknesses
DO NOT LIE!!!

10 Characteristics of a Successful Applicant

- Demonstrates a passion for the profession
- Balances multiple priorities
- Has a significant role in a meaningful research project
- Demonstrates strong leadership and initiative
- Demonstrates strong ethical values and professional stature
- Submits strong letters of recommendation
- Is well-acquainted with the admissions process at schools being considered
- Knows strengths and fit of institutions
- Demonstrates clear career goals
- Applies early and to more than one school

Really EXCELLENT resource with lots of great examples!

- https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/psychology/_files/PDF/diversitypdfs/Personal-Statements%20Workshop.pdf
 - Balancing personal vs. professional
 - Tailoring your statement
 - Emphasize your strengths
 - Responding to specific kinds of prompts
 - Writing a strong summary paragraph

Additional Resources

- Purdue OWL: Writing the Personal Statement
 - <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01>
- IUPUI Guide to Writing a Personal Statement
 - http://psych.iupui.edu/sites/default/files/guidetowritingapersonalstatement_1.pdf
- Sample personal statements:
 - <http://www.shsu.edu/mcnair-scholars-program/documents/ExamplesofPersonalStatement.pdf>
 - https://www.plymouth.edu/department/psychology/files/2013/06/SOP_clinicalpsych.pdf
 - <https://www.plymouth.edu/department/psychology/files/2013/06/SAMPLE-STATEMENT-OF-PURPOSE-FOR-PSYCHOLOGY.pdf>
 - <http://www.oocities.org/heartland/flats/5353/classes/essays/essay3.html>

Would this be an good anecdote for a personal statement?

- Every since I could remember, my parents, grandparents, aunts, uncle sand great grandparents, on my father side, pressured my cousins and me to be a medical doctor. When I graduated high school with honors, everyone insisted that I would “be the one” who should be the doctor. To my family’ s disappointment, I decided to major in criminal justice- a field that was more aligned with my interest and personality. However, strangely enough, my first college part-time job was at the local hospital as a nurse assistant. After a few months, I was promoted pay and my responsibilities now also included collecting laboratory samples throughout the hospital for testing. After spending some time observing doctors perform their duties, it dawned on me that this is something that I could do as a career. I finally submitted to my family’ s dream. I graduated with a B.S. in biology with a 3.8 GPA and earned a 32 on the MCAT. I am now ready to accept the challenge of medical school to become a medical doctor.
