

## Writing Personal Statements for Graduate School

Your personal statement is your introduction to a university admission committee. The aim of your statement is to communicate that you are intelligent and literate and that you have interests and abilities in common with the program in which you are interested.

### Clarity

Your writing should be clear and enjoyable to read. Here are some guidelines for clear writing:

#### **Use simple words and direct phrasing.**

*Needs work:* It is rather important that the selection of words chosen by any given individual reflect a cognizance of the English language as demonstrated by the careful selection of words designed to evoke the most appropriate emotional and cognitive response in a clear concise manner.

*Better:* Use words and phrases that simply and directly convey your meaning. Avoid verbosity. Don't use jargon and long words just to try to sound sophisticated.

#### **Avoid cliches, overly common phrases, and nonspecific information.**

*Needs work:* "My above qualifications and my placement in the top 10th of my class demonstrate that I have the leadership, organization, and academic ability to have a positive impact as a graduate student at your school."

*Why:* This generic statement says little about you as an individual. The words aren't that interesting. The personal statement is your chance to show how uniquely qualified you are. When you're writing, think about whether it's likely that 100 other people can say the same thing you did.

*Better:* You write this part! Use personal experiences to describe what makes you different from other applicants. For example, if you have great leadership skills, describe a specific situation in which you demonstrated these skills or a situation where you were awarded for leadership.

*Tip:* Try writing to just one person, not to a group of anonymous people. Your descriptions will become more personal when you have a specific reader in mind.

**Organize.** Organization is the 'macro' level of clear writing. Not only should each sentence be clear, but the entire text should also flow together in a logical order. This will take some thought. Don't expect raw inspiration to result in an organized paper.

- Put the most important sentences at the beginning and end of each paragraph. People tend to focus on these as they skim. Make a good first and last impression with substantive statements.
- Make an outline (even if you've already started writing). Have a reason for the order of paragraphs and sentences, and have clear main points that logically fit together. Based on your outline, evaluate the worth of each point and decide if it contributes something unique.
- Use meaningful transitions between paragraphs to keep your reader engaged and reflect your organization. For example, "After my experiences with X, I decided to explore other topics by joining Dr. Z's lab." This specific description is a stronger transition than just "In addition" or "Further".

**Check spelling and grammar.** Be professional. Use a spell checker, but also reread text to catch errors

that the spell checker will miss (e.g., "affect" vs. "effect"; "its" vs. "it's"). Don't let your writing imply that you're too lazy or don't care enough to fix typos, or worse, that you're in college and still don't know how to spell.

**Read and follow the essay guidelines on formatting.** Make your personal statement fit neatly within the allotted space (usually 1-2 pages). Standard formatting is 1" margins and 12-point font size. Standard fonts include Times New Roman and Arial. Experiment with font styles to see which best serve your space requirements, but avoid unusual fonts, which are distracting. For other suggestions, check out the APA Manual on typeface (pp. 285-286, 5th ed.).

### **Creative Content**

Your statement must be substantive, and if you can be creative that's even better. Read and re-read the essay instructions for each school to which you're applying. What and how you write will vary according to these guidelines. Here are some typical areas to include:

- Personal reasons for your interest in the area (e.g., difficulties overcome, great or unique extracurricular achievements).
- Clinical or related work experience. Discuss your specific roles and accomplishments, both individually and with others.
- Recognition of and interest in work conducted by individuals in the department to which you are applying.

These examples are pretty standard, so don't limit yourself to this list. Use your imagination! It can be very effective to incorporate stories that are less traditional, but stay on topic: everything that you write must be directly relevant to the essay instructions.

### **Conciseness**

**Stay well within length requirements.** If you find yourself running over, evaluate which aspects of your personal statement are essential and which may be nice but not special. Even if you meet the length requirement, still evaluate your writing for wordiness. You can always write something shorter. Here is a short checklist to evaluate factors that affect length:

- Have you stated information concisely? Is anything wordy or repetitious?
- Does each paragraph and each sentence convey a specific, meaningful point?
- Can you combine paragraphs that convey the same point?
- Are you crowding the page by using small margins and too-small font?

### **For a Strong Final Draft**

**Incubate and revise.** Leave enough time to set your statement aside and come back to it later with fresh eyes. Plan to write several drafts before you're satisfied. If you do, you'll be pleased at how much better your final draft is compared to the first one.

**Ask for feedback.** When you're satisfied with your draft, ask others to read it (friends, parent, graduate students, faculty), and be open to their suggestions. Don't be shy about sharing this writing with people you know – remember that future colleagues will read it.

**Proofread every draft – especially the last one.**