

## 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, literate, and have interests and abilities in common with the program in which you are interested.

### Clarity

Your writing should be clearly written and enjoyable to read. Here are some characteristics of clear writing:

#### **Clear, direct phrasing (word choice)**

- 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.

(Huh?) Oh sorry, let's rephrase that: Use phrases that simply and directly convey your meaning. Don't use language to try to sound sophisticated. You should be clear, concise, and intelligent, not verbose. For example: flowery, or pompous.

- Avoid overly common phrases and nonspecific information.

"My above qualifications and my placement in the top 10th of my class demonstrate that I have the leadership, organization, and academic ability to succeed well at your school."

This generic statement says nothing specific about you as an individual. When you're writing, think about whether it's likely that 100 other people said the same thing you did. The personal statement is your chance to show how unique you are.

**Organization.** Organization is the 'macro' level of clear writing. Not only should each sentence be clear, but the entire text should flow together in a logical order.

- Put the most important sentences at the beginning and end of the paragraph. When people skim passages, they look at the first and then the last sentence. Make a good first and last impression with substantive statements. Don't begin or end on fluff.
- Put the most important paragraph first. Don't "save the best for last"; you don't know how long the attention span of your reader will be.
- Have an outline. There should be a reason that paragraph 1 comes first and paragraph 2 follows. Have a clear outline of the main points and how those main points fit together. Use that outline to check whether the most important point is first, whether all points are equally important, and which points you might sacrifice in the interests of space.

- Use transitions between paragraphs. Have meaningful transitions based on your organization, e.g., time-based, academic then applied work, etc. Don't rely on phrases such as "In addition" to carry the reader to the next paragraph.

**Mechanics (spelling, grammar).** Don't be sloppy. Use a spell checker, but also reread it to catch errors that the spell checker missed (e.g., "affect" vs. "effect"; "its" vs. "it's"). You don't want your writing to suggest to the committee 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.

**Formatting.** You want the reader to be as comfortable as possible when reading your personal statement. Type your statement. Make it fit neatly within the allotted space (usually 1-2 pages). Standard margins are 1" all around. Standard font size is 12 points. Laser or inkjet printing is best; avoid dot-matrix printing. Experiment with different fonts to see which best serve your space requirements. Also check out the APA Manual's typeface suggestions (p. 285-286, 5th ed.). As a rule of thumb, avoid unusual fonts. The more a font looks like a typewriter, the better.

### Creative Content

You need substantive content, and if you can be creative that's even better. Needs will vary according to the area you're applying for, pay attention to the requirements of the department to which you are applying. Here are some areas you might include:

- Work done with or that displays knowledge of top people in the field--summarize key points of your actual experience
- Recognition of and interest in work of individuals in the department to which you are applying
- Clinical or related work experience
- Personal reasons for your interest in the area, for example, difficulties overcome, great extracurricular achievements, etc.

These items are pretty standard, so don't limit yourself to this list. Use your imagination!

### 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. Here are some things that affect length:

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

When you're satisfied with your draft, get someone else to read it (hey, how about the Psychology Writing Center), or leave enough time to set it aside and come back to it later. You'll be amazed at how many things sounded great when you wrote them that later seem unnecessary. Plan to write several drafts before you're satisfied; you'll be pleased at how much better your final draft is compared to the first one.