

The Personal Statement

Of all the aspects of completing an application for graduate school, writing the personal statement (also called the statement of purpose, application essay, sometimes autobiographical statement) is usually the most difficult. It is the personal statement that communicates to the admissions committee what it is about you which makes you stand out from the other applicants. You must demonstrate to the committee how your goals coincide with what the program has to offer as well as how you will fit in and how your qualifications will benefit the program.

Each graduate program is unique; each applicant is unique. The applicant, in deciding where to apply, has selected those programs which best match his or her needs and interests. Similarly, the graduate program is hoping to select those students which best match its interests and needs. The personal statement is critical to providing such information to the selection committee. The more competitive the school, the larger the pool of applicants with strong GPAs and GRE scores, the more important the personal statement becomes in the selection process. Therefore it is important for the applicant to devote ample time to writing the statement(s).

If the student is applying to more than one program, each statement should be tailored to the specific program. Each application packet provided by the graduate programs includes a set of instructions about what should be included in the personal statement. Rarely will applications ask for the same information with the same emphasis. Furthermore, each program has different characteristics and the applicant should address those characteristics in writing the statement. The applicant should not use the same essay for each program. A generic personal statement is easy to detect (even when the name of the graduate program is changed on the word processor).

In writing this information about personal statements, it is far easier to explain their importance than it is to give instructions for writing them or provide a model or models that can be followed. Once again each applicant is unique and each graduate program differs. However, in the CSULB Peer Advising office, there are copies of statements submitted by students whose applications to various programs were successful. You might want to view these for ideas of what to say. (Ask to see the binder called Graduate and Professional School Success Stories of CSULB Psychology Majors available beginning Fall 2000.)

What follows are lists of dos and don'ts to consider when writing personal statements. These lists are based on suggestions which are common to those providing guidance. Following the lists will be some items about which there is disagreement.

Do:

Prepare an outline of topics you are asked to cover by the graduate schools and others you want to cover and list supporting material under each topic. This information will be useful when you develop the drafts of your statement. Typical topics include professional career goals, academic interests and objectives, research experience, practical experience, special skills, and related personal material about your motivation and reason for choosing a program. Selected programs such as those in marriage and family counseling or social work, may ask about personal life challenges and other such autobiographical material. Research doctoral programs do not.

When writing your statement, stick to the points requested by each program. Also be attentive to the goals of each program. If a program stresses research, clinical work, or work experience, emphasize those issues in your statement. Avoid lengthy personal or philosophical discussions unless the instructions specifically ask for them.

Make sure you answer all of the questions asked by the program.

Apply to schools with faculty with interests that fit you own. You may want to include the names of those faculty in your statement (but make sure those faculty are still teaching at that school and still doing the same kind of research or better yet, use the names of faculty and their research interests as examples of what you would like to do). To get the names of faculty interested in specific areas of research, go to the library and/or do a search on PsycInfo of the names of faculty at the programs that interest you.

Different programs will request essays of different lengths. Follow the instructions about length. If the program asks for two pages, do not send ten. Conversely if the program asks for seven pages, do not send two.

Be confident in your statements, use a positive emphasis.

Try to use action words wherever possible.

Write a coherent, well-organized and interesting essay. The first paragraph should capture the reader's interest.

Your essay is a sample of your writing ability. Check your grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization carefully. Errors distract from the content of your statement. Furthermore, since writing is such an important part of graduate work; errors in the essay will lead the admission committee members to assume that your writing is weak if you cannot write well in a situation that is so important. Errors will also communicate that you don't care.

Review your essay by asking yourself the following questions:

- Are my goals well articulated?
- Do I explain why I have selected this school and/or program?
- Do I demonstrate knowledge of the program?
- Do I include interesting details that prove my claims about myself?
- Is my tone confident?

Type your materials.

Ask as many others as possible to proofread your work for writing style—grammar, spelling, etc. You should also ask those with academic credentials to critique the content, organization, and clarity since they will be aware of what graduate schools are seeking.

Don't:

- Use empty, vague, overly-used words like meaningful, beautiful, challenging, rewarding, etc.
- Repeat information from the application unless you use it to illustrate a point.
- Try to be funny—you don't know your audience, so humor can backfire.
- Use statements like "I've always wanted to be a . . .", "My therapist helped me so I want to help others" or other hackneyed phrases.
- Use gimmicks –it is very risky to do so when you don't know your audience.
- Use special fonts or colored paper.
- Use slang, technical jargon., long quotations.
- Discuss personal problems such as a recent "nervous breakdown."
- Write in an arrogant manner. Instead, make it clear that you are confident about your ability, but still eager to learn what the program has to offer.
- Misrepresent yourself. If you are not interested in research, don't say you are. You will be an unhappy graduate student if you are admitted to a program that doesn't coincide with your interests.

Do or don't?

There is mixed opinion about whether to call attention to and explain any of your obvious weaknesses in your essay. Some recommend clarifying any weaknesses on your transcripts or your GRE scores in your essay. Others believe one should only be positive—that if you feel you need to explain something, that you should attach an addendum to your application, make note of it in a cover letter, or ask one of your letter writers who knows you well to discuss it.

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