

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.

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, 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 could be about anyone. The words aren’t interesting. The personal statement is your chance to show how uniquely qualified you are. Think about whether 100 other people are likely to say the same thing you did. If they are, don’t write it.

Better: You write this example! 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 were recognized for leadership.

Tip: Write to a specific person, not to a group of anonymous people. Your descriptions will become more personal when you have that specific reader in mind.

Organize. Organization is fundamental to clear writing. Not only should each sentence be clear, but the entire text should also flow together in a logical and compelling story. This will take thought and plenty of revision. 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. Use the first sentence to tell the reader where the paragraph is going, and the last sentence to state your take-away point.
- Make an outline. Some people start with an outline, but always create an outline after you have written your draft to check your organization. Have a reason for the order of

paragraphs and sentences, and have clear main points that fit together. Evaluate the worth of each point and decide whether it contributes something unique.

- Use meaningful transitions between paragraphs to keep your reader engaged and reflect your organization. For example, "After my experience with X, I decided to explore other topics by joining Dr. Z's lab." This description is a stronger transition than just "In addition" or "Further".

Check spelling and grammar. Remember, you're applying to graduate school! 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 statement fit neatly within the allotted space (usually 1-2 pages). Standard formatting is 1" margins and 12-point font size. 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.

Creative Content

Your statement must be at least 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, exceptional 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! Incorporating less traditional stories can be very effective, but stay on topic: everything that you write must be directly relevant to the essay instructions.

Conciseness

Stay well within length requirements. The committee will have many statements to read and will welcome writing that is short, to the point, and uses well-chosen words. If you find yourself running over, evaluate which aspects of your statement are essential. Be willing to cut sections that may be nice but not special. Even if you meet the length requirement, still evaluate your writing for wordiness. You can always write shorter. Here is a short checklist:

- 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. If you write several or even many drafts, 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 (graduate students, faculty mentors, friends, parents), and be open to their suggestions. Faculty and others who are writing recommendations for you are good people to ask for comments. Don't be shy about sharing this writing with people you know – remember that your future faculty mentors and colleagues will read it.

Proofread every draft – especially the last one.