



Graduate School Personal Statements

The best way to approach your personal statement for graduate school is to imagine that you have five minutes with someone from the admissions committee. How would you go about making the best case for yourself while holding the listener's interest? What would you include and omit in your story? Figuring out the answer to these questions is critical to successfully preparing an effective statement.

To arrive at these answers, you should begin by asking yourself two specific questions:

- Why have I chosen to attend graduate school in this specific field, and why did I choose to apply to this particular school's program?
- What are my qualifications for admission?

The answers will not necessarily come easily to you, but this exercise will have great practical benefit in readying you to write an outstanding personal statement. By answering each question thoroughly, you will have given much thought to yourself, your experiences, and your goals, thereby laying the groundwork for formulating an interesting and persuasive presentation of your own personal story.

Writing a Personal Statement

No matter how many 15-page essays you've written during the course of your college career, the 2-page personal statement (also called a "statement of intent") can be more intimidating than any of them.

"Justify the last 4 (or 5) years of your college life, and everything else that you have done," the personal statement seems to demand. "Why do you deserve to go to grad school?"

The personal statement is a chance for you to write something that is purely about you – your experiences, goals, plans and thoughts on your undergraduate career and your expectations of grad school. It allows schools to evaluate your writing style and also to see, based on your strengths and goals, if you are a good "fit" for the school. You may have the GPA, the test scores, and have aced all the required courses, but if you want to study Medieval Literature at a small college that specializes in the 20th Century American Novel, you are not a good fit for that institution, and vice versa.

Grad departments don't want to be risky in their choices: they can't afford to be. This is why sometimes even the best students who seem to be shoo-ins to the schools of their choice don't get in: if it comes to a choice between 2 students, one who is known to the graduate committee and one who isn't – the one who is known has a major advantage. Graduate committees want to know that you can handle the challenge of graduate-level courses – they can't afford to gamble on students.

So what do you talk about? There are various opinions about what you should write and how you should structure the personal statement. There are probably several ways that you could write a personal statement – you need to adjust the form to your content. You want to demonstrate to the committee who will review your application a coherence and logical path to the academic and personal choices that you have made; you are committed to attending school at the institution you are applying to – you want to show how attending their school is something that you have been working towards and how this fits in with your future career plans.

Do some research on the school – who are the professors whose research interests or area of concentration are close to yours? You might want to mention that you are familiar with their work, or that you would be interested in studying with them. You want to demonstrate to the committee that you have concrete reasons for applying to this particular school – it isn't a whim, but rather a long-standing goal. You don't have to include a title and outline for your thesis, research or graduating project, but be prepared to briefly state the areas that you are interested in, and why.

Once you have a draft down on paper, it's best to leave it for a few days. Return to it with a fresh eye. And have at least two other people look at it for you. Your friends and your professors know different sides of you, and will have suggestions about your strengths and what you have to offer to the program.



You want to convey that this is something that you are excited and enthusiastic about, without sounding insincere or vague. “I love Literature” or “Research is my life,” are not good enough statements for the admissions committee – they may be true, but you need to demonstrate how they are true, and how you have made decisions based on the strong interest you have in Business, or History, or Medicine.

Perhaps the reason that the personal statement is so difficult is because it forces you to really think about why you want to pursue an advanced degree. Is it something that you’ve been planning to do for so long that you can’t remember why you wanted to do it in the first place? How does pursuing a Master’s degree fit into your personal and professional goals at this point in your life? These are difficult questions to answer, especially if you’re in the middle of your senior year of college, wondering why on earth you would subject yourself to several more years of exams, papers, projects, and student “lifestyle.” But who knows how you’ll feel by next September; if, even in the midst of madness, you can acknowledge that you love to learn, and research, and write and study and that you want to know more – you should probably apply.

Why Graduate School?

Graduate school is a serious commitment, and it may have been your goal for a long time. Describing your early exposure to a field can offer effective insight into your core objectives. Watch out, however, that you do not your point in such a clichéd, prepackaged way as to make your reader cringe. For example, you should not start your essay, “I have always wanted to..” or “I have always known that _____ was my calling.” Instead, you should discuss specific events that led to your interest in the field.

Graduate school is, of course, a means to an end, and admissions committees prefer students who know where they’re going and to what use they’ll put their education (though the occasional soul-searcher, who may exhibit exceptional raw potential, is welcomed). For many people, the long-term goal is to work in academia, and to differentiate yourself in such cases, you can stress more specific objectives such as your research interests.

Note: Read the instructions carefully. Sometimes schools will ask for a statement of purpose describing your specific research interests in lieu of, or in addition to, a personal statement that emphasizes your character and qualities. For these types of essays, you can assume that a faculty member will be reading your statement, but it should still be accessible enough for a non-specialist to understand. Remember that such essays should also still aim to engage the reader in a way that conveys your own enthusiasm for the subject matter.

Avoid mistakes like discussing the school's rank or prestige, or simply offering generic praise. Instead, mention faculty members by name and indicate some knowledge of their work. Consider contacting faculty members first and discussing their current research projects and your interest in studying under them. Then refer to these contacts in your essay.

Why Am I Qualified?

The way to prove your qualification is not to list attributes you believe you possess but to discuss concrete experiences that show your abilities and qualities. As always, details are paramount. The rest of your application has already summarized your accomplishments and your activities. Show the reader what you did in concrete terms, and again, highlight your active roles.

The experiences that demonstrate your qualification are not necessarily distinct from those that explain your motivation. You shouldn't plan on dividing the essay into two separate sections for each, but rather organize the structure by topic and extrapolate insights as they develop. It's important that you think of the essay as an integrated whole, not as a checklist of questions you must answer.

Focus on research experience, since research will be your main job for the duration of your studies. Be specific about what you did. If you worked for a year under a professor, you might consider emphasizing one particular project and exploring that in depth. The experience does not have to have been a major undertaking: Any



practical experience can be used as long as you demonstrate your enthusiasm and aptitude for the field of study.

Remember to keep the discussion personal. Do not get bogged down in minute details and jargon. Ultimately, the focus of the story should remain on you and your growth or success.

Essay Structures

Now that you have seen the complex themes with which you must engage and have begun thinking about the personal details you will use, it is time to begin the daunting task of structuring your essay.

Your first concern should be **clarity**. If your essay is haphazardly structured, the reader simply will not be able to follow your ideas, and your whole purpose will be lost.

Your second concern is **focus**. An essay could be clear on the sentence or paragraph level, but still lack overall coherence. Perhaps you have written three paragraphs each clearly devoted to one topic, but you have not shown how each topic contributes to a larger point. The basic focus of every essay is why you should be admitted to the school, but a more specific theme can be helpful. You want your reader to take away a clear point after he or she puts down your essay.

Your third concern is **impact**. Even a clear and coherent essay can fail to achieve the optimal structure that would maximize its overall impact. For example, the overarching theme of an essay might be your desire to help others. After outlining this clear focus in your first paragraph, you go on to write three clear paragraphs, each independently offering evidence of your desire to help people. What is lacking is a sense of progression: the reader sees not growth but repetition. To maximize impact, your structure must allow each point to build upon previous points, thereby improving not only your essay's flow but also the overall force of your argument.

It is important to remember that these three areas overlap. You do not achieve the optimal structure by treating each one as an isolated step, but must keep each one in mind as you plan the structure of your essay.

Style and Tone

While the structure of your essay affects the clarity, coherence, and impact of your content, writing style affects presentation in an even more fundamental way: It determines how engaged your reader is from sentence to sentence. Poor writing can make fascinating experiences a dull read, while strong writing can transform mundane details into an exciting tale.

The best advice we can give is to **be simple and straightforward**. Occasionally an essay will sound choppy or unsophisticated because of too many short sentences, but usually the problem is the opposite scenario. Applicants think that flowery prose and large words will make them sound more intelligent, when in reality their expression ends up being muddled and tedious. A direct style is not only more efficient to read, but it is also more enjoyable because it allows a steadily moving pace.

The tone you use should be **conversational, not too formal or informal**. The sentences you write should be sentences that you would actually say. This is not to suggest that you should not spend time refining your writing carefully, but the ultimate goal should be a natural voice.

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