

Writing a Good Personal Statement

You want your personal statement for graduate school to communicate several things, some explicitly and some implicitly. In no particular order, these things are (a) writing ability, (b) fit with program goals, (c) fit with individual faculty mentor, (d) why you are a better, more interesting choice to interview than the hordes of other applicants, (e) maturity, (f) ability to see connections across different domains (hints at critical thinking).

Don't let formatting get in your way!

- Pay close attention to length requirements, which may differ from school to school. Do NOT go over the recommended length. If no length is given, stick to 1-2 single spaced pages (or 3-4 double spaced pages).
- Use standard formatting, including 1 inch margins and 12-point standard font [Ariel, Times New Roman]. Avoid “fun” fonts, colored typeface, and too-wide or too-narrow margins.
- Pay close attention to content suggestions. Some programs ask you to answer specific questions, and if they do, make sure you follow instructions. For example, applicants to the University of Arkansas are asked to indicate specific career goals in the field of clinical psychology, how your career goals fit the training program here, your research interests and goals in graduate school, and how your research interests and goals align with faculty members in the program.

Plan for re-writes

- Most statements aren't very good on the first draft, but that is totally OK! Plan on writing a “garbage draft” to just get your thoughts down on paper. Even if nothing from this draft sticks, doing a “garbage draft” is NOT a waste of time, it will help you organize your thoughts about what you want to say. Set it aside and review it again later. Put notes to yourself in the statement if it's helpful to you. Example: “I conducted coding of videotaped dyadic interactions between dementia patients and their caregivers in a study that found [check with Jason about focus of and results of study].”
- Get feedback, ideally from multiple sources, including current graduate students and if possible, current faculty. Try to be non-defensive and open to feedback, but also know that you will get a variety of feedback that may not be consistent.

Content

Note: The below advice is tailored toward clinical and experimental psychology programs. Applications for social-work or marriage & family therapy (MFT) degrees may have a slightly different slant, with more emphasis on clinically-relevant experiences.

There is no one “right way” to write a personal statement, and depending on your experiences, you may need to tweak a particular area or two. For example, if you have limited research experience, you will need to bolster the “other relevant experience” section and make a case for how you have the skills to do research as a graduate student, and the “research interests” section to clearly describe an area of focus.

- *Research experience:* Particularly for scientist-practitioner clinical psychology programs and experimental PhD programs, prospective faculty mentors want to be confident that you have gotten enough exposure to research to know that you've got the interest and the chops to handle writing a masters thesis or a dissertation, as well as helping them on their research projects. Describe what kind of research projects you worked on, what your role

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was, and what you learned about research from the experience. Did you acquire specific skills doing this research, such as exposure to particular software programs or unique methodologies? Say so! If you have publications or presentations, indicate what you (and co-authors) found. If you constructed an independent project (honors thesis or otherwise), what do you hope to find? How far along are you on the project?

- *Research interests:* What do you want to study now? Ideally draw a connection between what you've done and where you want to go. Perhaps you worked on a qualitative study in a lab, and this got you interested in developmental research, so you took a developmental class and wrote a paper on acquisition of substance use problems in teens. Great! What might you want to study for the next 6-7 years?
 - This paragraph should change for each school if you have a variety of interests you would be happy studying. Try to tailor this section to the faculty mentors you are applying to work with; what is it about what they study that is fascinating to you? What kinds of research questions do you want to answer?
 - Pay attention
- *Other relevant experiences:* There are other aspects of your life besides psychological research that might give insight into why you'd be a good graduate student, and/or why you are interested in the topic you've described. Have you volunteered? Do you have work experience that is relevant? Do you have specific skills that might be valued by a faculty mentor (e.g. computer programming, peer mentoring, bilingualism)? Have you taken on any leadership roles? Do you have any clinical experience (e.g. working on a crisis hotline, etc.). Did you take any additional courses that might be useful (e.g. clinical interviewing, advance statistics)? This is an opportunity to bolster your statement and demonstrate your uniqueness (see section on Style and Personality below).
 - Many students feel that having clinical experience will help them get accepted to a clinical psychology program. This is a myth; most students do not have clinical experience, and this is perfectly OK. Faculty members would rather teach good habits from the start than re-teach poor habits, so lack of clinical experience is not a deterrent to admission, particularly for more research-focused programs.
- *Goals:* What do you want to do when you finish school? Do you want to do research, teach, work in public policy, or treat patients?
 - If you are applying for science-focused clinical programs ("5" or above on the *Insiders Guide*), you should consider downplaying clinical career goals. Emphasize the research more than the clinical work.
- *Why this program?* This will be specific to each school. Why do you want to go here in particular? What seems to be a good fit? Here is where you can mention specific faculty members you want to work with or unique training opportunities of the program (e.g. breadth of practicum opportunities, focus on minority health issues, collaboration with experimental psychology or psychiatry faculty, etc.).
 - There are reasons to discuss geographical limitations, and those would be discussed here, but tread cautiously. Some faculty may read "geographical restriction" as "I don't really want to go here, but I guess it'll do." That may be particularly true for big cities. On the flip side, emphasizing the positives about a more remote location may be seen positively, as a "Hey, this person sounds happy to spend 6 years in this small town, maybe they'll accept an offer!"
- When getting feedback, questions to ask about content:

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- Have I described my research experiences with enough detail?
- Are my research interests clear?
 - Do I sound too scattered in what I'm willing to study?
 - Do I sound too narrow in what I'm willing to study?
- Have I tied my other experiences and interests in to my research interests?
- Are my professional goals clear and appropriate for the program I'm applying to?
- Is it clear to the reader why this school is one I'm interested in?

Style and Personality: The Subtle Factors

- **This is the hardest part of a statement to accomplish, and you will not be able to work on this without feedback because you have no normative information.**
- It is important to come across as unique in your personal statement. Faculty are reading dozens of these each application season, and you want yours to stand out...in a good way. Most statements are cookie-cutter, and say something like “I want to help people, I'm a hard worker and conscientious.” These are qualities pretty much all graduate students have, so don't say them. You need to set yourself apart from others and to think about what unique experiences *you* have had that are relevant to a future graduate education. Some possible questions to consider:
 - How did you become interested in psychology? Why did you decide to major in psychology? What about psychology fascinates you?
 - What non-psychology experiences have shaped your personal and professional interests? Did you play in the marching band, participate in roller derby, or work at a video store? Did these things help shape who you are today? You can ask for help as to how these things might be weaved in, but when doing initial brainstorming about what makes you unique, don't discard information simply because it doesn't sound related. Write down anything that defines who you are.
 - What unique experiences have you had in your life that relate to your interest in psychology?
- On the other hand, be wary of including too many personal details. Personal mental health histories, excessive altruism, too much self-disclosure about things professionally inappropriate (e.g. you worked as a stripper one summer)—leave all these things out of the personal statement. You want to come across like an interesting, friendly, mature person. Do not make a possible faculty mentor question your ability to handle sensitive material (as you will have to do as a clinician).
- Most often you will want to “hook” your reader by including personal information in the opening paragraph. This paragraph is very important, as it sets the frame and the tone for the statement. Many people write this opening paragraph last.
- Demonstrate interest in psychology using the “show, don't tell” philosophy. Rather than telling the reader you have a particular characteristic, give an example that implies you have the characteristic
 - Poor: “I'm hard-working.”
 - Better: “I held a 20-hour a week off-campus job to support myself through college.”
- Demonstrate confidence in your skills, but don't be narcissistic. A personal statement is not a place to be overly humble or grandiose—do not understate or overstate your skills.

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Your letter writers will hopefully tout your amazingness; your job is to show (don't tell!) confidence and competence.

- Don't underestimate the importance of enthusiasm, passion, and intellectual curiosity!! Most statements describe experiences and interests in a formal way and lack any passion or enthusiasm. You are applying to a program where you will spend the next 2-7 years of your life; it's OK to be excited about it! Demonstrate enthusiasm appropriately by using strong words ("committed," "excited to investigate X, Y, Z"). Avoid using too many exclamation points or informal language ("Prof. Q's research sounds awesome!!").
- When getting feedback, questions to ask about style/personality:
 - How would you gauge my personality from this statement? [Note: best asked to someone who doesn't know you very well] Is this the kind of person you would want in your lab?
 - What stands out about my statement? What is memorable?
 - Is it memorable in a good way or bad way? How so?
 - Do I have enough detail to explain myself?
 - Am I overstating my skills? Am I understating my skills?
 - Am I "telling" too much?
 - Does my enthusiasm for psychology come across?

Pay attention to quality of writing

- **Because you can get feedback on your statement, there is no reason the statement should be poorly written.** If your statement is poorly written, your file may be discarded even if the content is good. A poorly written statements says either (a) you are a bad writer, which can be a red flag for success as a graduate student, (b) you were too shy to get feedback, which poses questions about your ability to seek/take feedback as a graduate student or (c) you did not take feedback given to you, which also poses questions about your ability to seek/take feedback as a graduate student.
- Writing should be clear and jargon-free. It is better to write short clear sentences than to try to "sound smart" by using big words and convoluted sentences.
- Spelling and grammar should be double- and triple-checked. Some words are only incorrect in context, such as "their" in the place of "there."
- When getting feedback, questions to ask about writing:
 - Is my statement clearly written? Does the writing style obscure the content?
 - Is my statement free of spelling and grammar errors?
 - Is the writing style good?

Other frequently asked questions

Q: If I have a history of mental illness, can I/should I put that into my statement?

A: The general answer to this is "no," because you have no idea how this information will be received. Whether valid or not, this kind of disclosure may make a faculty member think you have trouble with boundaries, or are too unstable to handle graduate work. When there are so many applicants, why take the risk? Now, there might be some reason to mention a background of mental illness, but if you wish to do so, consult with a faculty member about the most appropriate way of doing this. Have you overcome your disorder and in doing so recognized additional areas of research that would help people in

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your situation? There *are* ways of mentioning mental illness history appropriately, depending on the history itself, so you'll want to get a personalized perspective on this one.

Q: If I have some discrepancies/problem areas in other aspects of my application, should I address them in the personal statement? How? (e.g. poor GRE scores, poor GPA, large break in academic history).

A: It depends. The danger if mentioning it in the personal statement is that you're highlighting it, whereas it might not even be noticed if you say nothing. If there is a good explanation, it might be worth assuaging fears of your abilities, but this is another area where a personalized recommendation will come in handy. If you simply did poorly your first few years of college but bounced back, these are things some faculty members will automatically overlook. Taking two years off isn't necessarily an issue, and may not even be relevant. Poor GRE scores might matter to some faculty but can be compensated for by high grades...talk this through with a trusted mentor and evaluate the pros and cons of explaining your scores.

Additional resources:

- **BOOKS**
 - Asher, D. (2008). *Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice*. New York, NY: Ten Speed Press.
 - Stelzer, R. J. (1997). *How to write a winning personal statement* (3rd Edition). Petersons Publishing.
- **ARTICLES (non-peer reviewed)**
 - Bottoms, B. L., & Nysse, K. L. (1999). Applying to graduate school: Writing a compelling personal statement. *Eye on Psi Chi Journal*, 4, 20-22. Available online: http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article_98.aspx
 - Osbourne, R. E. (1996). The "personal" side of graduate school personal statements. *Eye on Psi Chi Journal*, 1, 14-15. Available online: http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article_165.aspx
 - Sleight, Merry J. (2009) Organizing your personal statement: An outline to get you started. *Eye on Psi Chi Journal*, 13. Available online: http://www.psichi.org/Pubs/Articles/Article_756.aspx
- **OTHER INTERNET SOURCES:**
 - Purdue statement guide: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/>