



Writing A Personal Statement For Graduate School

University Writing Center
Postgraduate Fellowships and
Scholarships Office

The Personal Statement: An Opportunity, Not An Obstacle!

- YOU have power over it (your GPA and LSAT and GRE and MCAT are perhaps beyond your control now, but the personal statement is not)
- This is your interview on paper—your chance to give the committee a sense of who you are
- The personal statement can be a tool for personal growth...

What Are They Looking For?

- Do you have what it takes to succeed in this field?
- “Can I picture you in the white coat?” (for doctors; or...in the lab coat, or the judge’s robes, or whatever, as appropriate for the field)
- Would I want you as a student in my class? (Are you mature and professional? Interesting? Likable? Passionate about the field?)
- Is there any reason to choose you over others who would also likely succeed in this program/field?

What Should Be In A Personal Statement?

- Academic experiences
- Relevant work and research experiences (paid or unpaid)
- Motivation for applying to graduate school
- Reasons for applying to a specific graduate program
- Long-term academic and professional goals
- Relevant personal background

Some General “Do’s”:

- Establish your intent early: Within first two paragraphs, state your objective; do NOT make reader search for your purpose
- Make sure you address all required aspects of the “prompt”
- Adequately research the programs to which you are applying (via online research, going to events, seeking out and speaking with current faculty and students)
- If you use the same essay for multiple schools, be sure to alter where appropriate

Some General “Don’ts”

- Avoid clichés
- Do not use contractions
- Do not linger on negative circumstances
- Do not submit anything risky or offensive
- Do not write about anything you are not comfortable sharing
- Do not describe self with string of unsubstantiated adjectives
- Do not lie or plagiarize

Be Creative (But Provide Context And Relevance)

- Include personal experiences that apply to your graduate pursuits

Example: Including personal experiences that apply to graduate pursuits

In one particular probability course during my junior year, I was typically the only student in attendance for each class. The professor asked me questions about the derivations of formulas and expected me to defend my responses. I spent hours preparing for each lesson and therefore developed an extensive understanding of probability theory. The course was most challenging because I was expected to generate a large base of knowledge for each class. The experience taught me self-reliance, since I did not have classmates to depend on for intellectual discussion. This unique experience has taught me to analyze mathematical concepts instead of simply to accept the calculations, which will assist me in the study of biostatistical methodology.

Be Creative (But Provide Context And Relevance)

- Mention theorists or innovators (or other sources of inspiration)

Example: Mentioning theorists or innovators

In my coursework last year, I was exposed to the dynamic efforts of Nancy Scheper-Hughes. Her concept of anthropologist-as-advocate has profoundly influenced my scholarship and leadership. Anthropologists are in an exceptional position to build communities in troubled regions because the inherent nature of the discipline attempts to understand social problems through the lens of those on the grassroots level. By employing empathy and considering all stakeholders in a certain situation, we are well-equipped to identify the needs of communities and to implement helpful programs. Scheper-Hughes' brand of witness-activist anthropology solidified my commitment to representing marginalized peoples and understanding that development, wrought with conflict, is a field where advocates are needed.

Be Creative (But Provide Context And Relevance)

- Discuss an early influence that led to your career choice.

Example: Discussing an early influence that led to a career choice

It was not until my father was assigned to Ft. Polk, Louisiana that I began to develop a sense of purpose and individuality. As I rode the school bus off base through neighboring Leesburg, past the dilapidated houses scattered between once magnificent plantations, I began to ask questions about the history of the Deep South. Living near the bayous of Louisiana led me to appreciate nature and helped me recognize that I wanted to one day pursue a career in environmentalism. More importantly, I developed an understanding of the history of social stratification and the struggles faced by fence-line communities along Louisiana's "Petrochemical Corridor." I gradually developed an interest in the intersection between human rights and environmental protection.

One Strategy: Include A Narrative Or An Anecdote

- Can help capture the reader's attention
- Can help make your statement more vivid and specific
- BUT make sure anecdote is relevant to your point: Don't force in a story if it doesn't serve what you're trying to say
- Beware of over-the-top drama

Example: Using a narrative

One event at the office particularly strengthened my convictions to engage in the rigors of legal study. It was a routine conference call with a long-standing client, Manny, regarding questions on his company's benefit plan document. Initially, Michelle, our external legal consultant, responded to the legal questions until one caused her to hesitate. Filling the silence, I offered my own interpretation. Manny reacted by directing his remaining concerns to me. After the call, Michelle expressed her appreciation by e-mail, noting that I was "always on target with [my] research and thoughts." Learning of my plan to pursue law school, she assured me that I was "going to be a terrific lawyer."

Example: Using a narrative

I remember sitting in my grandmother's home in Pakistan, witnessing something unforgettable. My eyes were fixated on my nana as my ears attempted to make out the whispers of my family members. I saw my beloved grandma sitting silently with her eyes shut, her arms waving hysterically. I was immediately rushed out of the room by my older cousins. My nana was physically fine, but something was wrong inside and I wanted to help her.

Create An Overarching Theme

- If you could leave your audience with only one phrase to describe yourself and your work, what would it be? Weave this theme throughout the essay
- This technique can be challenging and take time to develop

Formulate Specific And Feasible Long-term Goals

- Do not be overly vague (“I want to help people”)
- Do not be too specific/limited (“I want to be a financial consultant at Smith Barney”)
- Do not be overly ambitious (“I want to be President of the World Bank in 5 years”)
- Make honest self-projections

Example: Formulating goals

After finishing graduate education in social work, I aspire to become a clinical therapist in an inner-city social service agency. My motivation for this choice is due to my strong aspiration in improving the quality of life and enhancing the social functioning of vulnerable populations such as minorities, the LGBTQ community, and poor children and families. Along with counseling and offering supportive services, I would also like to implement various empowerment workshops, which will provide disadvantaged individuals to have a voice and develop positive self-esteem and self-responsibilities.

Example: Formulating goals

My short- and long-term goals include developing Geographic Information System (GIS) websites and eventually running a GIS department for local government. I hope to educate departmental managers in the capabilities of GIS to deliver effective solutions to their specific problems. Only with a practical understanding of a broad range of applied geography fields will I be in the position to create those solutions.

Beyond completion of a PhD in clinical psychology, my goal is to obtain licensure and begin practice in a clinical setting while continuing research on questions of marital relationships under stress. UNC Chapel Hill will provide me the knowledge to achieve significant research, the opportunities to develop into a successful clinician, and the support I need to reach this goal.

Begin And End With Strong, Polished, Moving Sentences

- Powerful opening lines:
- As the boat navigated through the waters of the Ha'apai archipelago in the South Pacific, I squinted into the sun to see the families awaiting our arrival.
- My grandfather, an 82-year-old man, worked hard all his life for the possessions he has acquired, and being the trusting man he is, signed a paper without understanding he had signed away his 216 acres of land.
- I will never forget the tear filled eyes of Lekshmi as she approached me in the poverty-stricken streets of Gangoli, India.

Begin And End With Strong, Polished, Moving Sentences

- Powerful final lines:
- Research on the history and integration of green urbanism and environmental justice, in the context of the built environment within Amsterdam, will provide me with a sound and internationally recognized model to bring back to my work in Washington D.C., where I can effect change through policy revision.

Write For Your Audience

- Your audience is well-versed in your discipline; speak to them, not the general reader
- Use discipline-specific language when appropriate

Example: Using discipline-specific language

In my research, I have learned to incorporate several different measures to better understand how individuals process information. I have helped to implement a study relating frontal electroencephalogram (EEG) asymmetry and behavioral responses during a socially stressful situation to self-reported levels of depression and anxiety. Researchers have also connected resting frontal EEG asymmetry to social-emotional function in children with high functioning autism (Sutton et al., 2005). I am interested in expanding this work to better understand the role of EEG asymmetry in high functioning autism and apply this knowledge to specific interventions. At State University, we are also collecting event-related potential and behavioral data as part of a threat attention bias task, based on the work of Bradley, Mogg, and Millar (2000). My experience with this technique relates well to response monitoring and error-related negativity research with children with autism, since I understand the event-related potential technique and am able to design tasks for these studies using E-Prime software.

Tailor Your Statement To Specific Schools Or Programs

- Include anything that makes this program stand out, but do not simply copy from the university website; you must connect this information to yourself
- Mention specific faculty members you hope to work with, when appropriate
- Revise your essays if there are considerable differences between programs

Example: Addressing specific programs

The MFA faculty is composed of a number of accomplished writers whom I would be honored to work with and learn from. Susan Shreve has written both adult and children's literature, producing a collection of poignant, and sometimes magical, coming-of-age stories while also examining more mature issues—it is an original blend that I struggle to create myself. Professor Shreve also writes about feminism, individuality, and integrity, which are themes I often explore in my own fiction.

The program has also infused two new professors. Helon Habila contributes personal experiences through his own works and experienced his own journey from early escapist fiction to more mature literature. He also believes that literature is a strong avenue of expression—for oneself, for one's country. Courtney Brkic has written about her experiences (which also chronicle the Bosnian genocide) as a first-generation American of Eastern European descent, a type of memoir I would be interested in discovering in my own voice.

Boring Format Matters

- Single-space the lines, and double-space between paragraphs (so-called “block paragraph form”)
- Use a readable, professional-looking font (Times, New Roman or the like)
- Use a 12-point font
- Allow ample margins (1 inch is standard)
- Personal statements don’t have a title
- Put “Personal Statement of John Doe” on the top of page 1; put your name and page number at the top of each subsequent page

Final Details

- Your statement should be free of all spelling and grammar errors
- Reread to check that you maintain a positive tone throughout; simple changes, such as in the example below, are preferred:
- “I find it discouraging that many young adults do not participate in the political process.”
- “I hope that young adults will be inspired to participate in the political process.”
- Continually ask yourself while revising your personal statement: “Is this compelling?” and “Is this memorable?”

Recognize That A Strong Personal Statement Involves A Major Time Commitment

- Ideally, give yourself at LEAST a month to research the programs to which you are applying
- Ideally, give yourself at LEAST a month for the writing stage (6-8 weeks would be better).
- A polished, strong personal statement usually has undergone multiple (six? seven? eight?) revisions
- Do not be afraid to ask for help

Skim Some Books

- See various commercially-produced books of sample essays (in your local Barnes and Noble in career section, and in the Mason library)

George Mason University Support

- Career Services is dedicated to career and graduate school preparation. Their website includes a timetable for the application process and resources for the application process as a whole:
- <http://careers.gmu.edu/students/gradschool/>
- The University Writing Center offers free tutoring for essays and assignments (including personal statements). We will not proofread or edit for you but will work with you to improve your essays.
- <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/>
- Register with the Writing Center (very easy process)
- Hours vary based on location; see online scheduler for more details

Find At Least Three Readers To Provide Feedback

- Someone who knows you personally
- Someone who is able to comment on the writing aspects
- Someone who knows you academically and is an expert in your chosen field (e.g., an academic advisor, or a professor who knows you and your work)

Remember...

- Keep repeating the mantra: “The Personal Statement is my Friend.”
- Embrace the process: Don’t expect a fully-formed strong personal statement to emerge the first time you sit down to work; don’t be discouraged.
- Be compassionate with yourself if you find writing the statement a challenging task

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