

GRADUATE SCHOOL PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Writing a personal statement for graduate school (sometimes called a statement of purpose or application essay) is a challenging task; you must showcase your unique qualifications and illustrate why you are a good fit for a particular graduate program; you must be thoughtful, specific, and focused; you must make your essay stand out among hundreds of others. And, you must achieve all of that in (often) just 500 words. However, giving yourself plenty of time to plan, write, get feedback, and revise will help. Use the tips below as you work through the process.

- ✓ Review the prompt.
Some schools will ask for a general statement of purpose, in which you outline your qualifications for and interest in the program; however, others will give you a specific prompt (or series of prompts). Make sure that you understand the question you are being asked.
- ✓ Research the program.
When committees read applications, they will look for applicants who are a good fit for their particular program. Research the specifics of the program that you are applying for (special programs, coursework, field experiences, professors) and use those details as appropriate to illustrate your fit/interest.
- ✓ Speak to professors in your field.
Your professors are some of your best sources of information. Some of them have served on grad school application committees themselves and can give you an inside perspective on the selection process. Others may know details about specific programs, individuals, or discipline-specific best practices. If you ask well in advance, a professor that you have a good relationship with may be willing to read your personal statement and give you feedback.
- ✓ Take a self-inventory.
What makes your life story interesting or unique? How has this shaped you and your career/academic goals? How did your interest in this field develop? What related experiences have you had? What did you learn from these experiences? Why are you a strong candidate for this particular program?

Before you write...

While there are various organizational approaches you might take, the following outline is one possibility:

Getting started ...

- ✓ **Introduction**—begin with a “hook,” possibly in narrative form, that depicts a key moment/event that demonstrates your interest in or passion for your field
- ✓ **Transition/Segue**—connect the story you just told to your background in the field
- ✓ **Description** of relevant academic or extracurricular experiences related to field AND what you learned from these experiences/how they make you a good candidate
- ✓ **Explanation** of why you are interested in this particular graduate program; connect to previous section—how would this program give you the opportunity to practice or expand upon the skills/qualities you have already discussed?
- ✓ **Conclusion**—a sentence or two; if possible, connect back to narrative from introduction

Revising your personal statement

Make sure that when you discuss your experiences, you are answering the questions, “How?” or “So what?” Be sure you are explaining what you learned from these experiences and how they have helped prepare you to engage with others in your field. Avoid simply listing what is already on your CV.

Move beyond simply how much you “love” something. Show the committee that you’re ready to take part in intellectual conversations within your field. You don’t need to speak in jargon or throw around elevated language, but you should try to illustrate that you’re ready to move beyond what is expected from you as an undergraduate student and take part in the scholarly conversations that will be expected of you as a graduate student.

If you are applying to multiple schools, tailor each personal statement to each particular school. While you do not need to rewrite the entire thing, making revisions based on the particular school or program will be necessary—and will be noticed and appreciated by search committees that may see many, very general personal statements.

Avoid overly clichéd language, humor or gimmicks, or anything that could be read as either preaching or complaining.

Don’t try to flatter the search committee by mentioning, for example, their program’s rankings or the school’s reputation—they already know these things, so mentioning them is essentially just wasting time.

Be yourself. It’s okay to acknowledge struggles or weaknesses, particularly if you can show what you have learned from these experiences.

Have multiple people read your draft—professors in your program, friends already in graduate school, WCC consultants, etc. Proofread multiple times. If you’re applying to multiple schools, make sure that all references in your personal statement are to the right school/program and that you’re adhering to the appropriate application guidelines.