

PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Personal statements for graduate school can take many forms. Some programs will pose specific questions for you to answer, while others may ask for a general personal statement. The general statement can be the most difficult kind to begin: how are you supposed to talk about yourself for several paragraphs (or pages) while striking the right tone? To give yourself a sense of direction, it may be easier to think of the personal statement as an answer to four related questions:

Why

do you want to become a _____ (librarian, dentist, video game designer)?

What

have you already done to prepare for this future?

How

will you contribute to the discipline or profession?
What projects, questions, or goals interest you?

Where

do you want to pursue your graduate studies, given all of the above?

In this handout, we will elaborate on each of these questions, while providing some tips for the overall construction of your personal statement.

WHY DO YOU WANT TO BE A _____?

To begin work on your personal statement, ask yourself why you want to enter the field you want to enter. This is especially important for those applying to pre-professional programs, such as medicine, law, and business. Many of us have a ready-made answer, but the personal statement is the place to go deeper. Lots of students pursue medicine because they want to help people – but being a doctor is not the only way to help people. Make a case as to why this profession represents the only (or at least the most direct and effective) path to achieving your goals.

WHAT HAVE YOU ALREADY DONE TO PREPARE FOR THIS ACADEMIC/PROFESSIONAL FUTURE?

This is the place to describe relevant coursework, research, job experience, etc. Your path to graduate school may have been straightforward, or it may have involved twists and turns. Regardless, the goal is to present yourself as someone who is committed to answering key questions or upholding important values. You also want to assure the committee that you are a highly motivated self-starter. Graduate study involves much less oversight than undergraduate work, so you want to demonstrate that you can devise and meet research goals independently.

HOW WILL YOU CONTRIBUTE TO THE DISCIPLINE OR PROFESSION? WHAT PROJECTS, QUESTIONS, OR GOALS INTEREST YOU?

This is an especially important question for students applying to programs that require a dissertation or another major research project. You want to show the admissions committee that you understand the nature of scholarship or practice in your chosen field. Ideally, you will also indicate that you are familiar with key debates and ongoing discussions. Overall, do you have a sense of the discipline? Do you know where your interests fit?

WHERE DO YOU WANT TO PURSUE YOUR GRADUATE STUDIES, GIVEN ALL OF THE ABOVE?

Your goal is to help the admissions committee picture you fitting into their department – and, in time, bringing positive attention to the department via professional accomplishments, original research, etc. Some questions to consider, if you're stuck:

- Are there professors in the department with whom you'd like to work?
- Does the department have notable strengths in an area that interests you?
- Is the department located somewhere important to your work (access to archival materials, cultural institutions, populations, lab equipment, etc.)?
- Do you see your work as a graduate student contributing to the surrounding community in some way (e.g., I want to make art in X city for Z reasons)?

In addition to developing a meaningful answer to the four fundamental questions (why, what, how, and where), consider the following tips for an engaging, memorable personal statement.

#1: REMEMBER YOUR ABC'S: ALWAYS BE CONCRETE.

Rather than describing yourself in general terms (“I became passionately committed to social justice as an undergraduate”), provide the committee with specific details to show who you are (“I volunteered at a homeless shelter in order to learn from people who have fallen through our social safety nets...”)

#2: AVOID DISCONNECTED LISTS OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS, COURSEWORK, ETC.

Not only is this information available to the committee elsewhere (transcripts, your C.V.) but lists are difficult to process or remember. Use the personal statement to tell a story about who you want to be professionally and how you will contribute to the field/discipline at large.

#3: AVOID MONSTER PARAGRAPHS

In this handout, we've suggested organizing your personal statement around four big questions. This does not mean four big paragraphs! Some of these questions will need to be addressed across multiple paragraphs. This is especially the case when it comes to the first and second questions, the “why” and the “what.”

#4: AVOID DISCONNECTED PARAGRAPHS

For instance, if you move from a description of your undergraduate work to a discussion of your goals as a graduate student, connect the two points with a sentence that looks backwards and forwards simultaneously (“My undergraduate thesis examined comics culture in mid-century San Francisco, while as a graduate student I hope to examine improvisational comedy in Chicago because...”) Even if your story has a lot of gaps, make logical transitions from milestone to milestone.

#5: TRY NOT TO BRAG OR APOLOGIZE

When describing academic honors or distinctions, do not worry about perfecting your humble-brag (“I was stunned and honored to land on the Dean’s List for three semesters!!”). Instead, contextualize your accomplishments by presenting them as significant steps toward a goal that is bigger than you (“My desire to understand the relationship between environmental toxins and pediatric cancer led me to Russia on a Fulbright”). The same goes for flaws in your academic record. You do not need to apologize for imperfections, but you may need to put them in context, with an emphasis on what you learned.

#6: GET LOTS OF FEEDBACK

Personal statements are intimidating because the audience is unknown: you do not know who is on the admissions committee or what they value. To combat this anxiety, show your personal statement to lots of different people. The Writing Center consultants can meet with you at any point, but it’s also important to seek feedback from people in your field. How persuasive and well-informed does your statement sound to someone who has been doing this work for decades? How does it sound to someone who graduated from a similar program last year?