

# PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Your personal statement for a program or graduate school should be one that your readers notice and remember—one that stands out from all the others they're reading. It should show that you are intelligent, capable, and well-prepared. Just as importantly, it should show that you know what you're getting into and that you've carefully chosen this program because it relates to your long-term professional goals. Ultimately, it should have a single theme: *you are somebody they want!*

Some personal statements have to be very short; others don't require any particular length. Your statement can touch briefly on the high points of the rest of your application, but its most important job is to address issues that probably don't appear anywhere else. Your readers want to know

- What interests you about this field?
- Why do you want to enter this **kind** of program?
- Why do you want to enter **this** program, in particular?
- How realistic are your expectations of the field you want to enter?
- What skills and qualities do you have that will help you succeed in the program?

## ■ Think before you write.

Before you start writing, read the application guidelines carefully. How long should your statement be? If there's a strict limit, what does it count: words or characters? When's the deadline? Are there particular issues the readers want you to address?

You'll also want to do some research into the program itself. Spend some time on its website and ask yourself: Is there a specific project or professor you would want to work with? Is its faculty especially strong in an area that interests you? Does the program offer a particular kind of experience that you're looking for?

Lastly, you'll want to think about the bulleted list of questions in the first section of this handout. What do you hope to be doing in twenty years, and how will this program help prepare you to do it? What strengths do you bring to the program that will help you succeed in it? What description or story or fact could demonstrate that you **have** those strengths? What details (shadowing? internship?) could show the reader that you know what you're getting into? What details (a course? a project?) could illustrate your interest in the subject?

You won't want to include all of that information in your finished statement, but by thinking it through you'll be able to choose the details that will speak for you most effectively. If you're thinking about your coursework, for example, was there one course that changed your direction, or helped you narrow down your interests? What was it about the course that made such a difference? Was there a day or a paper or a project that you remember especially vividly? What do you remember about it?

Unless the statement you're writing is very short or the program you're applying for is highly technical, you might consider opening with a story or scene that catches the readers' attention. So what story or scene could you choose? Which one might communicate something important about your motivation or skills?

## ■ Cover the basics.

When you do start writing, your draft should include several things.

- **State which specific program you're applying to.** You might also explain how you know about the school or organization, any special considerations about its locale or proximity to family, and any other reasons it fits your particular interests.
- **Sum up your prior training and course work** in your field of interest and mention any special skills you have, such as languages (computer or foreign), drafting ability, or familiarity with specialized procedures. Avoid spending more than a sentence or two, however, on restating information found elsewhere in your application packet.
- **Describe any educational or professional experience** that makes you an especially strong candidate, including research, editing, or writing with an individual professor or organization (paid or non-paid). This section indicates you are already actively engaged in the concerns and activities of your discipline.
- **Note if you are including other application materials** or have requested transcripts or recommendation letters (if appropriate). Give the address where your dossier is available and state your willingness to meet for an interview. Tell the readers when you'll be available and note any conferences you're attending for that purpose.
- **Keep your tone positive.** If there are weaknesses in your application, focus on the things you've done to address those weaknesses or the beneficial experiences that came out of them.

## ■ Rewrite your draft.

Now put your statement away for a day or two and then come back to it. Reread the original instructions and make sure you've addressed all the issues that the program is interested in. Go over the list of strengths you made: did the most important ones make it into your essay? Did you describe them with enough detail that they'll stick in the readers' minds? Could you make any parts more specific—instead of saying *I developed an appreciation for each of my clinical experiences*, could you talk about one experience and something in particular you appreciated about it?

And take out any words that you don't really need. Most personal statements have a length limit, so you'll want to make sure that every word counts. Have you written a sentence like *There were many things that made the test, which was on college biology, especially challenging?* Instead, try *many things made the college biology test challenging*. Better yet, skip the "many things" and give some examples: *Its two hundred questions and the need to choose between good and better options made the biology test challenging*.

If you can, find someone else to read your essay. Friends and family members may catch small errors; more importantly, they may also notice places where a reader might want to know more or where your meaning isn't as clear as you meant it to be. Of course, you can always make an appointment with the Writing Center!

*Last Revised Spring 2018*