

Writing Graduate School Personal Statements

Writing your personal statement for graduate school can be a daunting endeavor, but you should embrace it as an opportunity to sell yourself to your desired graduate program. Most graduate schools require a personal statement as a part of the application process. This statement is often centered around your interests in psychology, your personal background, the reasons you are applying to a particular graduate program, and your career and personal objectives. Personal statements generally fall into one of two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write. If you have this open format include the following:
 - a. Introduction
 - b. Long term career goals
 - c. Your specific area of interest in psychology & why
 - d. Reasons for choosing this particular program & how it can help you fulfill career goals
 - e. Elaborate on your qualifications and relevant experiences
 - f. Conclusion
2. The response to very specific questions: Some graduate school applications ask specific questions, and your statement should respond specifically to the question being asked.

Tips for Success

1. Avoid submitting the same personal statement to every program. Make sure that you are tailoring the statement to each program and the specific questions being asked. You want to customize your personal statement according to the program's emphasis and training specifications. Before you begin your statement for each school, read as much as possible about their program so that you can tailor your statement to the program and convince the admissions committee that you will fit well there.
2. Provide examples and demonstrate your competencies through specific, concrete experiences. Explain your relevant experiences (e.g., internships or research projects), but do not try to turn them into events of cosmic proportion. Be honest, sincere, and objective.
3. Find an angle to make yourself interesting or your application notable to set yourself apart in a positive way from other applicants.
4. Concentrate on your first paragraph. Make sure that you have a clear thesis statement and grab your reader's attention. A creative start can set you apart. The lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab the reader's attention or lose it. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.

5. Share what you know about the profession that you have learned through coursework, applied experiences, research, etc. Many applicants do not know a lot about the careers that they are pursuing!
6. Think carefully before including controversial (e.g., religious or political views), overly personal (e.g., traumatic events) topics or unimportant (e.g., high school accomplishments) information. Do not include anything that you would not want to be asked about during an interview.
7. Do your research on the programs. You want the programs to know that you are applying because you know their programs well and know what makes them different from other programs. You also need to be sure your career goals are in line with the program (e.g., do not say you want to work with children and apply to a clinical program that focuses on adults).
8. Writing well is important. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Check your grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization carefully. Nothing detracts from the content of a statement more than these types of errors. Make sure that you stick to stated word limits!
9. Avoid slang words that make you sound uneducated and overly elaborate words or stilted language that will make you appear pompous or pretentious.
10. Avoid clichés. For example, all applicants who apply for clinical psychology programs love psychology, are good listeners, and want to help other people.
11. Ask a trusted advisor to read your personal statement and provide feedback.

Preparation Questions to Consider before Writing your Statement

1. What is unique and/or impressive about you?
2. When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
3. How have you learned about this field through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
4. What are your career goals?
5. What applied experiences have you had and how have they contributed to your growth?
6. What skills do you possess that you can highlight?
7. What personal qualities do you possess that would help you be successful in your chosen field?
8. Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (e.g., great grades but mediocre GRE scores or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
9. What personal characteristics (e.g., integrity, compassion, and/or persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
10. What skills (e.g., leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
11. What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?