

The Purpose and Audience of Your Personal Statement

Your personal statement will be read by a graduate admissions committee in a specific program/department, typically comprised of faculty members. The purpose of a personal statement is to make a compelling case for yourself to be admitted to graduate school. It is essential to put time and thought into it. Your personal statement is your opportunity to tell your story that can't be captured in other parts of the application. In a way, it is similar to a cover letter that you need to apply for a job.

Qualities and Content of a Good Personal Statement

Ideally, a personal statement is interesting to read, insightful, and revealing of yourself and your goals. It should be evident that you have thought deeply about yourself and your objectives.

1) Your Background and Motivation

Discuss your interest in and exposure to the field of interest. If possible, discuss experiences conducting research, taking a relevant class, reading, or talking to people in the field, or relevant work experiences. Demonstrating that you are well-suited and well-prepared for your future field of study through specific experiences will contribute to creating a unique personal statement. Rather than listing things, as is done in a resume, you need to think carefully how to best convey the information you want the committee to know.

2) Objectives

It is important to show your readers that you realize that graduate school will lead to some future career. Although admissions committees like to see that you have an idea of what you might want to do in the future, and how graduate school fits into that career path, they realize that you are at a very early point in your career. It's OK to not know what you might want to do in the future or to say that you are currently interested in X but are keeping an open mind.

3) Program Qualities

Discuss why the program or department you're applying to appeals to you. This will take some research on your part. You could consider discussing unique aspects of the graduate program or mention specific faculty members whose research interests you. Generic flattery like "world-renowned faculty" and "state-of-the-art laboratories" is exactly that –generic – and will not show that you have really spent time looking at the graduate program and institution.

You should only mention faculty members whose research interests you, if you have some theme that ties them together. Mentioning 4 or 5 faculty members who work on totally different things is not ideal, as it suggests that you are very scattered in your interests and that can be a red flag. It is OK not to know exactly what you want to work on – and in that case, it might be best not to mention specific faculty members.

4) Honesty

Write in a way that shows your genuine self. It's best to avoid overused metaphors and clichés about being a great scientist. It can be difficult to write about yourself. Gaining the perspective needed to write about yourself can be difficult and it is helpful to ask professors, peers, and people who know you well to critique your personal statement. Be careful not to mold your experiences to "fit" what you think the committee wants to hear to the point where they are not genuine.

Common Mistakes

1) Errors

Be sure to proofread your personal statement carefully! Get others to look over it as it is easy to miss mistakes in your own work that you have been reading again and again. Careless errors lead to the perception that you are a careless person. Some common careless mistakes are:

- Having the wrong university or department name
- Misspelling the names of people you mention at the university
- Grammatical—commas, wrong homophone (e.g. it's vs. its; weather vs. whether), etc.
- Typographical—repeated words, weird formatting
- Errors in meaning—having a wrong word that changes the meaning of the sentence (e.g. pique)

2) Listing Your Resume

The personal statement is not the right place to list your accomplishments. Rather than trying to say everything you have ever done, it is best to dig deeper into one or two aspects of your experiences.

3) Verbosity

Conveying your message clearly and concisely shows your ability to communicate. Additionally, admissions committee members have to read lots of applications, and committee members appreciate reading something concise. Do your best to eliminate irrelevant details and use only details that are illustrative to your story. Do not be redundant. Do include the most illustrative/important examples early on, in case committee members don't read to the end.

4) Dwelling on negative aspects/making excuses

If you need to explain something that might be perceived negatively, don't dwell on it. First, you need to decide whether the particular issue is something glaring that needs to be explained or not. If so, then, you should think about whether you should mention it in your personal statement or perhaps a faculty member writing one of your recommendation letters could touch on it. For example, you may need to explain why your academic record has a semester/year of lower-than-typical grades. Maybe you had a death in the family or a medical issue. Or maybe your freshman year was off to a rough start because you were homesick. In general, you want to focus on the positives!

Consideration Before Writing

- Academic experiences – research and courses - that led to you to your field of study
- Long and short-term goals
- Positive personal characteristics and attributes and examples of them in a research/academic context
- Personal background and accomplishments (non-academic)
- Ask people close to you about what makes you unique for the two above points. Sometimes it's hard to have the perspective to see qualities of yourself.
- Use specific examples to illustrate points, and remember, you don't have to discuss everything.
- Don't necessarily discuss things in chronological order