

Personal Statements for Graduate Programs in the Humanities

Definition of Genre

The Personal Statement, or Statement of Purpose, is one of the most important components of an application for graduate study in the humanities. With interviews rare and campus visits expensive, this statement is your one chance to tell an admissions committee, in your own words, how and why you have decided to pursue a graduate degree in a particular field and at a particular school.

Personal statements for humanities graduate programs differ from other types of admissions essays in some very significant ways. An applicant to medical school with a high GPA, strong test scores, and extensive research experience might try to present herself in her personal statement as more than just a “science nerd”—as someone with important community ties, for example, or strong leadership potential—in order to round out her application. For the humanities, however, the content of your statement should primarily inform your readers about your academic background, interests, and aspirations, rather than extracurricular and professional experiences. This essay may be the first occasion where you’ve been asked to write seriously about your own research. Your challenge is to do so in a way that sounds unique and professional at the same time. You can’t simply turn your resume or CV into a prose narrative and call it a day.

The committee wants to know if you are interested in and able to conceive of and complete a long yet incredibly in-depth and focused research project. Extracurricular activities don’t carry any weight unless they directly speak to your ability to do research and teach in your field. Humanities departments tend to be interested in seeing evidence of *how* you think and write, rather than reading through a litany of papers you’ve written and courses you’ve taken. (All this information should be available somewhere else on the application, after all.) Suffice it to say that a personal statement for a humanities program is a sensitive and tricky genre to master. So, be sure to take your time with it.

Questions to ask

You need to have rough answers to the following questions in your head before you begin applying to any graduate program in the humanities, let alone start writing your personal statement.

- You may love literature/music/cultural theory/art history, etc., but—given the limited number of academic jobs in this field and the amount of money and time further study will require—why do you want to devote at least the next two, five, or eight years of your life to this subject?
- Your phone rings; it’s your dream graduate program. They’re offering you a full ride on the spot; all you have to do is tell them—right now—what your research agenda looks

like. (You aren't signing anything in blood here, and certainly your interests and goals will change as you continue your studies, but you do want to demonstrate that you'll enter the program with a strong sense of direction and purpose, or at least an idea of what this kind of work entails.)

- You don't have two heads, twelve fingers, or—unless J.K. Rowling created you—a distinctive scar on your forehead that binds your destiny with that of the Dark Lord. So what makes you different from other majors in your department and from other potential applicants to a graduate program in your field? More specifically, what about your *work* and *ways of approaching your subject* sets you apart from the masses?

Actions to take

- Read the prompt and make sure you respond to it. Different departments may ask you to respond to different questions in your personal statement.
- “Why do you want to go to graduate school for *that*?” Turn this pesky and oft-repeated question to your advantage. Answer the question, out loud, as often and in as many different ways as possible. Explain in detail how your research interests fit into the discipline at large; why you think you'd be a particularly good match for the department to which you are applying; what issues and questions you believe are most pressing to your field at present and why; etc.
- Do your research. Find out as much as you can about the accomplishments of professors in the departments you plan to apply to. Look at books and articles they've written, and think carefully about how their work fits in with the kinds of questions you want to ask. You'll want to tailor your personal statement accordingly to each department; this does take some time and thought, but it's worth it. Admissions committees want to make sure they choose applicants who are “good fits” for the program. All-around rock stars whose interests don't match those of the faculty may be less likely to accept an offer of admission or to get as much out of the resources at hand if they do.
- Reading up on what schools have to offer also allows you to invest your efforts where they will count most. If you want to study a particular topic, author, or time period, and the department does not have professors willing to work with graduate students in that area, you are better off choosing a different school. It is also important to remember that, as opposed to applying to college, the audience for your essay is the department, or even a set of professors in your field, instead of the school.
- Think about the differences among these four sentences:
 1. “I am particularly interested in studying the history of the Victorian novel at Hotshot University.”
 2. “I am particularly interested in studying the history of the Victorian novel with Professor Fascinating at Hotshot University.”
 3. “Professor Fascinating's work on Dickens and Eliot is of particular interest to me.”
 4. “I am particularly interested in the ways in which Professor Fascinating's study of Dickens and Eliot challenges prevailing assumptions about the relationship between

gender and narrative form in Victorian literature.”

In all likelihood, if this applicant had indicated an interest in Victorian literature, Professor Fascinating herself would be reading this statement. Only the fourth sentence would indicate to her that the applicant really knows something about her work, and gives her the means to put the rest of the essay—and the rest of the application—in some sort of context.

- Plan to write multiple drafts, and leave yourself as much time as possible. There are many different possibilities for how to organize your statement, but it may take a while to find the structure that works best for you. Prepare for the brutal task of having to cut some of even your most beautifully crafted sentences and paragraphs; your essay needs to cohere, and it needs to be fairly short. Your job is to come up with the best of all possible statements, which may mean writing and rewriting several entirely different versions.
- Proof *obsessively* for grammar, sentence, and paragraph structure, and word choice. Humanities professors want their graduate students to know how to write and edit. Indeed, graduate students in the humanities are frequently charged with the department’s *teaching* of writing to undergraduates. They *will* notice and be unimpressed by typos, passive constructions, and needlessly complex language. Beware of importing chunks of text from one essay into another: the faculty at Hotshot U. won’t be impressed if you tell them how delighted you’d be to be accepted at Nearly Ivy U.
- Ask your advisor, professors, TAs, and peers to read and comment on your statement well before the application deadline. If you’re a Duke student, bring your statement to the Writing Studio at any stage of the process. It’s important to make sure that at least one of your readers is familiar with the conventions of your field and, preferably, with the application process for graduate programs as well.
- If possible, you should have a close-to-final draft of your statement ready in time to submit to professors who have agreed to write you letters of recommendation. Their letters will be better the more they know about you and your interests, and their comments on your essay will help you revise and polish.
- Don’t be afraid to contact the directors of the programs to which you are applying with any questions about what they’re looking for.

Helpful links

<http://chronicle.com/article/A-Purposeless-Statement-/46867/>

“A Purposeless Statement?” In this Chronicle for Higher Education article, an M.F.A. candidate in creative nonfiction investigates the purpose of “purpose statements.”

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/>

Purdue’s Online Writing Lab provides additional questions to ask and steps to take, advice from admissions officers from several universities, and excerpts from successful application essays in a variety of disciplines.

<http://english.duke.edu/graduate/prospective-student/application-faqs>

The Duke English Department offers the most detailed online, publicly available advice for writing a personal statement—and for applying to PhD programs in English more generally—of

almost any English department in the country. Question 17 on this FAQs page addresses how to write an effective personal statement. Keep in mind that different departments (and different disciplines) may be looking for different things.