

# UMSL Writing Center - Grad School/Personal Statements

## **What is the Personal Statement?**

A brief narrative of your past experiences and future goals and opportunity to:

- Describe the special strengths you offer the field
- Make a positive first impression
- Show why you are a good match for the field
- Present goals
- Reveal how your interests in the field evolved

## **Five Standard Topics for Personal Statements:**

- Motivation for your career
- Commitment to field of study
- Source and development of that commitment
- Long term goals

## **Questions to Consider before Starting Your Personal Statement:**

### **Exploration of Education**

What are your educational achievements and how do you want to continue your intellectual development?

What accomplishments or experiences establish your knowledge in the field?

Are there projects or experiences that show you have the potential to become a colleague to the professors in the graduate program?

### **Exploration of Future Goals**

What are your goals and plans for the future?

How will the knowledge you obtain through this program help you to meet your goals?

### **Exploration of Personal Development**

What have you done that makes you proud?

How have you responded to past disappointments or failures?

## **DO'S & DON'TS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PERSONAL STATEMENT:**

### **Advice on Affirming Your Personal Characteristics**

- Only write about things that you are comfortable discussing--be yourself and write about your best points.

- Consider life experiences as valid indicators of your ability to be successful in graduate school.
- If you have a non-traditional background, don't try to mold your personal statement to appear more like a traditional applicant. Consider how a non-traditional background could be presented as an advantage.

### **Advice on Development and the Use of Evidence**

- Work toward an overriding theme or image of yourself as an effective graduate student and future professional to unify the message of your statement.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the program to which you are applying and how you can be an asset to that program.
- Describe intellectual activities and accomplishments that show you have the intellectual involvement and commitment to the field to succeed in graduate school and the profession.
- Don't simply list abstract qualities you possess; give examples. In other words: show, don't tell. Let the readers draw their own conclusions based on the clear description of your educational activities.
- When providing examples, don't be vague. Check for unsupported adjectives. Avoid just saying, "the educational experience was rewarding and challenging." Explain how it was rewarding or challenging.
- Show that you have explored your intended career. Highlight what you intend to use your graduate school experience to accomplish after attaining your degree.
- Provide explanations, NOT EXCUSES for any irregularities in your academic record. Indicate what you have done to rectify the situation, and emphasize what you have learned from the experience.

### **Advice on Style**

- Use first person point of view. Think of the personal statement as speaking directly and clearly to your reader.
- The personal statement is all about the applicant, but beware of using "I" too often.
- Avoid clichéd approaches such as "For as long as I can remember, I've been interested in..." and beginning or ending your statement with quotations.
- Don't be too modest or boastful. Let the facts speak for you.
- Be lively and interesting. Don't be cute.
- Replace passive words with active words. Avoid overuse of "to be" verbs.

*Adapted by Cogie and Wind from Write for Success by Jackson & Bardo, The Grad School Handbook by Jerrard and Jerrard, "Story Works!" by Molidor & Campe, and the Health Professions Advising Forum listserv.*

### **Characteristics Faculty Look for in Candidates:**

- Effective preparation for graduate school
- Ability to succeed in the graduate program and in the field overall
- Knowledge and commitment to the subject or field
- Intellectual development and activity (personal development is generally not the concern)
- Ability to work with the faculty as a colleague

- Career goal or objective for pursuing the degree
- Awareness of distinctive features of the specific academic department

**Writing the essay Portion of the application to Graduate School:  
Taking the time to Assess & Revise Your Draft from your audience's perspective**

"Writing the essay was difficult. My grades were nothing to brag about, and I knew the essay had to make up for them. It took me days of writing and rewriting, but finally I finished one. My advisor later told me the essay was the reason they admitted me."

-Frances (from Jerards' The grad School handbook, 98)

**Example of knowledge of the particular graduate program (see Psychology ad Urban Planning essays below for additional example):**

Cornell's English department with its world renowned faculty and extensive library, as well as its excellent literary magazine Epoch, make your graduate program my first choice. I have just begun to have some of my writing published. I wanted to continue and study with your Kathryn Newcastle Curly, and original gifted writer. If given the opportunity to improve my own skills, I believe I have the ability to succeed at it. (Although in praising the program the writer depends more on adjectives than substance, he or she demonstrates an awareness of some specifics of the program.)

**Examples of how and how not to present an irregularity in your record:**

**Explanation with negative impact:**

"I would like to address the reason for my excellent GRE scores. I feel that I do not test well on standardized testing, and those scores do not fully reflect my other qualifications." (To explain this irregularity, the writer would be better off citing other qualities as more important rather than admitting to an inability to test, particularly when testing may be important in the field, Physics.)

**Explanation with positive impact:**

"Even though I was on the Dean's list for two semesters and had a fellowship for my freshman and sophomore years, after I graduated from Cornell with a B.A. in Psychology I could find no suitable job. I worked for awhile as a computer operator. I like computers, but in my job there was not enough challenge.

I have always enjoyed making things, so I headed out to Hollywood where I worked on and off as a carpenter on movie sets, using some computer modeling but not much. After several years which I witnessed a number of workers getting hurt on the job, I realized that there is a need for better and safer tools. I was taking a night school course in computer design when I saw what could be done with computers and knew then that I wanted to learn all that I could about computer-aided design. I am applying to Illinois industrial design program because of your strong program in computer graphics and its application to design. (Candidate shows knowledge of the specific graduate program.)

## **BARE BONES OUTLINE FOR ANALYSIS OF ESSAY ORGANIZATION**

**Questions to ask:** By jotting down answers to the following questions, you will come up with a bare bones outline of your essay. This outline will help you assess the effectiveness of the essay's organization and development and thus help you to prepare to revise your draft.

1. Is there a main idea or focus that prepares for and unifies the main ideas of the paragraphs that follow? If so, what is it and where have you placed it? (*Usually it should be the first paragraph.*)
2. What is the main point of each paragraph? How does that point connect to the overarching theme or focus of the essay as a whole and to the main points of the other paragraphs?
3. How do the paragraphs of the essay progress? Possible ways of organizing such essays include the following: chronological development of your character or interests, a theme related to your qualifications, types of activities or influences (*such as home life, education, extracurricular, volunteer, work*), types of qualifications you possess.
4. What support or development of each paragraph's main point is provided? (*Indent supporting points under the point they support to give you a visual representation of the hierarchy of ideas.*) Are there any points which would benefit from more detailed development or examples that would benefit from further explanation of why and how they are important or influential? (*Looking at the number and type of points/examples listed in the outline for each paragraph should help you decide what needs further development.*)
5. Are there any portions of any paragraph that don't fit clearly with the paragraph's main focus?

### **Sample Bare Bones Outline of Personal Statements for Application to Graduate School**

#### **Essay accompanying application to graduate school in Psychology**

#### **Order of Essay: Development of interest in & knowledge of Human Factors Psychology & the University of Wisconsin Engineering Psychology Program**

##### Paragraph 1

While attending Mason State University, I learned about Human Factors Psychology. I was excited to learn of a career in which I could study psychological issues in applied contexts such as human computer interaction and aviation psychology, two areas that have always been of keen interest to me.

##### Paragraph 2

To prepare for a Human Factors career, I have taken classes in Calculus, Fortran, C, and Pascal, in addition to my undergraduate major in Psychology.

When I graduate, I will have participated in over three years of psychological research studying basic mechanisms of attention

Currently working with Dr. S. on a Senior Thesis research project in which we are studying repetition effects of negative priming.

I plan to submit this research for publication next spring.

Also planning to participate in a human factors internship with a local company under

Dr. S.

Paragraph 3

My career plan is to become a researcher of HCI and display design in either academia or industry.

My specific interests include design of training and tutorial devices, and role of spatial cognition.

These interests seem to fit with present programs of several faculty at the Univ. of Wisconsin.

Dr. Roger's (misuse of apostrophe) textbook (esp. Chapters 4 & 5) has helped me solidify my areas of interest & my desire to pursue my graduate study at U

of W.

I thoroughly enjoyed the reports Dr. K. S. gave me on...when I met with him & visited...

Also enjoyed meeting with Dr. K. S. and discussing her areas of interest.

From this visit I know that the engineering Psych program at U of W is the one.