

Writing Student Statements

Nani Pybus, Ph.D.

Director, Center for Proposal Development

OK-LSAMP January 2012

The Basics

- *Presentation*
- *Personality*
- *Precision*

Internet Resources

Sites with information about personal statement preparation

- <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/734/1/>
- http://rpi.edu/web/writingcenter/wc_web/handouts/Grad_School_Essay.pdf
- <https://career.berkeley.edu/grad/gradstatement.stm>
- <http://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools/graduate-school-essay-mistakes.aspx>
- www.anat.stonybrook.edu/IDPAS/student_grants/index.html

Do The Homework

- Learn as much as you can about the program and institution to which you are applying. Be prepared to answer what makes one place preferable over others.
- If the school would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention.

Lay a Foundation

Avoid mistakes like discussing the school's rank or prestige, or simply offering generic praise. Instead, mention faculty members by name and indicate some knowledge of their work.

Consider contacting faculty members first and discussing their current research projects and your interest in studying under them. Then refer to these contacts in your essay.

Read the Instructions

The personal statement generally falls into one of two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement:

Allows maximum freedom in terms of what you write.

2. The response to very specific questions:

Often, applications ask specific questions -- your statement should respond specifically to the question(s) being asked.

Concentrate on Your Opening Paragraph

- The opening paragraph is the most important.
- Here you grab the reader's attention or lose it.
- This paragraph frames the rest of the statement.

Introduction

The introductory paragraph is the most important part of the essay, especially the first sentence.

- The first sentence should be unique and compelling, possibly thought provoking or attention-grabbing, capture the reader's interest, but not be a turn-off.
- Explain your desire to study the chosen topic
- Discuss the motivation that influenced this interest.

Central Sections

Usually about 3 paragraphs with evidence supporting statement made in the introduction.

- Each paragraph should have a transition which starts each paragraph with a topic statement that will be the theme of that paragraph.
- Each paragraph should have a resolution, which ends each paragraph with a meaningful sentence that provides a transition to the next paragraph.
- Mention your long term or future goals.

Central Section (cont'd)

- A brief summary of your educational background should be in the 1st paragraph.
- Personal experiences and the reasons for wanting to attend a given school should be discussed in the 2nd paragraph.
- The last paragraph should explain why you should be accepted.

Prove Your Quals

The way to prove your qualification is not to list attributes you believe you possess but to discuss concrete experiences that show your abilities and qualities. Details are paramount. The rest of your application has already summarized your accomplishments and your activities. Show the reader what you did in concrete terms, and highlight your active roles.

Conclusion

In the last paragraph of the personal statement:

- State why you are interested in studying the subject of interest.
- State the key points mentioned in the body, such as your experiences or accomplishments, that explain your interest in the subject. State it in a conclusive and brief manner.
- End on a positive note with one or two attention-grabbing sentences.

Talk About Yourself, Not Just Your Achievements

“My best advice is don’t write a boring essay. Sometimes I just read a first sentence like, ‘This one time I changed the world with my church group by playing the tambourine in Costa Rica...’ and I put that file directly into the ‘to be considered much later’ back-burner pile. Tell me who you actually are, and it is such a welcome change.”

— *Midwestern public university admission officer*

Tell a Story

Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do is to bore the admissions committee.

If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable

Be Specific

Don't state that you would make an excellent doctor unless you can back it up with specific reasons.

Your desire to become a scientist, engineer, or whatever should be logical, the result of specific experience, as described in your statement.

Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.

Make Yourself the Hero of Your Essay

“I encourage kids to think of this whole process as storytelling, and regardless of what stories they tell, they need to be the ‘hero.’ It's fine to talk about your dad being a coke fiend or your stint in rehab with your favorite WB crush . . . but unless you end up as the ‘hero,’ then the essay will have done nothing to help you, and it's the one place you're guaranteed to have the opportunity to speak in the first person.”

— *Los Angeles private college consultant and former admission officer*

Talk About What You Know

- The middle section should detail your interest and experience in a particular field.
- Be as specific as possible about what you know about the field.
- Refer to experiences, classes, conversations with people in the field, books, seminars, or other sources about the career you want and why you're suited to it.

Make Your Intellectual Curiosity Clear

If you are obsessively devoted to science, then describe *in detail this* fascination.

"Talking about something meaningful can make you more likeable," says independent college consultant Stephen Friedfeld, "but it has to be executed to demonstrate your academic rigor."

Essays Succeed or Fail in the Details

The "hand-cranked" ice cream. The baby clothes she cut up and made into a quilt...

"If the essay mentions you going to dinner, I want to know what you were eating," says one admissions officer.

Adds UVA's Roberts: "A standout essay starts with good writing. Be as descriptive as possible about the moment you're writing—we want to see it, smell it, touch it."

Avoid Some Subjects

Certain things are best left out

- Refs to experiences or accomplishments in high school or earlier are not a good idea.
- Don't mention controversial subjects such as controversial religious or political issues.

Make Time (not excuses)

- Successful writing takes time.
- TIME to develop the ideas
- TIME to write
- TIME to review
- TIME to get reviews from others
- TIME to re-review

Be Meticulous

- Proofread your essay very carefully.
- Many admissions officers say that good written skills and correct use of language are very important to them.
- Adhere to stated word limits.

Be Careful with Your Cut-and-Pastes

“In my book, the biggest mistake an applicant makes is when they answer the [essay] prompt from another school. It’s so apparent they’ve just cut and pasted from that school’s application. Why bother applying if you’re not going to edit the essay for our application?” — *East Coast liberal arts college admissions dean*

Writing

- *Keep your audience in mind* – admissions personnel do not have time to re-read long sentences or figure out obscure jargon.
- Reference: Strunk & White's *Elements of Style*.
- Grammar, spelling, brevity, format count.

Writing

- Use confident terminology; avoid weak words like: if, hope, try, believe, might, could or should, may, etc..

Better to say: I expect to demonstrate. . .

- Use several paragraphs per page
 - *Keep each paragraph focused on a key idea*

Writing

- Use simple declarative sentences.
- Do not use passive voice if you can help it.
- Short sentences are more forceful because they are direct and to the point.
- Do not be wordy. Certain phrases, such as "the fact that," are often unnecessary.

Writing

- Do not use cliches or empty phrases
- Be aware of grammar and syntax
 - *“Projects” don’t “show” things, people do*
 - *“Proposals” don’t “seek” funds, people do*
 - *“Results” don’t “improve” anything, people do*

Writing

Spelling is important!

Using the correct word in the correct way is very important!!

A principal is not a principle

Rationale is not rational

Led is not lead

Data are plural, datum is singular
etc...

Writing

- Do not overuse Bolding, CAPITALS, or redundancies **LIKE THIS.**
- READ formatting instructions carefully!
1" margin means 1" – not .95"
- Best font/size to use is TNR 12 pt.

Writing

Proofread, proofread, proofread again.

Challenge your buddies in the English department to find grammar, spelling, syntax mistakes!

Strive for Perfection

Always strive for perfection.

Rewrite as often as you can stand it to improve clarity, eliminate repetitions, refine style, and sharpen logic