

Writing the personal statement

A graduate admissions committee looks for students who are well-matched to the areas emphasized in the program. The personal statement is your opportunity to demonstrate how your goals and interests align with the courses, faculty, and research areas offered by your prospective program.

A strong statement will:

- show the admissions committee that you have an idea about what you want to study and why you believe it is important;
- demonstrate that you are familiar with the program and that you have sound reasons for applying;
- reflect your intellectual curiosity, motivation, and persistence, or the earnestness of your academic pursuits;
- assure the committee that you will be successful in the program.

An effective personal statement is persuasive; it is intended to convince the admissions committee that you are the right choice for their program. Yet, it is important that you remain true to yourself when preparing your essay. Matching up well with a program does not just mean your “measuring up” to admission standards, it also means deciding that the program meets your needs and interests. It is a two-way street. That is why it is so important that your statement reflects not only your best writing but your true intellectual interests.

Consider your motivations for pursuing a graduate education:

- What are the experiences that have brought you to this point in your life?
- Why are you thinking about graduate school?
- What do you hope to contribute as a student or as a graduate in your field?

In order to demonstrate why you are a good match, you need to have an understanding about your prospective program. You might consider the following questions:

- Which faculty are conducting research in areas related to your interests?
- What is it about their work that is meaningful, interesting, or appealing to you?
- Does the program offer specialized training or course sequences that fit with your goals?
- Are there specialized research centers or facilities that support the areas of investigation you wish to pursue?

Additional questions you might ask yourself:

- What is special, distinctive, or impressive about you or your life experiences? What sets you apart from the crowd?
- What have you learned about your field that sparked your interest and convinced you that you are well suited to contribute to this field?
- Were you inspired by any classes, readings, seminars, research, or internship experiences related to your field? Have you had conversations with people already in the field that helped shape your interest?
- Do you possess special skills or work experience that enhance your likelihood of success?
- Are there any gaps in your academic record that you should explain?

Crafting the essay

The opening paragraph

Your lead paragraph is generally the most important. It introduces your main ideas and sets a framework for the rest of your essay. Often it is easiest to write this paragraph last, when you have worked out what you want to say.

Tell a story

Your statement should tell a story with concrete details about your life. Describe the events that led you to your professional or educational aspirations. Which experiences helped shape your values?

Be clear

Your essay should provide specific detail instead of relying on broad generalizations. For example, rather than stating “my research internship provided valuable experience,” a more interesting and persuasive statement would describe the specific skills and insights you acquired: “By transcribing interview protocols and coding the data, I gained a deeper understanding of how teen-age mothers make attributions.”

Helpful hints

- Visit your campus writing center for help. They can assist you with brainstorming your ideas, proofreading, style, and grammar.
- Ask your professors and advisors to review drafts of your statement.
- Consult writing and grammar aids. Do not rely solely on the spelling and grammar checks in your word processing software.
- Plan ahead so that you have plenty of time to review, rewrite, and edit your essays.