

Developing A Statement of Purpose Resource Guide



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Tips for Developing a Great Personal Statement

Get Organized

- Conduct a self-inventory of yourself (see page 4 of Guide)
- Write an individual and unique letter for each school- this means do your research on each school you are interested in applying to
- Make sure you follow the instructions accordingly- address all prompts

The Essentials

- Candor-honesty, sincerity, and authenticity
- Grammatical accuracy and clarity
- Good writing is writing that is easily understood
- Have three or four people read your personal statement and critique it
- Maintain the proper tone
- Stick to the length that is requested
- Realize that it may take 4 to 5 drafts before you are ready to submit

Be sure to...

- Make yourself stand out
- Find your unique angle- ask yourself “Who am I?” “Why am I different?” “What distinguishes me from others?”
- Always consider your audience
- Make sure you demonstrate that you have read the catalog carefully, researched the program and considered your reasons for applying to that particular school
- Keep it upbeat and positive

What to Leave out and What to Avoid

- Don't repeat information from other parts of your application
- In general, avoid, generalities
- Don't try to be funny unless it's actually funny
- Stay away from anything remotely off-color
- Circumvent political issues if possible
- Don't make religion the focal point unless you're applying to a graduate or professional school with a religious affiliation
- Put the fraternity bake sale behind you- make sure that whatever you did rises to the level of having an actual impact on your life
- No gimmicks; no gambles- avoid tricky stuff. Don't rhyme; don't write a satire or a mock-up front page newspaper article
- Negativism or deep personal problems
- The overutilization of “I” statements
- Overutilization of contractions (i.e. Don't, Can't, I'll, its etc.)
- Overutilization of clichés
 - “I have always wanted to be a...”
 - “All my life I have wanted to...”
 - “I want to help the world...”
 - “I want to become a doctor because I want to cure the world”

Subject Matter to Avoid in Your Personal Statement

- “My MCAT/LSAT/GRE score isn't great, but I'm just not a good test taker.” (*unless specifically asked to address*)
- “My college grades weren't that high, but...”

Addendum

- If a school welcomes an addendum, consider including one if you feel that there is additional information you would like to include
- Please consult with a mentor, advisor, faculty member, or the Career Center before you consider adding an addendum

Words and phrases to avoid without explanation

significant	enjoyable/enjoy	meant a lot to me	I like helping people
interesting	feel good	stimulating	remarkable
challenging	appealing to me	incredible	rewarding
satisfying/satisfaction	appealing aspect	gratifying	useful
appreciate	I like it	fascinating	valuable
invaluable	it's important	meaningful	helpful
exciting/excited	I can contribute	helping people	Things

The Essay Hall of Shame

Admission readers at the top programs in the nation say some of the biggest offenses in statement of purposes include the following (Asher, 2008).

- “Errors and sloppiness, misspellings, even an occasional handwritten essay. You have to wonder how they made the grades on their transcripts.”
- “Spelling errors, poor English.”
- “Anything that starts out, I’ve always wanted to be a _____.”
- “Sometimes they don’t really answer the question. We ask each question for a reason.”
- “When they just seem to be saying what they think we want to hear. We can pick up on that right away.”
- “Our application is a little different. We want original work. I hate when I can tell that they’re recycling material they wrote for other schools.”
- “The essay sounds like they want to be the next Mother Theresa, but there’s nothing in the rest of the application to back up any claims of altruism.”
- “We ask for dates on activities. It’s a red flag if all the activities are brand new.”
- “A whole essay on deep personal problems or excuses for past performance. It’s amazing how common that is. The essay should be upbeat, convincing, and persuasive.”
- “Too long. It shows no discipline.”
- “Every year there is always at least one essay from someone who tells us how proud he would be to be admitted to _____, but this isn’t that school.”
- “Students are afraid to take a risk that they don’t really tell us anything. That throws us right back on the numbers.”
- “Don’t tell me what _____ is. I know what my own discipline is! What can they be thinking? Tell me what _____ means to you.”
- “Some students think they can use the essay to manufacture a person who doesn’t exist. It doesn’t work.”

Great Statements of Purposes

- Convey that the student is well prepared for graduate or professional school
- Showcases that the student has done research and is familiar with the program they are applying to
- Shows that the student is very knowledgeable about the field they want to go into
- Demonstrates that the student is prepared to undertake this huge and important commitment
- Demonstrates maturity and discipline on part of the student
- Showcases that the student has submersed themselves in gaining hands on experience in the field they are interested in or in obtaining as much information as possible about the field they are interested in
- Are easy to read and follow
- Utilizes industry/field specific language and lingo
- Tells a unique story

A Guide to Conducting a Self-Inventory

In preparation to your statement of purpose ask yourself the following questions and write down specific examples for each. This will help you prepare a statement of purpose that is unique, well thought out, reflective, and articulates your professional career goals.

What is unique about you? What makes you different, unusual, one of a kind?

“At the age of forty-eight, I left my two adult children, my husband, and the dishes in the sink, and moved into a college dorm to become a freshman. And because I was a first-generation college student, I had no one to tell me that a college dorm is not the serene, academic refuge I had always imagined!” Asher, D. (2008).

Identify who and what your intellectual influences have been?

- What writers and which particular articles in your field of study have had the greatest influence on the development of your thought?
- Who were your favorite professors in college, and why? How has each influenced you?
- What is the best paper or exam you ever wrote in your major, and what makes it good?
- What do you consider the most important book, play, article, or film you have ever read/seen, and how has it influenced you?
- What is the single most important concept you have learned in college?
- Are there specific professors at the targeted institution who interest or influenced you?

Be able to identify when you had an epiphany moment:

- Where were you? What were you doing when you first thought of pursuing this particular direction of graduate study or professional school?
- What were you doing when you decided to pursue this particular field?

Now answer these questions that build a historical overview of your career choice:

- How has your interest evolved, and what specific turning points can you identify?
- What work experiences have led you to believe you would like to pursue graduate or a professional degree?
- What experiences as a volunteer or traveler have influenced your career direction?
- What experiences from your family life have contributed to this choice?

Be able to articulate and identify your career direction:

- Why have you chosen the particular path you are now pursuing? Why Now?
- What attracts you to this career?
- What do you hope to gain?

Consider your academic background:

- How have you prepared yourself to succeed in graduate or professional school?
- What body of relevant knowledge will you take with you?
- What study or laboratory skills have you honed to date?
- What personal attributes or physical characteristics make you particularly likely to succeed in graduate or professional school? In your new career?
- What is your biggest accomplishment to date?
- What research have you completed to date?

Connect Yourself to the Program

- Why this program?
- What do you have to offer the program?
- How is the program aligned with your personal and career goals?
- How is the program a good fit?

Can you connect yourself to the geographic area in which you are applying to?

- What do you know about the region?
- Have you lived there before?
- What interests you about that geographic area? i.e. population, culture, initiatives, activism, climate etc.

Consider the future:

Short-term goals

- What classes are you going to take between now and your arrival at your targeted graduate school? What laboratory or research skills will you learn?
- What research projects will you complete between now and when you begin graduate or professional school? Will you complete a thesis or capstone project?
- Will you be presenting your findings at any type of conference or meeting?
- If you are working, what will you try to get accomplished before you depart for graduate or professional school?
- What are your goals while you are in graduate or professional school?

Long-term goals

- What are your specific post-graduate or professional school career plans?
- How will this graduate or professional school facilitate those plans?
- What is your 5 year goal? Your 10 year goal?
- Will you be pursuing additional education or professional training beyond the program you are applying to now?

Developing A Personal Statement

The Personal Statement is important to admission selection committees; it provides them with a sample of your writing skills and your ability to present ideas in a clear and coherent way. Before submitting the statement, seek constructive comments from advisors, faculty and from career counselors at the Career Center. If the application asks you to respond to certain questions or cover certain topics in your statement, make sure that you do so.

The following is a simple outline which might be used in writing a Personal Statement:

Opening Paragraph: Make it interesting; the committee members will read many applications, so be sure that you give them a sense of your particular talents, individuality, experience, and uniqueness. One of the best types of opening paragraph relates to an *epiphany*. An epiphany can be the moment you decided to pursue your current goals or the moment you discovered what might be entailed to pursue your career goals.

Examples of interesting first liners in your opening paragraph:

“When the old man urinated on my left leg, it ran down my pants and into my shoe. I could not let go of him, as I was holding him up, trying to move him from a wheelchair onto the bed. That is when I first realized that medicine was not going to be just starched white lab coats and golf at four. I looked again at medicine, the actual practice of medicine on real people, and saw that it often involved messy fluids, imprecision, and an element of surprise....”
Asher, D. (2008).

Background: Concentrate on those experiences that have served as a foundation for your upcoming graduate and professional school work. Describe your community and family background and tell how your interests in, and knowledge of, your chosen field developed. Describe any personal attributes and qualities that would help you complete your graduate study successfully, examples are very helpful. Focus on your determination to achieve your goals, initiative and ability in developing ideas, and capacity for working through problems independently.

Qualifications: Describe those experiences that will serve as a foundation for your forthcoming graduate and professional school work. Discuss (1) your expertise and accomplishments in your major field, (2) your undergraduate studies in general and how they relate to what you intend to do in graduate or professional school, (3) specific learning experiences that demonstrate your motivation and inspiration for continued study, (4) other relevant experiences such as jobs, internships, community activities, volunteer experience and other related experience, and (5) address how their program is well aligned with your career goals, aspirations, be sure to showcase you have done research on their program and that you are a good fit with their program.

Goals and Objectives:

- Short term- What specific area do you want to study in graduate or professional school?
- Long term- How do you intend to combine your knowledge and experience with your graduate or professional school work to achieve your career goals?

Closing Paragraph: Leave the reader with a strong sense that you are qualified and that you will be successful in graduate or professional school. (You should combine this with your qualifications)

*“Summarizing all written above, I believe that my serious intention for study, my past lab work, strong academic background in various areas of physics and mathematics will be beneficial for my graduate studies and research. Attending *Blank* University would give me an opportunity to receive high-level education under the guidance of prominent scientists and excellent teachers and with the help of first-class equipment.”*

Reference: Asher, D. (2008). *Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way Into the Graduate School of Your Choice*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.