Applying to Graduate School

WRITING THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

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Parts of a Graduate School Application

- The application form
  - Usually done online through a secure page on the school’s Graduate Division website

- Academic records
  - Transcripts of all undergraduate work—some institutions will accept unofficial (always check to be sure)
  - Order well in advance; institutions charge up to $35 for rush

- Admissions test scores
  - GRE, MCAT, LSAT, DAT, GMAT, etc. Some programs will require the Subject exam as well.

- Letters of recommendation
  - Most programs want 3; do you have your recommenders lined up yet?

- Personal Statement or Statement of Purpose
What is a Personal Statement?

- Also called other things, often interchangeably:
  - Letter of intent
  - Statement of purpose
  - Autobiographical statement
  - Personal narrative

The personal statement is an important part of your application package. It provides additional evidence of your intellectual and creative achievement.

The personal statement is the only opportunity for the readers of your application to get a feel for you as a person as well as for you as a student.

It is also the place where you can put your academic record into the context of your opportunities and obstacles.
What is the purpose?

- To distinguish yourself from other applicants
  - *Who are you, and what life experiences make you different?*

- To help committees recognize your particular strengths and preparation
  - *Special coursework, summer research experience, industry experience, skill with protocols and equipment use.*

- To help committees identify you as a candidate for certain types of fellowships
  - *Regional, heritage, gender, first in family to attend college, etc.*

- To help programs determine if you are a **good fit**.
  - *Why this program and not another?*

- To express your interest in working with particular faculty.
  - *Who at this institution is doing the kind of work you want to do?*

- Other–look for guidelines specific to program
  - *Be sure to speak to questions or prompts provided in the application instructions.*
The “Hidden” Agenda

**How well do you follow instructions?**
- If the instructions give a word limit, stay within the limit
- If you are instructed to use a form, use it
- If you are given questions to answer, answer them

**How well do you craft an argument?**
- You are marshalling evidence that you are a good fit for the program, i.e. you are presenting a thesis and defending it. Sound familiar?

**How well do you write?**
- The essay should be well written, well organized, and interesting to read.
- Grammatical mistakes or errors of syntax give the impression that you are careless or didn’t allow enough time for proper proofreading.
What is Your Agenda?

• Convince program you are well-prepared
  ▪ Your good grades did not happen by accident. Why did you take those hard courses and study so hard?

• Convince program you have “the right stuff”
  ▪ Use examples to show you have the will and determination to succeed in graduate school

• Convince program you have a life plan
  ▪ Be open with your career aspirations and be convincing about how the graduate program fits with your plan
Preparing to Write the Statement

- Think honestly about yourself
  - Why do I want this degree?
  - What am I good at and what do I love?
  - What makes me better than other applicants?

- Take advantage of online advice
  - [http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/FS/essays.html](http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/FS/essays.html)
  - [http://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/GradStatement.stm](http://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/GradStatement.stm)
  - [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/pw/p_perstate.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/pw/p_perstate.html)
The Outline

- **First paragraph**—who are you and what do you want?
  - What’s your major and standing, and what are you applying for?
    - MA, MS, PhD? Program name?
  - What sets you apart, or what obstacles have you overcome?
    - First in family to go to college, re-entry student, student parent, double major in philosophy and neuroscience, triathlete, etc.

- **Middle** paragraphs—inspiration, preparation, explanation
  - Address your reasons for wanting to be in the field, or perhaps say what experience originally captured your interest
  - Discuss coursework, lab training, other preparation
  - Address any gaps or problems in your record

- **Last paragraph**
  - Draw the threads of your argument together to show the committee that you are a good match for this program
  - Briefly discuss your future aspirations (to be a professor, to contribute to the field of stem-cell research, etc.)
The First Draft

• Get your ideas on paper
  - Write it quickly; don’t be a perfectionist

• Get away from the internet
  - You have read other peoples ideas; now put them away and work from your own head

• Never, ever cut & paste from someone else’s work
  “I’ll just put this in place until I can figure out how to say it” is a recipe for disgrace and disaster
Revisiting the First Draft

- Let the first draft cool off before you evaluate it
  - Good writing takes time and part of that time is just getting fresh eyes

- Read it for content
  - Have you covered everything you think is necessary?
  - Have you left out critical information?

- Read it for style
  - Is my writing clear?
  - Am I getting my points across?

- Read it for the intangibles
  - Is my own personal voice coming through?
  - What kind of tone am I conveying?

- Ask other readers to give you feedback (peers, TA’s, program coordinators, etc.)
The Second Draft

- **Edit ruthlessly**
  - Prioritize! Only the best and most relevant and/or compelling information stays
    - Dull or irrelevant material must go
    - Sometimes even interesting material must go to make way for better material

- **Aim for a professional, personal, and consistent “voice”**
  - Your voice should be yours, but also professional, and should incorporate the vocabulary of the discipline.
  - Your voice should consistent throughout

- **Organization and transitions**
  - Smooth connections are nice, but readers understand that you are working under strict space limitations. A well-organized essay won’t need to rely on artful transitions.
Evaluate the Second Draft

- Have I improved the statement?
- Does it convey the message I intend?
- Does it speak in my voice?

  - If the answer to any of these questions is no, then REVISE AGAIN

  - If you think the answer is yes, then it’s time to share it with readers again.
The Penultimate Draft

- Let the prior draft cool off
  - Does the document still hold up? Are you happy with it?
- Edit for grammar, syntax, spelling
  - Now you can, and should, be a perfectionist
- Choose a trusted external reader to give feedback
  - A good reader will give you useful feedback that may make you want to change things. That’s why we called this the penultimate draft.
The Last Draft

- Your final document should meet all guidelines in the instructions you received
  - Create a checklist and read your essay against that
- Read to see if your voice is unified and consistent throughout
- Writing should be clear, error-free, and professional in tone.
  - Professional, not pretentious.
- Edit ruthlessly
RESOURCES & REFERENCES

- http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/FS/essays.html

- http://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/GradStatement.stm

- http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/pw/p_perstate.html

- Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice, by Donald Asher
  - Publisher: Ten Speed Press
QUESTIONS?
For best results, email me in advance so we can schedule an appointment to discuss your essay.

- I will *not* proofread for typos and bad grammar.
- I *will* help with ESL issues.
- Best of all, I will give you feedback on structure and content and help you write a clear, compelling, and overall *awesome* statement.