

Writing Personal Statements and Statements of Purpose for Graduate School

Many graduate and professional schools require applicants to submit a written statement or essay as part of their application. The “statement of purpose,” “personal statement,” “personal narrative,” “letter of intent,” etc. are essentially the same type of narrative but differ in terminology based on the program’s preferences. While most graduate programs have few requirements for the statement, others require specific information, which will be noted in the application material. Essentially, reviewers assess your interest and motivation in the program or field based on the quality of your statement. The statement is an indicator of your thought processes, and writing ability, therefore, clearly articulate your ideas with coherence and accuracy. Remember to have your statement reviewed by others who have a keen eye for grammar and spelling.

- Regardless of the subject matter, focus on that topic throughout the statement.
- Remember the audience is made up of professionals in their field so clearly focus on your intent and message, and don’t make assumptions about what ideas will resonate with your reader.

Choosing a Topic

- Reflect on something distinctive about yourself. Consider beginning your essay with a view into your world or what makes you interesting or unique.
- What is your purpose for graduate study or attending “this” school? Research the program and school. Know what appeals to you and why.
- Who and what have been your intellectual influences? ...a body of works? Writer(s)? Article(s)? Professor(s)? ideas demonstrated in a paper you wrote? a concept you learned? a defining moment or event?
- What area you would like to specialize in? Know this may change, but it shows focus in your current context.
- Define your career goals. Identify goals or future plans based on your self-knowledge and motivators.
- Your preparation and academic background. Combine academic and extracurricular experience to demonstrate how it makes you a special candidate. Highlight your research or publications experience.
- Influence of family/early experiences. Tell your story and the dynamics that have brought you to today’s realizations.

- Personal philosophy. Include your mission and add a powerful dimension to your statement. Consider carefully, though, stating opinions that are extreme or controversial.
- Any problems and/or inconsistencies in your academic record. Explain these in a positive manner.
- Special conditions that are not listed elsewhere in the application. Putting these factors into context will help your evaluators see the whole picture in evaluating your application materials.

Choosing Your Approach and Style:

There are no perfect ways to write a statement, it depends on you and your style.

A successful statement...

Has great opening lines and paragraphs that get to the point and catch the attention of the reader.

Is objective but conveys your personality.

Demonstrates specific academic preparation and knowledge in the field and explains the value and meaning of your experiences.

Gives specific information with details and conclusions that are apparent and relevant.

Is an example of careful persuasive writing.

Shows how you will use the graduate education in your future career goals.

Is no longer than two pages, unless the school's instructions ask for a longer essay.

Things to avoid when creating your statement:

The "what I did with my life" approach.

The "I've always wanted to be a ..." approach.

Over sentimentality or being too mundane.

A laundry list or catalog of achievements – it reveals nothing about you as a person.

Lecturing to the reader – criticism, opinionated, offensive statements will damage your chances since the reader does not need to be educated about the field from the applicant.

Faking your knowledge, being dishonest, or having someone else write it.

Writing in a passive voice.

Writing the statement will take time. **Begin early.** Give yourself plenty of time to write, edit, seek feedback, and rewrite. Follow a preferred writing process and showcase your best skills. Visit with a career advisor today to help you prepare a winning essay.