

Tips on Writing Statement of Purpose and Personal Statement Essays for Graduate School and Fellowship Applications

Personal statements and statements of purpose are perhaps the most important parts of applications. There is little you can do to change your GPA or your curriculum vitae (the academic version of a resume), but these statements can be written in many different ways, emphasizing different aspects of your interests, goals, personality, and style. They present the unique qualities that make you the candidate that a committee wants to select, and a good statement of purpose can also affect those professors who will write letters of recommendation for you. Consequently, you need to pay particular attention to their composition. Admissions and approval committees have been known to accept candidates with uneven academic records or reject otherwise excellent candidates on the basis of these statements.

Read the description of the essay carefully, and make sure that you answer the question in the way that it is worded. Pay attention to the word length indicated in the instructions and do not exceed it. These essays are usually very short, and you need to be concise and strategic about which interests or goals you decide to highlight.

Some fellowship applications may require a personal statement that addresses concerns of the fellowship. For example, the Udall asks for an essay responding to Sen. Udall's speeches and writings concerning the environment, the Soros seeks a personal account of what it means to be a New American and how the Constitution and Bill of Rights affect your life, and the Truman asks a series of interlocking questions. Such essays call upon all your critical capacities to present an analysis, opinion or personal reflection, and they are similar to other essays you have written in college.

Statements of purpose are required of all fellowship and graduate school applications. These essays require you to describe clearly your interests, your proposed intellectual projects leading towards major research or dissertation, as well as your plans for the future. They are the committee's introduction to you as a scholar and potential colleague.

A statement of purpose or interest is very different than the personal essay you wrote for undergraduate applications. It is NOT a general biographical sketch, nor is it primarily a personal reflection upon your decisions to enter a field, nor does it focus on your extracurricular activities (unless those activities pertain to your scholarly interests). Being a scholar, researcher or teacher will demand your best communication skills, so your essay should reassure the committee that you can communicate effectively and with a deep understanding of your field.

Keep in mind that you are writing to a particular audience, usually of faculty in your field (unlike your undergraduate admissions essay, which was directed to a general admissions committee). In other words, if you are applying for a chemistry PhD program, you will be addressing fellow chemists, for history, fellow historians, etc. If you are applying to an interdisciplinary program (e.g., History of Consciousness at Santa Cruz), your audience is a diverse group of scholars (literature, history, philosophy, etc.) all united by a similar concern. If you are applying to a fellowship, your audience is liable to be more general or interdisciplinary.

Be prepared to produce many drafts. These essays are among the most difficult pieces of writing you may do related to graduate school (other than your dissertation and your first job letter) because you must make so many strategic decisions on how to present yourself in such a short amount of space. Allow yourself a lot of time for drafts, and do not get frustrated because of the many times you will need to rewrite. Making multiple revisions is an inevitable part of the process.

Show your drafts to faculty members, particularly those writing letters of recommendation, fellow students, and others. Accept criticisms with as little defensiveness as possible. On occasion you will get conflicting opinions on the presentation of your ideas and you will have to decide which direction to take. If you have a leading faculty mentor, you may defer to his or her opinion over others.

The “trick” of this essay is to transform supplication into conversation, to change begging into exchange. Readers want to get a feeling of your intellect, and in a successful essay they have initiated, which they can only do if they admit you into their program. They will want you to be a part of their community of scholars because you have something to offer.

Concentrate on demonstrating what you know about your field and what you hope to accomplish in graduate school and even beyond. Is there a particular area of the field that you find interesting? What do you hope to contribute to the field? Avoid digressions.

Demonstrate your knowledge of the field by making appropriate references to leading scholars, major writers, and current debates or concerns, employing appropriate technical terminology. Avoid jargon that you believe is fashionable in order to appear flashy: most committees can tell superficial use of buzz words. You usually do not need to explain concepts in depth, since admission committees are usually already familiar with the field (although brief explanations for a more general reader may be necessary for fellowship applications). If you do write about an aspect of the field that may be somewhat unusual, your ability to briefly explain technical or theoretical aspects is a crucial component of how your essay is judged. You are not simply offering a summary of a field, so your ability to present your own arguments demonstrates how creatively you engage the entire field.

Make concrete references to the program you are applying to and to the faculty you would like to study with. However, make sure these references are sufficiently broad so that you do not sound as if you want to study with just one person or have an excessively narrow interest in the field. Investigate the program – review their web site, talk to graduate students, visit in person – to discover its focus, how graduate students are involved in research, – à-vis the field. Do not inadvertently position yourself on one or other side of a controversy

While you should discuss the particular area of your field from which you may develop a dissertation topic, do not present an overly detailed proposal of your anticipated dissertation. Most young scholars do not have their dissertation topics determined yet, and admission committees anticipate that. Many committees will regard a detailed description of a dissertation topic with suspicion, even deciding that a young scholar who has so determined his or her topic without advanced work is not open-minded enough to other influences in the field. However, if you do have areas of interest, explain them — just refrain from writing a proposal.

You are fashioning a “fictional” version of yourself. While your account is always based on truth, you have a great deal of freedom in constructing the image of who you are. You decide what goes in and what does not, and in what order. The notion that you are writing fiction can

However you construct yourself, never lie. Not only is lying wrong, but lies are usually easily detected and self-defeating.

Construct coherence. No matter how different your intellectual or other relevant experiences may be, seek out some way to bring everything together as a coherent whole. This is tricky and difficult — but everything can be described as part of one sort of process or development or another; there are always underlying connections.

There are many ways to open your essay, many choices on the order in which to present your involvement in the field, many different aspects of your academic career to highlight. However, many people get hung up on producing an exciting opening. In your initial drafting process, experiment with presenting yourself and highlighting your interests in many different ways before settling on which approach is most compelling. You can experiment by avoiding any opening and writing the body of your essay; or you can experiment with trying to write one short paragraph that concisely says everything. One technique is to write a brief paragraph or a few sentences describing your different academic pursuits without any regard to a beginning. Be playful in your experiments before you settle on one approach.

An opening that uses **an anecdote** about your interest in the field is very popular, so much so that it may come across as trite, unless it is a very powerful, appropriate anecdote, and it must be short. Opening with a **personal narrative** (e.g., how I became passionate about this subject) can be effective, but, again, this approach is very popular and even overdone

. If you do use personal narrative, make it very brief and to the point, relating a story. Another popular approach is to present **a chronology** of your development. While a chronological account may be tempting — and may be necessary for you to do at an early stage of writing — it is a fairly low-level rhetorical mode. Another possibility is to open with **at the most sophisticated level of your development**, such as the advanced research or honors thesis you are currently completing, and then describe how you got to that point in the field. Often, **an analysis** of some aspect of your research interest or of your own development can provide you with a way to discuss your overall development.

Present your interests according to an underlying theme, framing idea or argument that then draws from the history of your involvement to illustrate your idea. No matter how

different your activities may be, you can draw a coherent picture of your development. At first you may not think that climbing Mount Everest connects readily to a doctorate in mechanical engineering or medieval studies experience out of hand.

Do not present a complete list of courses in the field you have taken or an undifferentiated, comprehensive description of your interest. You will need to make strategic decisions on how you present your interest, deciding what is primary, secondary, etc., and making such decisions may be difficult, even painful.

Address any anomalies in your transcript. If you have any lapses, unusual low grades, withdrawals or anything else that seems strange, explain them in as non-defensive a way as possible. For example, the fact that the first two years of college you were a mediocre student until you discovered your intellectual passion or you withdrew from classes one quarter because of illness or family problems. If you do not explain the situation, your readers will invent explanations for themselves and their fantasies will probably be worse than the reality.

Avoid excessive, unreasonable enthusiasm. Extreme effusion backfires. For example, statements such as "I love 19th century British literature so much that I live in the 19th century," not reasonable enthusiasm. For the most part, exclamation points should be avoided.

Check your writing style for unconscious attempts at forced sincerity or authenticity. For example, "I am a person of few words" and reveal important

repetition has the effect of undermining your logic of your underlying coherence.

Be conscious of inflammatory or biased language. You may hold strong opinions about the field or be motivated by particular causes. Do not mask your opinions, but be aware of presenting yourself in a tactful, judicious fashion. You can express various views in such a way as to present yourself as having an opinion yet remaining open-minded. You want to avoid coming across as an extremist or a crank who cannot enter a dialogue with others.

No jokes. Humor and sarcasm depend upon a shared field of reference and you have no idea if you and your readers have such a mutual understanding. Most of the time, self-deprecating humor comes across as simply self-deprecating, and sarcasm can easily be misunderstood.

Do not write what you think the committee wants to read. Be yourself. Often, applicants believe they should write according to some image of proper "academic" seriousness or style. Your personal style and passion should shine through the essay. Although this is a formal essay and you should avoid slang or overly casual constructions, its tone should be engaging, even personable (though not personal).

Poofread the essay, roofpread the essay, prufreed the essay. Have your friends proofread it. While this is not a grammar test, excessive typos and other mechanical errors indicate poor work habits and do not make a good impression.

After all this advice and warning, keep in mind that this is actually an exciting process. Perhaps for the first time in years you are attempting to present a coherent intellectual portrait of yourself. In the process you may actually gain a clearer vision of your interests and goals and feel even more confident that graduate study is the direction you want to go.