

Applying to Graduate School: Writing a Compelling Personal Statement



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YOUR FIRST STEP TOWARD A GRADUATE degree in psychology is to apply to graduate programs that are right for you. Your goal is to do everything possible to ensure admission to at least one, and hopefully more, programs. The typical psychology graduate school application package includes four crucial elements: Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, official undergraduate transcripts, letters of recommendation, and a personal statement from the applicant. Different schools, programs, and faculty members attach different relative value to each element, but all are important. In general, most programs expect applicants to score highly on each subtest of the GRE, maintain a strong GPA during college course work, submit excellent letters of recommendation, and write an impressive personal statement. Of these four elements, students typically agonize a great deal over the personal statement, perhaps because they have never written one before, because it seems awkward to write about oneself, or because the task is not well defined by graduate programs. In this brief article, we outline basic guidelines for writing a persuasive personal statement. Note that our own expertise is in research-oriented graduate programs; consequently, our advice is largely specific to applications to such programs. Even so, students interested in purely applied programs should also

benefit from many of our tips. Finally, keep in mind that there is no one perfect formula for a personal statement. By the very nature of the task, everyone's personal statement will be unique, yet the basic suggestions we provide can be incorporated into any personal statement.

The Basics

Keep four basics in mind as you write your personal statement: length, writing style, tone, and the need for feedback and revision.

Length. In general, a good personal statement will be around two single-spaced pages. In our experience, shorter statements provide too little information; longer statements are redundant and wordy. Longer statements might be fine if you have substantive issues to discuss. For example, if you have a lot of research experience, you may need to exceed two pages to describe your work in sufficient detail. Above all, aim for quality rather than quantity. No reader will appreciate your stretching two pages worth of information into six or seven pages. Remember, readers will be assessing the content of your personal statement as well as your ability to communicate effectively and concisely.

Writing style. Your personal statement is your opportunity to create a good first impression. This means your writing must be clear and correct. No one is

impressed by careless grammatical and typographical errors. Failure to attend to such details raises concerns about conscientiousness and reliability. Remember, paying attention to detail and writing well are extremely important research skills. You also should attend carefully to your use of vocabulary. Large doses of unusual or obscure vocabulary will only distract readers and cause them to doubt your writing ability. To learn more about this and other writing errors, buy yourself a copy of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* and read every word. This little book is a classic for a very good reason.

Tone. Do not misinterpret the meaning of *personal* in the phrase *personal statement*! This statement is not a place for you to espouse your personal philosophy of life, to describe in detail your first romance, or to tell the story of the time you were bitten by the neighbor's dog and subsequently developed an anxiety disorder. Instead, think of the statement as a *professional statement*. Write about the activities and

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experiences that led you to apply to graduate school and that have prepared you for its rigors. Provide concrete, detailed examples of your experiences and abilities when possible (see below for more information about content). Above all, write in a professional tone that conveys your self-confidence: You need to showcase your abilities and convince the reader that you are smart and driven to succeed. The personal statement is a chance to sell yourself—now is not the time to be overly humble, hiding your assets. Of course, you should not misrepresent yourself, and you should avoid sounding pompous.

Feedback and revision. After you have drafted your statement, solicit detailed feedback from one or more professors and incorporate their suggestions into subsequent drafts. It is especially useful to obtain feedback from psychology faculty, particularly those who make graduate admissions decisions themselves. Few professors will consider this an imposition—as long as you give them enough time. Start writing early and give your professors at least two weeks to read your statement. Never wait until the eleventh hour to begin writing and then expect your professors to drop everything and read your statement only days before the application deadline! (Follow that advice in approaching faculty for recommendation letters, too.)

Content: The Key Components of a Statement

Now that we have covered the basics of how to write a personal statement, let's focus on what to write. At least four key components should be included: your previous research experience, current research interests, other relevant experience, and career goals. (As you consider our advice, you might find it helpful to keep in mind the characteristics valued by graduate programs as described in an article by Appleby, Keenan, and Mauer in the Spring 1999 issue of *Eye on Psi Chi*.)

Previous research experience. The faculty evaluating your application (often your potential advisors) are particularly interested in your research experience, so describe each project you've worked on in detail. Aim to convince the reader that you understood all aspects of the work, not just your specific duties. For example, do not write "I entered some data for Dr. Raney's political opinion survey." Instead, describe the details of your involvement. Who supervised your work? Did you do the research to fulfill a



From left: Kari L. Nysse, Anisha Shetty, Matt Badanek (past president of the University of Illinois at Chicago Chapter of Psi Chi), and Professor Bette L. Bottoms. (Photo courtesy of Dimitri Perivoliotis, historian and webmaster for the University of Illinois at Chicago Chapter of Psi Chi.)

laboratory class requirement, for other class credit, or as an independent study? Most importantly, explain the theory, methods, and results of the research. Show that you made the effort to understand the scientific goals of the research (e.g., by reading articles related to the research and discussing the work with your research supervisors). Also, note any tangible products that resulted from the project, such as class papers, conference presentations, or publications. If you were an author on a conference presentation or publication, mention that in your statement and include a copy of the publication in your application packet.

By working on research projects, you acquired valuable research skills such as computer programming, data entry, literature review, etc. Discuss all such skills in a manner that conveys the importance of the skill, no matter how simple it may be. For example, notice the different impression created when you say that you "organized mass mailings, prepared subject materials, and conducted literature searches" rather than "stuffed envelopes, stapled subject packets, and ran library errands." Not only does it sound more impressive, but it implies that you understood the importance of the skill within the overall research enterprise.

Finally, state how your research experiences shaped your attitude toward research in general and toward research in a given domain. Explain why your experience did or did not make you want to continue working in that area of psychology (or other discipline).

Current research interests. Describe the topics within psychology that most

interest you now. You should have a good idea of this before you apply, because you should pick potential graduate programs based on the fit between your and the faculty's research interests. This doesn't mean you have to know exactly what you want to study. For example, you might be interested in two or three areas of research such as stereotyping, small group dynamics, and self-esteem. That's fine, because all of those topics can be studied within a program of social psychology, and you will find many social psychology programs with faculty who have one, if not two or three, of those interests. In general, it's best to be neither too broad ("all research in social psychology") nor too narrow ("research on the effects of sleep deprivation on 5- to 6-year-olds' math skills") in defining your interests.

Once you have clarified your research interests and identified schools with faculty whose research programs could accommodate those interests, tailor your personal statement so that it will stand out to faculty whose research interests you. To do this intelligently, you need to do your homework. Familiarize yourself with the research conducted by faculty members at the programs you are considering by reading their Web pages (if available), by locating articles they have published, and/or by contacting them and requesting reprints and preprints of their papers. (Such preapplication contact sends a positive message to the faculty member about your interest in his or her work.) Then, in your statement, mention what interested you about various professors' work. State your preferred research interests, but ▶

express your openness to studying related topics—that is, any topics you honestly would be happy studying. Discussing the research interests of several faculty members will increase your chances of getting accepted at a particular program. For example, let's say you apply to a program that uses a mentorship system (a one-to-one matching of students to faculty advisors). In such a program, faculty will seek students who are truly interested in some aspect of the topics they study. Let's say that in your personal statement, you discuss only your interest in working with Professor Walsh. If Professor Walsh is not accepting students the year you apply, and you didn't mention an interest in any other faculty member's research, you might not be accepted to the program no matter how stellar your qualifications. Now, if you truly wanted to go to that program only if Professor Walsh advised you, then such an outcome is acceptable. If, however, you would have been happy conducting research in another faculty member's laboratory in that program, the rejection would be unfortunate. The rejection might have been avoided had you been more clear in your personal statement about the breadth of your research interests.

Other relevant experience. Potential future advisors will also want to know about other experiences that make you particularly qualified for graduate work or that explain your decision to pursue a career in psychology. For example, you might want to highlight particular

psychology classes you've taken, such as laboratory courses in which you studied scientific writing style, or special topics courses that piqued your interest in certain psychological issues. You may also want to describe work, internship, or volunteer experiences that pulled you toward a particular subfield of psychology (or pushed you away from another subfield or field). For example, you might describe how you struggled to decide whether to pursue clinical or social psychology, and how your experience as an emergency mental health intern helped you decide.

As we mentioned earlier, very personal, emotional self-disclosures are nearly always best avoided. There may be exceptions: for example, revelations about friends' or relatives' personal experiences with mental illness might be illustrative concerning your reasons for pursuing a particular interest in clinical psychology, but even then, such topics should be discussed professionally and concisely.

Career goals. The final component is one that is often overlooked—a statement of what you would like to do as a psychologist after graduating from the program. If you have chosen to pursue graduate training, you must have at least a general idea of the type of career you would like to have once you receive your degree. Convince your reader that you understand your options, and explain why you favor a particular career goal. What are your options? If you envision yourself in a research-oriented job, you could work in an academic setting as a

professor who conducts research and teaches. Research positions are also available in nonacademic business or government settings. If you are considering more applied work, you might want to work as a consultant in a business organization or you may want to go into private practice as a therapist. (Consult the American Psychological Association for more information on career options in psychology: www.apa.org/students/career.html.) It is fine to discuss a couple options and to be uncertain about which option you will likely pursue, but in any case, make sure you are up-front about your intentions and that the options you are considering match the goals of the program. For example, you should not apply to research-oriented programs if you do not intend to conduct research after you graduate.

Conclusion

We hope we have dispelled some of the mystery surrounding the personal statement, and that some of our advice will be helpful to you. Just remember: The clearer you are with yourself about your goals and interests, the clearer you will be in writing about them in your personal statement. Be honest, professional, and self-confident. Then rest assured that you represented yourself accurately and fairly, and that, in turn, you have maximized the chances that admissions outcomes will be driven by accurate assessments of your potential fit with the programs to which you apply. ☺

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Professor Bottoms has taught undergraduate and graduate courses such as Introductory Psychology; Social Psychology; Children, Psychology, and Law; The Psychology of Eyewitness Testimony; and Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Racism. She supervises graduate and undergraduate students in her laboratory. The excellence of her teaching and mentoring has been recognized with all three of the University of Illinois at Chicago's teaching awards: In 1997, she won both the Amoco Silver Circle Teaching Award and the Teaching Recognition Program Award, and in 1998, she won the Award for Excellence in Teaching.

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Kari L. Nysse, BA, is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in social psychology from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She was inducted into Psi Chi in 1993 at Hope College, where she received her BA in 1996. Ms. Nysse has been a teaching assistant for Introductory Psychology and Abnormal Psychology, has participated in training workshops for new graduate teaching assistants, supervises undergraduate research assistants, and plans to teach courses in Social Psychology, Psychology and Law, and Statistics. Her research interests include children's eyewitness testimony, jurors' decisions in child abuse cases, and the determinants of adults' abilities to detect deception in children. She has presented her research at meetings of the American Psychological Society, the Society for Research in Child Development, and the Midwestern Psychological Association. She has twice won the prestigious University of Illinois at Chicago University Fellowship. Ms. Nysse is a member of the student section of the editorial board of *Child Maltreatment*.