

Writing a Winning Personal Statement For Graduate School

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Outline:

Personal Statement

- Overall view
- Break
- Detailed view
- Questions

Outline:

Personal Statement

- Overall view:
 - What is it?
 - What is the purpose?
 - Getting Ready
 - The Overall Structure
 - Do's and Don'ts

What is a Personal Statement?

The application packet for graduate school

- Application form (on-line)
- All undergraduate and graduate transcripts
- Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores
- Letters of recommendation
- **Personal statement**

What is a Personal Statement?

- Definition (Wikipedia): a brief and focused essay about one's career or research goals
- Your “intellectual autobiography”
- It explains the experiences that have led you to want to pursue a career
- Your opportunity to highlight critical information, emphasize your strengths
- Turn academic weaknesses into strengths

What is a Personal Statement?

My take on it

- It represents the first non-numerical introduction or exposure to you!
- A wonderful opportunity to “humanize” your application package
- A window into the way you think and the way you express yourself
- It must “sell” yourself just as you would attempt to do in a job interview
- It is a “living” document

Purpose

- To present yourself in a favorable light
- To link your experiences to your goals
- TO get THEM excited about YOU
- To show off your writing
- To help them determine match

Remember the Audience (them!)

- Assume that the admission committee consists of professors in your area of study
- DO NOT to define basic terminology
- DO NOT talk down to your audience
- Stick to what you are an **EXPERT** in—your life and experiences

What Faculty Look For in a Statement

- A story! A mental picture of who you are as a person as it relates to graduate school and your future profession
- Maturity, self-knowledge, purpose
- Evidence you've done your homework
- Writing skills and articulateness

Kinds of Personal Statements

1) **General, Comprehensive Statements**

- Allows you latitude in what you write.

2) **Response to a specific question**

- Less latitude, but still important to be thoughtful and persuasive.

Sample Questions

“The unexamined life is not worth living.” -Plato.

- In light of this quotation, please discuss a decision you have made which has had a profound influence on your present circumstances. In hindsight, would you have made a different decision? Please explain. (*Haas School/Berkeley*)
- How would you characterize the effects of your contributions to the groups or organizations in which you have participated? (*Yale*)

Getting Ready

- DO YOUR HOMEWORK
- Confirm that the degree program offered matches your career goals
- Get the names of specific faculty members with whom you want to study

Getting Ready

- Review your accomplishments
- Update your CV
- Think about your goals
- Who are you? (research identity)
- Create an **outline**

Opening paragraph: Generally the most important

- ATTENTION GRABBER: Here is where you catch the reader's attention—or lose it!
 - Fresh + lively + different = Memorable

“One of the worst things you can do with your personal statement is to bore the admissions committee, yet that is exactly what most applicants do”

- It establishes the framework for the entire document; elements of a story are introduced in this paragraph
 - In a general sense, why you are applying to the program.
 - Begin in a direct manner
- End with your Thesis Statement

- Define your thesis statement

“...a sentence that explicitly identifies the purpose of the essay and previews its main ideas.”

Supporting Paragraphs

(past, present, future)

- Past

- What made you decide to pursue this path? (thesis statement)

- Significant role models and influences?
- Personal background; what distinguishes you as a person?

- What experiences have you had that shaped your goal (thesis statement).

- How & when your interest developed?
- Special research, academic work, employment, volunteer experience, etc

- What have you done to explore this path? (thesis statement)

- How you've pursued this interest so far?

- What have you accomplished that helped you along your way to this goal (thesis statement)

- What insight did you gain about yourself and the way you relate to the profession?

Supporting Paragraphs

(past, present, future)

- Present
 - What are you doing now that has helped you to pursue this path? (thesis statement)
 - How are your current activities shaping your goal (thesis statement)?
 - What do your experiences and choices say about your value system, interests, and motivators?
 - What is it about you that makes you well suited for this path? (thesis statement)
 - What strengths would you bring?
 - Unique skills that demonstrate the depth of your experience in the field?

Supporting Paragraphs

(past, present, future)

- Future
 - What research experience, skills, or training are you looking for in a graduate school to help you pursue this path? (thesis statement)
 - Research the program & explain its appeal.
 - Refer to specific aspects that match your interests (philosophy, curriculum, faculty interests, etc.)
 - “Flirt” with them without indulgence
 - What is your vision for career once you complete graduate school?
 - Future goals within the profession
 - Here is where your research about faculty members pays off!
 - Area of specialization? Future work setting

Do's

- Give yourself plenty of time to write it
- Give it a theme or thesis
- Use concrete examples of life experiences to distinguish yourself
- Write about what excites you!

Do's

- Edit, revise, edit revise, get feedback, revise...
- Be honest and confident in your statements.
- Make sure your essay has absolutely perfect spelling and mechanics.
- Use technical terminology appropriately.

Don'ts

- Write what you think the admissions committee wants to hear. You are probably wrong.
- Use [overuse] empty, vague, over-used words like "meaningful," "beautiful," "challenging," "invaluable," or "rewarding."
 - Emphasize the negative
- Try to be funny. Most people are not as funny as they think.
 - Get too personal
 - Use gimmicks

Don'ts

- Generally, references to experiences or accomplishments before college
- Controversial or highly unconventional topics
- Information from “out of left field” – i.e., doesn't fit into the story you're telling
- An autobiography or resume approach

What not to include:

- Do not lecture about what qualities and attributes you believe a professional in the field should have.
- Do not spend a considerable amount of time offering compliments about how wonderful and prestigious you think the program or institution is.
- Do not repeat information that is already in another part of your application, such as test scores or grades.

Personal Statement: Overall Structure

- **Opening paragraph**
 - **Attention Grabber**
 - **Thesis Statement**
- **Supporting paragraphs (2-3)**
 - **Supporting Evidence**
 - **Addressing weaknesses**
 - **Past, present and future**
- **Closing Paragraph**
 - **Brief Summary**
 - **What can the Program do for you**
 - **What can YOU do for the program**
 - **Close the attention grabber loop**

Attention-Grabbing Leads: example #1

“My parents who have always wanted me to succeed in life and take advantage of all the opportunities that they did not have growing up. My mother gave up her career in Mexico in order for me to be born in the United States so that I could have a better education and more opportunities to succeed and so that she could look after me and make sure that I have someone to rely on for anything throughout my entire life... My father has always provided the necessary things to live by always working hard and never failing to bring home a pay check... Seeing my parents work so hard to maintain a family they love shows me just how much working hard really pays off. I also owe my academic success to my determination to make my parents proud of me and to show them that all the effort they put into me has not been in vain. As a result of their support I am where I am. It is my way of thanking them for all the sacrifices that they have done for me...”

Attention-Grabbing Leads: example #2

“I come from a family of eight and I am the fifth child out of six. I am the first girl to attend a college from my family and it has been a challenging experience because I come from a low income family that does not accept education as a long term goal. I am a hard worker and I typically work two jobs while being a full time student to help pay for school and often am in need for financial support from various means. My father is a traditional Hispanic male that believes that women should not pursue a life in education because women are intended to be housewives and care for children while the male figure provides for the family. I respect my father's traditional ways in life but this is a path I do not choose for myself and growing up I have seen my mother living that life, loving each one of my brothers and sister, I know she would have wanted to have accomplished more in her life. It can be difficult at times for oneself to compete for a life in education because I am a young Hispanic female determined to strive in the field of science which is often dominated by males. ”

Attention-Grabbing Leads: example #3

“As a Latina, I hope to obtain many goals and fulfill them through my education. I am a first generation college student, a sophomore at X College. At X; I am a current Puente Project student where I once held a leadership position as a spring 2005 Treasurer; I am a current Bridges to the Future scholar, funded by the National Instituted of Health grant #123; an EXPORT scholar (EXcellent Partnership for community Outreach Research on disparities in health and Training), funded by National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities grant # 123; I am involved with Phi Beta, a Psychology Honors Society; and I am an EOPS and STAR student. These programs which I have been apart of have expanded my educational experience and have introduced me to greater opportunities.”

Attention-Grabbing Leads: example #4

“Six years ago I drove 1200 miles to enjoy the benefit of a college experience. It began in front of a caboose, that now extinct tail end of a train that tends to be red as a toy... Sitting massively in the back yard of my grandparent’s home, it was to be transformed in to my own dormitory. Making the transition from rusty metal box to comfortably self-sufficient dwelling was a creative change that in many ways paralleled the character changes that I went through during my undergraduate career. Fueled by my grandfather’s and my own efforts, we eagerly commenced constructing those changes. Challenges were not slow to present themselves. Each required an imaginative response, or rather many responses, as no challenge came with a prescribed answer. Structurally the caboose refused to remain level due to a long history of harsh treatment across the country on unruly railways... Six years after stepping in to that canvas of metal the caboose is nearly finished. Throughout the project my interest in bringing about its completion has not waned. Instead, in my unremitting determination to find creative solutions I have gained many life experiences that have brought me to the realization that working with ideas in inventive ways towards a goal is exactly what I desire in a career. The precise nature of the ideas I hope to work with has revealed itself to me during my academic and professional pursuits in science.”

Attention-Grabbing Leads: example #5

- “The ocean has always been integral to my family’s life; our annual vacations to Baja California fostered a strong attachment to the ocean. When I was thirteen years old one trip in particular had a profound effect on me. We went on vacation to Santispac, a pristine beach in southern Baja California. It had stretches of spectacular white sand and translucent blue-green waters, the hills overlooking the beach were covered with tall Saguaros and lush cactus vegetation. I submerged into the water with makeshift snorkeling equipment and discovered a new world: corals of every color swayed with the gentle current, while schools of fish scattered beneath my shadow. Eight years later, I returned to southern Baja and found Santispac littered with plastic containers and beer cans; fish had become a rare sight due to pollution. My commitment to work with threatened marine ecosystems was born out of experiences such as this one. In fact, it is my awareness of the need for environmental management that fuels my dream to become a marine biologist.”

Attention-Grabbing Leads: example #6

“Imagine suffering from a mentally challenged condition while living at a homeless shelter which often cannot afford to provide you with medications. This was the case of my friend Rita, who I met during volunteering at Cheshire home back in my native country India. While tutoring her for basic math I noticed that she rarely had medication available to her, but when she did, her condition would suddenly improve. At a young age, Rita’s case motivated me to learn about biological sciences and how drugs played such a critical role in clinical diseases. This led me to pursue a career in the realm of pharmacy. With the Doctor of Pharmacy degree I will be able to help prescribe and administer medication to people in need, especially those unfortunate souls who cannot afford it like my friend.”

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- Opening paragraph
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Supporting paragraphs: Content

- **Keep the Thesis Statement in mind at all times**
- **List the top 3 lines of evidence (strengths) **supporting** your thesis statement and that you would like the admission committee to remember you by**
- **Address the main blemish (weakness) on your record that may contradict your thesis statement hurting your case with the admission committee**
- **Define trajectory: Past, Present and Future**
- **Academic path, Research Experience, and description of character (Leadership skills, community service, student clubs, honor societies)**

Supporting paragraphs: Basic structure

- **Leading Sentence--this one tells the reader what the paragraph will be all about. In your case, it would be about supporting evidence #1 (Academic Path)**
- **Paragraph Content--here you have a chance to expand your evidence #1 with facts**
 - **Community College**
 - **4-yr University**
 - **Graduate School**
- **Transition Sentence—this one connects this paragraph with the next one, helping the reader maintain a “flow” of information about your document (Classroom experience-→ Laboratory research)**

Attention-Grabbing Leads: example #7

“Imagine suffering from a mentally challenged condition while living at a homeless shelter which often cannot afford to provide you with medications. This was the case of my friend [Rita](#), who I met during volunteering at Cheshire home back in my native country India. While tutoring her for basic math I noticed that she rarely had medication available to her, but when she did, her condition would suddenly improve. At a young age, [Rita](#)’s case motivated me to learn about biological sciences and how drugs played such a critical role in clinical diseases. This led me to pursue a career in the realm of pharmacy. [With the Doctor of Pharmacy degree I will be able to help prescribe and administer medication to people in need, especially those unfortunate souls who cannot afford it like my friend.](#)”

Supporting paragraph I: The “Pharmacologist” & Rita

“Being the first member of my family to follow a dream that embodied the pursuit of education, I overcame obstacles that demonstrate my resilience to take both life and scientific challenges and succeed. The first step in my journey through higher education was perhaps the most difficult one. In 2005, I migrated to America all by myself, overcoming the fear and anguish of leaving my loving family back in Delhi. Although painful, this giant step was necessary because there are fewer opportunities for someone from a low socio-economic background such as myself to obtain a good education in India. Similar to many immigrants who come to this country looking for a better life, I faced many difficulties to learn English as a second language and assimilate to the American culture. Luckily for me, X Community College offered me a nurturing environment to start my educational process while I supported myself by doing miscellaneous jobs varying from tutoring in math and chemistry to a shift supervisor at Starbucks. It was here where I took my first scientific courses in order to understand Rita's mental condition, and the more I learned about the potential impact of medical drugs in mental health, the more I became fascinated in with the field of pharmacology. After obtaining a basic general and scientific education, I made a smooth transition to the University of Y in 2007. Although University of Y proved to be a challenging and competitive academic environment, it also offered me the opportunity to learn science directly from the laboratory bench, changing forever the way I perceive the field of pharmacology.”

Supporting paragraph II: The “Pharmacologist” & Rita

“My curiosity and eagerness to conduct scientific research led me to obtain a scholarship from a program funded by Howard Hughes Medical institute that placed me in Dr. Z’s laboratory. Under his guidance, I got to study the neuronal biochemical pathways using the medicinal leech nervous system. My project dealt with assessment of the role of receptor tyrosine phosphatases in the regeneration of an injured nervous system. By performing real-time PCR, I was able to generate a strong statistical analysis that suggests a critical role for the expression of genes encoding tyrosine phosphatase receptors during the regeneration of the leech nervous system. These data will be part of a manuscript currently in preparation that will include me as a co-author, demonstrating my ability to engage and carry a scientific project in collaboration with other members of the laboratory. My experience in Dr. Z’s laboratory was not only limited to the bench. I also got the opportunity to present my project at the 2009 Undergraduate Summer Research Symposium, in which I delivered a poster presentation to faculty and fellow students at University of Y. This experience enriched my ability to speak in public and convey scientific knowledge to the community. Overall, my literature and research investigation of the neuronal biochemical pathways provided me with a better understanding of Rita’s mentally challenged condition, and it made appreciate the potential of neuronal growth and regeneration could play in finding a cure for mental diseases. Not only did scientific research reaffirm my conviction to become a pharmacist, but it also gave a unique perspective of how different model systems like the medicinal leech are essential to understand clinical conditions and promote drug development.”

Supporting paragraph III: The “Pharmacologist” & Rita

My experience of closely working with Rita inspired me to help others. Being an immigrant in San Diego allowed me to relate intimately to the Hispanic community residing in this area. I quickly learned that this community is largely composed of a continuous wave of newly immigrants coming from some of the most impoverished areas of Mexico and Central America. My will to help others who are less fortunate than me motivated me to travel to a remote area in the country of Costa Rica. There, my personal background and ability to relate to people became quite useful in performing physical examinations and dispensing medications to patients. Despite my limited language skills in Spanish, I truly enjoyed the task of educating patients about how to take their medication, personal hygiene, and different clinical conditions endemic in that region of Costa Rica. In one particular case, I became friends with a patient named **Pepe**, who was suffering from severe scabies. Witnessing a rapid improvement on Pepe's skin conditions after a disciplined medication treatment, made me realized the importance of clear and accurate advise for a patient's recovery. Considering that a patient like Pepe can be diagnosed in only fifteen minutes but remain in medications for the rest of his life, I was very grateful to have this type of opportunity to improve my skills in relating to people different from me. After coming back from Costa Rica, I continued helping immigrants and impoverished people by volunteering my time at the University of Y free clinic and the mobile health clinic at St. Santa Rosa Church. By participating in patient assistance programs, I was exposed to the work of on-site pharmacist concerning the distribution and prescription of medicine to patients. My work as a volunteer opened my eyes to the important role a pharmacist play in dealing with patients from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. **Whether it is Rita in India or Pepe in Costa Rica, it is clear to me that the ability to understand and relate to patients along with a strong scientific training are key factors in becoming a well-rounded pharmacist.**

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Closing paragraph: The “Pharmacologist” & Rita

It is my intention to earn a Doctor of Pharmacy degree to culminate my preparation in this discipline. I firmly believe this degree will be an important tool to fulfill my dream of becoming a professional devoted to prescribe and administer medication to people in need. If accepted, I will use the knowledge gained from my past experiences and personal background, intellectual curiosity and resilience, to succeed in this program. In addition, I can provide my leadership skills and warm-hearted nature to collaborate with faculty and fellow students, and create an environment in which people can feel comfortable around me. Nothing will give more pleasure than to devote my life helping people, like my friends Rita and Pepe, obtain proper medication and advise to improve their quality of living.

Thanks for your attention...

Go Aztecs!!!

Geanncarlo Lugo-Villarino