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Guide to Writing a Personal Statement

Note: Request an electronic copy by emailing psyadv@iupui.edu. It will make following the numerous links in this document much easier.

Writing an Essay or Personal Statement

Applications to graduate and professional programs usually require some type of writing sample. Usually it's in the form of a personal statement where a candidate is asked to write a brief essay about their academic and career goals and objectives. Writing a personal statement can be very time consuming and requires drafting, revising, gaining feedback from faculty mentors, and revising more.

Much of the following information is taken and adapted from: APA, (2007), Getting In: A Step-by-Step Plan For Gaining Admission To Graduate School In Psychology, Second Edition, APA.

"Selection committees do not expect you to have a sophisticated philosophy based on worlds of knowledge and experience; they are more interested in your abilities, in your potential, and in the nature and degree of your interest in psychology."

~APA, Getting In: A Step-by-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology

Things to Consider Before you Begin Writing

Each application will, most likely, require you write something just a little different from the other. Be sure to tailor your essay according to the specifications outlined in the application, including themes or questions asked, page length or word count, and certainly don't try to use extra wide margins and font size to make it work. One of the most important aspects of your statement is conveying why this particular program is the best fit for you based on your mutual interests.

Here are common writing themes:

- What are your long-term career plans?
- What are your areas of interest in academic psychology?
- Why are you choosing this program?

Methods for Writing

Clustering

- On a piece of paper write down the question or theme for the essay.
- Break it out into parts if more than one question or theme is requested.
- These parts are your "nucleus" words.
- On a blank piece of paper, write out **one** "nucleus" word or phrase in the center of the paper and circle it.
- Then brainstorm. Look at the words in the center and write out in a word or two other associations or connections that come to you. Write them down around the "nucleus," circle them and draw lines that connect them and radiate out from the "nucleus."

- Consider the following categories to help guide your thinking: your strengths, accomplishments, needs, background, experiences, incidents, abilities, skills, interests, ideals, character, expectations, goals, plans, and ways of looking at the world.
- Consider the program’s assets, faculty, uniqueness, scope, and philosophy.
- Don’t edit or censor at this point. Write down anything that comes to mind.
- Now, do the same type of brainstorm with the next “nucleus” word or phrase. And so on.
- Look at the clusters you created and see if a theme or pattern emerges. If you see something, write it at the top of the page. If not, move on to the next step.
- Now, review all of the clusters you created and begin to darken those connections that you believe are the most important. Put yourself in the position of a graduate review committee. After reading dozens of PS what would attract your attention – who would you want to work with for the next several years?

Free-writing

- Block out about 20 minutes of uninterrupted time in front of your computer or with pad and paper. Set your timer for 20 minutes and go!
- Review your resume and the action statements which can guide your thinking about your experiences and transferable skills.
- With your clusters at your side, begin to write. Create sentences out of the cluster you created and provide supporting details (examples or illustrative incidents).
- Don’t worry about organization, flow, grammar, punctuation AND DON’T STOP for the full 20 minutes.
- This is a good time to take a break from the development of your PS. Let your mind clear and refresh for the next phase.

Putting It All Together

Your goals during this stage of development include:

- Finding a theme or focus
 - Successful essays have a central point or theme that is built upon (it does not have to be dramatic)
- Developing a logical order
 - You could create an outline and then start cutting and pasting things in and creating a logical order of things
 - Look at the order of each paragraph and the order of sentences within each paragraph
 - Consider thinking about your argument in terms of Inductive Reasoning (start with specific incidents that leads to a conclusion) or Deductive Reasoning (start with a generalization and confirm it with facts).
- Examining details and language (avoid clichés) to make your essay more vibrant
 - Provide brief concrete examples and illustrations
 - Avoid vagueness in your essay, instead aim for specific examples
 - Don’t just describe your background – interpret it by making connections between this background and your future goals. Example: Don’t just say you worked in research but talk about what that did for your commitment to graduate school, the field, your area of interest... Give the experience meaning.
- Expanding ideas or trimming and refocusing ideas to meet the expected length
 - Which passages are particularly strong and enhance your theme (argument)?
 - Look at each sentence and each point you make...is it clear and succinct?
 - Look for jargon, clichés, tired phrases that don’t add meaning, big words that look out of place or may be used incorrectly...
 - Do statements sound grandiose (“save the world” type statements)? Make sure your aspirations are realistic and achievable.
 - Avoid negativity. You can talk about how you would like to contribute to an area, but don’t criticize past research or the field in any way.

- **Creating an introduction (focus in on that first sentence) that grabs the reader’s attention**
 - Avoid starting with tired old phrases like, “I’ve always wanted to help people.” You want something that is memorable (because this is your chance to make a strong FIRST impression).
- **Work on the last sentence – it should be meaningful and bring closure to your essay.**

Obtaining Feedback

- Your faculty mentor/advisor is probably one of the best sources for reliable and candid feedback.

Revising Again and Final Proofing

- Take the advice you are given and make changes. This may mean a lot more time on task, and more feedback and revisions may still be required. This may feel discouraging, but this PS could be what puts you above the crowd of applicants....or, it can be what kills your application. It’s worth the time!

Dos and Don’ts from Psychology Faculty on Writing a Personal Statement

- “Avoid odd salutations, **telling your life story (too past-focused) instead of staying focused on future**, spending too much space on some personal point of pride that really isn’t relevant to graduate school, clumsy impression management (of course it will occur, but should not be jarringly obvious), poor characterizations of the field by students who don’t really have a good grasp of what they’re getting into, using big words that sound out of place and represent obvious attempts to display a good vocabulary (but end up doing the opposite), cursory references to program faculty and/or their research interests that are clearly tacked on (e.g., lifted off a the program website), failing to change the names of faculty/programs/schools when a form-letter template is being used).”
- “Do your homework – **learn something about the program. Get research experience, and then talk about it in the statement. Highlight other strengths that are clearly relevant. Be honest and address deficiencies straight up rather than hoping readers won’t notice them (they will).** Don’t be afraid to edit and revise. Get some feedback from at least two other people. Continue proofreading and correct mistakes until you get through it once without spotting any errors. Then proofread it one more time.”
- “It’s hard to write a great personal statement that really stands out, but very easy to write a bad one that can knock you out (or significantly down the list). Try to craft a good one, but the main thing is not to crank out a bad one.”
- “One thing that makes me scream are statements about how much they love helping or working with people. It’s a pretty meaningless statement when you think about it. What job doesn’t involve SOME degree of working with people? I also scream when I read a rehashing of experiences that I can glean from their application. It’s better when applicants flesh those experiences out so I can see what kind of personal impact they made on the student.”
- “**The best statements involve something that will make the committee remember the student.** A personal anecdote perhaps (e.g., remember that applicant who took a trip to India to learn more about...). A word of caution, however: **be careful what you reveal in personal anecdotes. Ideally they are professional in nature. Saying that you want to be a psychologist because you were diagnosed with X at age 18 is not the way to make a good impression.** Students should remember what they learn in their social psych courses. Saying something like that is a sure-fire way to activate stereotypes, and given how busy we are when we read applications, we’re all the more likely to apply them. It’s just an automatic reaction, but unfortunately has negative consequences for the applicant.”

- “Anything students can say to show that they already are gaining expertise on a certain topic is a good thing. This is especially important for applying to Ph.D. programs. If I see that someone can speak knowledgeably about a theory or a particular person’s research, it suggests to me that they have gone above and beyond what was asked of them in their classes.”

How to Avoid the Kisses of Death in the Graduate School Application Process

A full-text copy of the following article whose results are summarized in this document (see its reference below) can be accessed at: http://www.leaonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1207/s15328023top3301_5

Appleby, D. C., & Appleby, K. M. (2006). Kisses of death in the graduate school application process. *Teaching of Psychology*, 33(6), 19-24.

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Numerous authors offer advice to undergraduate psychology majors about what they **should do** to gain admission to graduate programs. However, few authors advise students about what they **should not do** when applying to graduate school and, when they do, few support their advice with data. We surveyed the chairs of graduate school admissions committees in psychology about the contents of graduate school applications that **decreased** chances for acceptance (i.e., kisses of death or KODs). A qualitative analysis of these surveys yielded the following six categories of KODs. Although the KODs identified in this study reflect unwise choices on the part of applicants, we believe many of them resulted more from a lack of appropriate advising and mentoring than from a lack of applicants’ intelligence. Unless undergraduate psychology programs provide appropriate advising and mentoring concerning graduate school culture and the requirements of the graduate school application process, their majors are likely to commit these KODs. For example, an unmentored psychology major may interpret a personal statement at face value by perceiving it as an opportunity to share personal (i.e., private) information with the members of a graduate admissions committee. **Unless applicants know that a personal statement should address issues such as research interests and perceived fit with a program, they may misinterpret its purpose and write personal statements that inadvertently doom their applications.** Similarly, an unmentored student may interpret a letter of recommendation as a request for information from a person who knows her/him well and can vouch for her/his admirable traits and strong values (e.g., a family member or a member of the clergy). The purpose of our study was to remedy these unfortunate situations by providing undergraduate psychology majors with advice that will enable them to avoid the KODs in the graduate school application process.

Personal Statements

- **Avoid references to your mental health.** Such statements could create the impression you may be unable to function as a successful graduate student.
- Avoid excessively altruistic statements (e.g., “I just want to help people.”). Graduate faculty could interpret these statements to mean you believe a strong need to help others is more important to your success in graduate school than a desire to perform research and engage in other academic and professional activities.
- **Avoid providing excessively self-revealing information.** Faculty may interpret such information as a sign you are unaware of the value of interpersonal or professional boundaries in sensitive areas.
- Avoid inappropriate humor, attempts to appear cute or clever, and **references to God or religious issues** when these issues are unrelated to the program to which you are applying. Admissions committee members may interpret this type of information to mean you lack awareness of the formal nature of the application process or the culture of graduate school.

Letters of Recommendation

- Avoid letters of recommendation from people who do not know you well, whose portrayals of your characteristics may not be objective (e.g., a relative), or who are unable to base their descriptions in an academic context (e.g., your minister). Letters from these authors can give the impression you are unable or unwilling to solicit letters from individuals whose depictions are accurate, objective, or professionally relevant.
- Avoid letter of recommendation authors who will provide unflattering descriptions of your personal or academic characteristics. These descriptions provide a clear warning that you are not suited for graduate study.
- Choose your letter of recommendation authors carefully. Do not simply ask potential authors if they are willing to write you a letter of recommendation; ask them if they are able to write you a *strong* letter of recommendation. This question will allow them to decline your request diplomatically if they believe their letter may be more harmful than helpful.
- Identify and approach letter writers early in the application process. This means approaching potential writers at minimum four weeks prior to the first letter deadline. Not only does this ensure that writers have plenty of time to put together a quality recommendation, it also gives you enough time to identify other potential writers if a person you ask is unable or unwilling to write one for you.
- Make sure you provide letter writers with an abundance of information about you to write about. Useful materials include things like transcripts, test scores, a list of extra-curricular involvement, reminders of class performance, descriptions of relevant work or volunteer experience, a short statement of career and educational goals, or anything else that might help prompt a writer's memory. Remember, providing too much information is never a bad thing- this is especially true if your writers have not been in constant contact with you recently (you do not want them to forget all of the awesome things you have accomplished!).

Lack of Information about the Program to Which You Are Applying

- Avoid statements that reflect a generic approach to the application process or an unfamiliarity with the program to which you are applying. These statements signal you have not made an honest effort to learn about the program from which you are saying you want to earn your graduate degree.
- Avoid statements that indicate you and the target program are a perfect fit if these statements are not corroborated with specific evidence that supports your assertion (e.g., your research interests are similar to those of the program's faculty). Graduate faculty can interpret a lack of this evidence as a sign that you and the program to which you are applying are not a good match.

Poor Writing Skills

- Avoid spelling or grammatical errors in your application. These errors are an unmistakable warning of substandard writing skills, a refusal to proofread your work, or your willingness to submit careless written work.
- Avoid writing in an unclear, disorganized, or unconvincing manner that does not provide your readers with a coherent picture of your research, educational, and professional goals. A crucial part of your graduate training will be writing; do not communicate your inability to write to those you hope will be evaluating your writing in the future.

Misfired Attempts to Impress

Avoid attempts to impress the members of a graduate admissions committee with information they may interpret as insincere flattery (e.g., referring to the target program in an excessively complimentary manner) or inappropriate (e.g., namedropping or blaming others for poor academic performance). Graduate admissions committees are composed of intelligent people; do not use your application as an opportunity to insult their intelligence.