

Applying to Graduate School in Psychology: Personal Statement Workshop

October 8th, 2024



BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

- **Do your research**
 - Identify a faculty member(s) you would be interested in working with
 - Search program websites and faculty profiles; authors of interesting articles you've read, etc.
 - You are allowed to email potential supervisors before submitting your application to ensure they are taking graduate students; you may also request a meeting if you feel that you need additional information – but keep in mind that not all profs will meet with potential students before applications are to be submitted
 - Be able to answer the question “*Why do I want to join this program and work with this person?*”
- **Read instructions carefully**
 - Schools and programs will often differ in what they want you to write in a personal statement – read the instructions very carefully before you begin to write
 - Some will have a single prompt; others will have a series of questions for you to respond to
 - Some may have specific length requirements
 - Sometimes personal statements will be referred to as a “Statement of Interest” or a “Letter of Intent”, but the purpose is always similar: to provide the admissions committee with a deeper understanding of your research experience, interests, and skills, beyond your grades and academic achievements
- **Brainstorm and make an outline**
 - Helps organize your thoughts in a logical way
 - Can prevent repetition and rambling

- You want to craft your personal statement carefully based on each program/faculty member you are applying to; outlines can make it easier to see important information that should be emphasized for certain applications vs. all applications

WHILE YOU ARE WRITING:

- Identify your research interests and goals (you may have multiple, and that's okay!)
- Provide **specific examples** that will support the skills and traits you talk about having (e.g., organization, reliable, team player, etc.)
 - You don't have to speak about your experiences in chronological order
 - You can connect other "non-research" experiences (i.e., work and/or volunteer experience) if they are relevant and would be an asset to the program
 - Connect experiences to your overall narrative
 - Use **ACTIVE LANGUAGE**
 - E.g., "I collected data from 100 participants" vs. "I helped to collect data.."; "I actively recruited..." vs. "I worked alongside X other RAs and attended recruitment events..." etc.
 - You sound more confident in talking about your experiences (and it will help if you have a limited word count, too!)
 - Don't give your whole life story
 - You can supplement with a few personal anecdotes, if appropriate, but don't make them the foundation of your statement
- **Highlight why you are the right fit**
 - Specifically discuss what makes you the right fit for a particular faculty member(s)
 - You may highlight different experiences depending on the program/prof you are applying to
 - Talk about how your research interests align (i.e., how research in the lab fits with your interests, but also what you would contribute to the lab)

Q & A:

Q: If you're interested in more than one faculty member, do you suggest tailoring your personal statement to your top choice?

- **A:** You can tailor your personal statement more to your top choice, but do save some space to talk about why you're interested in the second faculty member as

well (especially if their research areas are quite different); can mention top choice(s) and discuss how research interests align, but can also talk about flexibility and having multiple areas of interest when you mention the second prof you are interested in.

Q: Is it okay to list two professors who run the same lab?

- **A:** Yes, applicants often list at least 1-2 faculty members they are interested in working with.

Q: What if your program doesn't require you to apply to work with a specific supervisor? Who do you tailor/address your personal statement to?

- **A:** In this case, you would write about why you are a good fit for the overall program more broadly, and not a specific faculty member/area of interest; but you will still want to mention all the relevant skills and experiences that make you a good fit!

Q: If you're directing your statement to a group of people who will review admissions and not just one specific faculty member (e.g., S-LP), how much should we assume they know in terms of "field specific" language?

- **A:** In these cases, it's important to strike a balance between showing your familiarity with terms used in the field and while also making sure your statement is accessible to a diverse group of reviewers. These admissions committees are typically made up of faculty and professionals in the field, so it's likely safe to use general field-specific terms (e.g., language processing disorder, phonological processing, language intervention, etc.) without providing excessive details. Usually best to avoid using super specific terms; and clarify any acronyms the first time you use them, just to be safe! The most important thing is to communicate clearly and avoid overusing a lot of technical language that could take away from your main message.

Q: How do you assess "fit" [between yourself and a potential supervisor]? And how do you make the case that you have the experience(s) that align with what the prof studies even if your past experience(s) don't perfectly overlap?

- **A1:** You can review a professor's lab website to see recent projects and publications. You want to ask yourself what about their research questions excites you? Do the methods they use and general topics they study align with what you'd like to explore, even if the topic itself isn't identical? Consider the skills you currently have and those you want to develop – does it look like this professor/lab is conducting research that would allow you to contribute with your current skills while also allowing you to grow and develop other skills that will allow you to meet your

goals? Would you enjoy doing activities associated with that type of research (e.g., travelling to schools for testing children, computer programming for cognitive or computational work, capping participants for EEG work, etc.)? Also consider their mentorship style (this is when it can be useful to talk to profs or grad students!) – are they hands-on or hands-off? Do they encourage more collaborative or independent work? Do they have a large lab or a smaller lab? Think about what style would work best for you.

- **A2:** This is where it's important to talk about transferrable skills! Emphasize how your experiences and skills can contribute to the prof's work/the lab, even if your past research (or interest) isn't a super direct match. Talk about how your interests and experiences relate to theirs and how you can use this knowledge to help further their line of work. Profs have a general understanding that students applying to work with them are unlikely to have perfectly overlapping interests or past experiences. What they do want to see is that you can talk about experiences and interests and relate them in some way to their work.
 - E.g., If you are applying to clinical psychology but haven't had experience working in a clinical lab or other clinical setting, talk about other lab experience you have, emphasize skills in data analysis, research design, and/or interpersonal communication that will still be relevant to the prof's area of interest.
 - In terms of interests, maybe you're interested in parent-child or sibling interactions and the prof/lab you're applying to studies peer interactions – consider talking about how you think it would be interesting to extend the questions being asked about peer interactions to these other types of interactions you're interested in.
 - Beyond transferrable skills, you may also want to demonstrate your resourcefulness and willingness to learn (e.g. by describing a time where you taught yourself some new skill to solve a problem).

Q: For programs where you have the option to enter direct-PhD, do we have to justify in the personal statement why we want to do direct-PhD and skip the Masters?

- **A:** Since PhD programs are typically more intensive (in terms of research and sheer length), it would be smart to provide some justification as to why you feel you're ready for the PhD (without having done the Masters). Talk about any advanced skills you have that you feel make you ready for the program, and how this path aligns with your goals (more than a traditional MA/MSc → PhD would).

Q: If you've worked in the faculty members' lab that you are applying to, how much detail should you go into when talking about your experiences in their lab?

- **A:** You should still provide enough detail so people other than that prof would be able to understand what you did and your contributions to the lab. It's common for applications to be reviewed by multiple profs/a committee, so while you know the prof you're applying to work with may have "additional info/knowledge" about your experiences, you want others to be able to read and understand your statement just as well.

Q: I'm in the middle of my thesis and won't have it done by the time I apply. How do I talk about it in my personal statement?

- **A:** It's incredibly common for students to only be part of the way through their thesis work when they apply. Talk about your experience so far! Mention how you came up with the research question, study protocol, stimuli, methods for collecting data, etc. You can talk about all the skills you've developed and what you've learned so far during the process. If you think it's particularly relevant or important, you may even mention the expected results, or any preliminary findings (if you have that info).

Q: If a personal statement is in the format of "Please answer the following questions...", what can I or what should I write for a question asking if there is "anything else you would like to share?"

- **A:** If you have something important you feel you should talk about (e.g., poor grade(s) in a relevant course(s); long gaps in the middle of your degree) that doesn't have a place within other responses, this would be the place for those things. You can also mention any other additional skills/competencies/experiences that didn't fit within the other responses – but don't use this space to continue the answer to a question if you went over the word count! You still want to be sure you're being succinct in all your responses. And remember that you don't *have* to write anything just because the space is there, especially if it's only optional.

Q: What are some ways you can save space in your personal statement?

- **A:** Word limits can be tricky and frustrating! Using active language that is clear and concise is helpful – you want to get rid of the "fluff". Replace some longer sentences with more direct statements (e.g., "I am writing to apply..." can be "I am applying to..."). Avoid redundancy, overexplaining, and using too many filler words (e.g., very, really, in order to). Only talk about the most important, relevant experiences. You may have experiences that are important to you that you want to talk about, but

unless they serve a clear purpose (e.g., provide support for a skillset you learned; is what ignited your interest in a particular area), they aren't necessary.

Q: If I'm applying to my current supervisor's lab, it is a conflict of interest for them to read and give feedback on my personal statement?

- **A:** It's unlikely that this would be an issue (unless your supervisor thinks it is or there are specific policies indicating that it would be a conflict of interest). Your supervisor will also likely be writing you a letter of recommendation and have a lot of knowledge about your strengths and how you would best align with their lab. But if it would make you more comfortable, you could also ask your supervisor to provide more general advice and not the part where you mention them and their lab specifically.

Q: I started in a different program and didn't have the best grades. How can I talk about this in my personal statement?

- **A:** It's not uncommon for students to have poorer grades if they started in a program that wasn't interesting or exciting to them, but then showed improvement when they got into a program they were particularly passionate about. Grades are obviously not the only part of your application package, but if you're worried and feel it is something you should address, you can frame it something like: "The program I started in wasn't a good fit, but now I'm in a program I really enjoy, and I am excelling in my courses."

Q: Do we have to state the start and end date of a certain experience in our personal statement (e.g., working in a lab)?

- **A:** No, you don't have to mention this – your CV is the place where you'll note start/end dates. In your statement, it's more important to use the space to talk about *what* you did.

Q: If a prof says they "may" be accepting students for the upcoming year, should I still list them in my personal statement?

- **A:** Yes! Profs might say this for a variety of reasons, so if there is any indication they could be accepting students and you are interested in working with them, it's totally fine to mention them.