Personal statement
for
Graduate School in STEM

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Presentation outline

- (1) Types of graduate schools in STEM
  - Rotation-based vs. Lab-centered
  - Committee vs Individual faculty acceptance
  - Assigned project vs. your own project
  - RA- or TA-based vs. Fellowship-based

- (2) Types of statements
  - Statement of purpose vs personal statement

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Types of graduate schools in STEM

- **Rotation-based**
- 1st grad school year-rotate through 2-4 labs
- Then, a lab may pick you
- Usually you are part of a larger project
- Usually the faculty member has funding for the project- but maybe not your stipend

- **Lab-centered (accepted into a single lab)**
- Primary relationship is with a single faculty member
- Usually create your own project
- Seeking funding is partly your responsibility

In both, fellow grad students and post-docs are principal mentors

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Personal Statement

It's about
YOU.

Who are you as a person?

Personal Statement

- Know what the admissions office are seeking
  - Passionate, motivated, and prepared applicants that hit the ground running
  - They are trying to get to know **you-** not your record
- Keep the focus on **yourself-** provide a narrative focused on life during college
  - Don't start with a story from when you were a child- can be used elsewhere in the statement
  - Take a personal inventory
    - Your personal inventory will help you reflect on your actions, accept yourself for who you are, and promote self-awareness. In order to be effective, however, you must be thorough and completely honest.

Personal Statement

- Know the program and make connections

  - More about being the best match than being the most qualified candidate- write about professors whose work interests you

- Finish with a strong statement about why the school is your top pick

  - Help the school see your overarching vision for your future career and how your time at that school will prepare you to realize those goals

Personal Statement

- The program is trying to evaluate
  - Can you stick it out?
    - A lot of money is invested in you to attend grad school
  - Can you write well and logically?
  - How effectively can you communicate?
  - What characteristics about you say that you will succeed?
  - Are you a good fit for the school?

Desirable characteristics for grad school

- Creativity
- Problem solving ability
- Tenacity
- Ability to work in a team
- Independence
- Self-motivation
- Good communication skills
- Project management skills
- Relevant background knowledge
- Flexibility

- A positive attitude
- Resilience
- Organizational skills
- Attention to detail
- Ability to see the big picture
- Ability to prioritize
- Time management skills
- Appreciation for diversity
- Good interpersonal skills
- Maturity
- Ability to appear professional

How to write a personal statement?

Start with your motivation: A story that got **you** motivated to go to grad school or **your** study in that field

    - Explain why you want to go to grad school

Go into specifics: A compelling problem/idea in the field you want to work on

    - Explain the science you are interested in

Finish: What are your future goals?

    - How will this program help you achieve those goals?

Items to consider while writing a personal statement

- What sets me apart from other applicants?

- How did I learn about this field?

- Why am I interested in this field?

- What experiences have stimulated and enhanced my interest?

- What skills or personal characteristics do I possess that would enhance my chances for success?

- What are my biggest accomplishments?

- What are my career aspirations?

- Why THIS school and program?

- Do I have any connections?

- What will I be doing between now and next fall?

- Have I overcome relevant obstacles in my life?

- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in my academic record?

Statement of Purpose

It's about
your
RESEARCH INTERESTS

Statement of Purpose

- Narrow down your interests
    - Make a list of 8 to 10 things you might like to do
    - Cut it in half
    - Think about it and cut in half again
    - Then you have a better basis for what you want to do
- What you want to study at graduate school?
    - Major field, area of research
- Why you want to study it?
    - Motivation, and why this school/faculty
- What experience do you have in your field?
    - Past academic study
- What are you planning to do with your degree once you have it?

Statement of Purpose

- What details/facts should you give to support your statement?

- How do you present the details?

    - In what order or style?

- What kind of language do you use (tone, vocabulary?)

How to write a statement or purpose?

Start with: a pertinent anecdote, facts, a problem you want to solve

- Be careful, need to come full circle

Then: discuss—briefly—an idea in your field that turns you on intellectually

- The idea can tell an admissions committee a lot about you

- It demonstrates your interest in your field, rather than just describing it

Formatting for EITHER statement

Length: 1.5-2 pages

   - Keep it short

   - The longer it is- the more likely it will get skimmed, not read

Spacing: single space

Paragraphs: block paragraphs separated by a single line of space

Common mistakes

- Not enough intellectual depth
- Too much humor or drama
- Too long or too short
- Failure to answer the questions
- Failure to explain a weakness in your application
- Trying to impress the committee with big words
- Poorly written, written in the passive voice, or too wordy
- Too many or too few transition words
- Re-stating the obvious
- Too many adjectives
- Flowery language (i.e., much water has flowed under the bridges of King Author's river since the year of our lord 1652 when Gwenevere first ate the salamander.)

General advice on both statements

- Don't use clichés
- Highlight all the adjectives you use-
  - There may be gender bias in the adjectives we use to describe ourselves
  - Try substituting adjectives to see how important the right choice can be to the meaning/tone of the sentence
- Analyze- don't list items (i.e., show, don't tell)
- Answer the questions they ask if you have a prompt
- Tell a story- but keep the content over the style
- Give concrete examples
  - Provide the names of professors you have worked with
- Don't be afraid to give credit when appropriate
  - "I learned XXX from YYY".

General advice on both statements

- Personalize each statement to the school you are applying to
  - Don't let it be generic
- Be concise
- Make it easy to read- if you would not say the word in real life- do not use it.
- Avoid making excuses or placing blame
- Point out recent evidence showing you are a good candidate
- **HAVE AS MANY PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE READ IT**

General advice on both statements

- Be specific and accurate
- Make certain that the grammar and spelling are perfect
- Avoid lofty sounding statements that communicate little
- Be ruthless about eliminating extra words
- Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence and make certain all sentences in a paragraph address the topic (or thesis statement)
- Use white space to make the document look easy to read.
- When you cut and paste- make sure to be aware of items like:
  - "I am enthusiastic to apply to the program at UCSB", when in reality you are applying to Duke.

Break into groups

- (1) Identify the hook- is there one?
- (2) Identify the motivation
- (3) Why do they want to go to that program?
- (4) Is the statement well-written?
  - Would you accept this person into your program?
- (5) Is the statement too long? Too short?
- (6) Are there too many adjectives? Are there any you would substitute? If so, with what?