

## THOUGHTS ON WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

### Mostly intended for research-oriented studies

**The personal statement is your opportunity to demonstrate your ability (academic promise), interests, fit, goals, professionalism, motivation, and writing ability.**

When applying to graduate schools in psychology, **demonstrating the ability to express yourself clearly and efficiently is more important than demonstrating your creative writing skills.** The professors making decisions about acceptance/rejection are interested in your potential strengths as a student and a professional, and they will probably not want to wade through flowery, meandering writing and complex sentence structures.

**Don't write too much about your personal history** (how you were raised, your personal experiences, etc.). Again, **professors are most interested in your skills and motivation as demonstrated by your coursework/GPA, GRE scores, research experience, and applied experience (depending on your area of interest).** They are more likely to be interested in the *fact* that you have interest in their area and the *fact* that you have the skills/motivation to be a successful student and professional than in *why* you have the interest. Some of the “why” might be fine (even necessary for some programs) but don't overdo it.

You might wonder **how to present your motivation.** You might wish to discuss the level of motivation (i.e., very motivated) and the source of your motivation. However, you might not want to spend much time talking about these issues separately from your professional experiences, skills, abilities, and classwork. There are probably at least two reasons for this. First, anyone can *talk about* how intensely motivated he or she is (and after all, why would you be applying to grad school if you weren't motivated?). However, if you have no relevant skills or professional experience, then all the motivation in the world might count for little in the eyes of a professor who's judging whether you have the professional background necessary to handle their graduate program. Thus, it might be wise to spend your words on a coherent description/analysis of those skills and experiences, rather than proclaiming your motivation. Second, an extensive and thoughtful description of good professional experiences and skills should convey the fact that you are motivated. That is, a high level of motivation will be demonstrated (rather than self-proclaimed) by your extensive and strong professional skills and experience.

**The organization should be coherent.** Each paragraph should present a point clearly, and it should provide evidence relevant to that point. Similarly, you might have more than one paragraph that is relevant to a general topic (e.g., research experience or volunteer work). If so, then those paragraphs should probably be sequential. That is, you might want to have separate sections for research, classwork, internships/work, etc. Each section should be coherent within itself.

**What to say about academic performance and ability.** Mention the quality of your academic performance (hopefully you have a high GPA). Briefly mention any courses that go “above and beyond” the typical undergrad major requirements (e.g., extra Statistics courses) and any courses that fit very closely with the area to which you are applying (e.g., advanced social/personality

courses, if you are applying to social/personality programs). Hopefully you have a high GRE. If not, don't draw much attention to it and, for crying out loud, don't say "I don't test well in standardized exams" (see "weaknesses," below).

**What to say about research.** Faculty are going to be impressed by research experience. There are at least two issues that you might discuss – the process of doing research and the content of your research experience. Your experience with the *process* of doing research might be the more important issue. Professors will be looking for students who can come into graduate school and hit the ground running with research activity. The more/better experience you have with doing research, the more impressed the professor will be. So, you'll want to describe some of the tasks that you have done (e.g., planning, data collection, creating stimuli, coding data, entering data, analyzing data, writing, presenting results, attending conferences, etc.). Professors will be particularly impressed by the more conceptual activities that you might have done. If you are an author on any products (i.e., conference presentations and/or publications) be sure to mention them explicitly. Regarding the *content* of your research experience – it would be a bonus if the area of your research matches the area to which you are applying (e.g., you've conducted research on a personality/social project and you're applying to a personality/social program). This is nice, because it shows the faculty that you have research experience specifically related to their area. But again, experience in the process of doing research is perhaps the more important issue; if the content fits as well, that's icing on the cake.

If your research background closely fits the area to which you are applying, then you'll definitely want to provide more depth about what you have done. For example, describe the topic, relevant variables, and results of research projects on which you've worked. This will demonstrate your familiarity with relevant *content* of the area, in addition to providing evidence of your training in the *process* of doing research.

Related to this, **within in each section and/or paragraph, be clear about how the topic speaks to your skills and ability to contribute and perform in graduate school.** For example, it's definitely good to have a statement about your research, but you might want to comment on the broader implications of this experience – in terms of process and content (if possible). Any research project should provide you with first-hand experience in some fundamental skills and processes in research. This is the primary benefit of early your research experiences. Therefore, you might want to be sure that these skills are explicitly mentioned in your statement. Similarly, your research experience might have implications for the area of psychology that you wish to study in graduate school. Although this is a secondary aspect of your early research experiences, it might be possible to make some connection to your intended area of study (but don't push it too far!).

Along with presenting your strengths, **you might need to address your weaknesses.** For example, if you have a GPA that's lower than you'd like, you might want to address this issue head-on. If there are clear, defensible reasons for your lowered performance (e.g., you really screwed up during your first year but you got your act together after that, or you had to work 20 hours a week to support yourself), then you might want to point this out. But be very careful, you don't want to sound too much like you're making lame excuses, and you don't want to call too much attention to your weaknesses.

Also, along with presenting your strengths, you'll want to **make clear how the program fits your interests and goals**. In general, you want to: a) show that you are quite familiar with the program and that you're not applying haphazardly, and b) provide evidence that your interests, goals, and abilities fit well with the grad program. For example, mention one or maybe two faculty members with whom you would be interested in working (particularly for PhD programs). Describe the match of your interests with their work. Note that the two people shouldn't be very different from each other – otherwise it'll seem like you are unfocused and don't really know what you want to do. Or, for example, some programs offer a “minor” in certain areas (eg, Quantitative methods) – and you might want to mention an interest in this.

You might want to say something about your **short term and long term goals**. Again, you can describe what you hope to get out of their program. Do you eventually want an academic job? Clinical practice? Industry job? If you're not absolutely sure, that's OK (particularly if you're currently an undergraduate), but you might want to mention that you are considering, for example, an academic career versus an industry job, and that you hope to learn more about that during graduate school. Perhaps this is conservative, but make sure your goals sound reasonable. You might very well plan to win the Nobel Prize for fully integrating Psychology and Architecture within five years of getting your graduate degree. But perhaps you should consider keeping the more grandiose plans to yourself for now, and instead emphasize more clearly manageable and typical goals (eg, “teach and do research as a professor of Social psychology”).

Last but certainly not least, an overarching issue is to **be concise and very clear**. The people reading your statement are probably reading many statements. And frankly, their attention may wane during the process – they want to get the relevant information, and they want to get it quickly. Therefore, you must make your statement as clear and efficient as possible. Don't ramble on and on, don't jump randomly from topic to topic, don't spend much time talking about issues that aren't strongly helping your cause. One way to think about it is that each word costs a dollar (and you have only so much money) - so you have to spend your words in a way that maximizes their impact. This overarching issue speaks to every point raised earlier – organization, coherence, emphasis of specific topics (eg, skills and professional experiences over general motivation and enthusiasm). Make the readers' job as easy as possible and make sure that you tell them exactly what they need to know. As one who reads personal statements every year – I'd much rather read one that's brief and to-the-point than one that's long-winded, meandering, and full of peripheral information.

See also.....

<http://www.psychgrad.org/>

[http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article\\_98.asp](http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article_98.asp)

[http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article\\_165.asp](http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article_165.asp)

<http://psych.hanover.edu/handbook/applic2.html>

<http://www.accepted.com/grad/personalstatement.aspx>

<http://www.rider.edu/~suler/gradschl.html>

<http://www.psywww.com/careers/perstmt.htm>