

## **Personal statement**

It's misleading that the personal statement is called a "personal" statement, since what admission committees are really looking for is a **research statement**. What admission committees want is a statement about what research you have done, what research you hope to do, and why you like research.

### **Here's a template if you need one:**

- i. First paragraph – Describe the general areas of research that interest you and why. (This is helpful for a committee to determine which professors should read your application.)
- ii. Second paragraph, Third, and Fourth paragraphs – Describe some research projects that you worked on. What was the problem you were trying to solve? Why was it important? What approaches did you try? What did you learn? It's fine to say that you were unable to fully solve your problem.
- iii. Fifth paragraph – Tell us why you feel you need a Ph.D.. Explain what in there appealed to you.
- iv. Sixth paragraph – Tell us why you want to come to CMU. Whom might you like to work with? What papers have you looked at from CMU that you enjoyed reading? Why is CMU the right place for you?

It's important to realize that the research statement is *not* a commitment to do research in that area. A third of all applicants end up working in an area different from that which they described on their research statement.

Here are the common mistakes that many of our applicants make:

• **The grade regurgitator** – “In my high school, I was ranked Number 1. Then I got a perfect score on my college entrance exams. Then I competed in a statewide math competition and I was the best. Then I competed in a national programming competition and I was 5th. In college, my GPA was 3.95 out of 4.0. For these reasons, I believe I will do well in your graduate department.”

What's wrong with this? This portion of the essay is a waste of space. Awards are certainly relevant, however any award you won should be listed on a separate piece of paper which is titled “Awards and Honors” and which you can include with your application. There is no reason to tell us all this in your essay. It will only piss-off the people reviewing your application because they already read all this information earlier in your application and they now want to hear about research.

• **The boy genius** – “When I was born, my mother gave me a glass ball to play with. I would lay and look at the prisms of light shining through my ball. At age 3, my father brought home our first computer and I disassembled it and then put it back together. It was then that I knew I wanted to become a computer scientist. By age 5, I had taken apart every appliance in our house. At age 6, I became a chess whiz ....”

What's wrong with this? We simply don't care what you did as a child, and we don't believe you either. You'd be surprised how many applications from Einstein-wanna-be's we get. If

you really think this is relevant, put the important facts on a separate sheet of paper, and include it in your application. It's best if your essay can stick with stuff you did in college and later.