[Stanford] Tips on Writing Statement of Purpose and Personal Statement Essays

Tips on Writing Statement of Purpose and Personal Statement Essays
for Graduate School and Fellowship Applications

Examine samples written by other students. The Undergraduate Research Programs office on the 4th floor of Sweet Hall has a binder with sample statements of purpose for a wide variety of fields. You cannot take the binder out of the office, but there are comfortable chairs and you can read through the binder there. One thing you will notice: every student has a different history, different strengths and weaknesses, so there is no one way to write this type of essay.

Arrange for individual editorial consultation. After you have absorbed the tips suggested here and you have developed some kind of draft, send an email to Renee Courey at rcourey@stanford.edu with a Word attachment of your draft (with your name on it) along with days and times that you're available, and either she or another associate will set up an appointment. Avoid doing this at the last minute. The schedule may be booked, and very often essays need to be re-conceived or there are other major revisions. So, when you make an appointment, allow for plenty of time for follow-up meetings. You can also set up an appointment at the Stanford Writing Center – check with SWC on how to do this.

Personal statements and statements of purpose are perhaps the most important parts of applications. There is little you can do to change your GPA or your curriculum vitae (the academic version of a resume), but these statements can be written in many different ways, emphasizing different aspects of your interests, goals, personality, and style. They present the unique qualities that make you the candidate that a committee

wants to select, and a good statement of purpose can also affect those professors who will write letters of recommendation for you. Consequently, you need to pay particular attention to their composition. Admissions and approval committees have been known to accept candidates with uneven academic records or reject otherwise excellent candidates on the basis of these statements.

Essays for law school and medical school applications have their own unique characteristics.

While many of the tips outlined here are useful for these essays, the demands of graduate school and fellowship essays are different. Law school and medical school essays are closer to the type of essay you wrote for undergraduate admissions. Admissions committees are not that interested in how much you know about law or medicine, since they don't expect you to know very much, and research, while important to write about, is not as crucial as for graduate programs. For law, you are expected to demonstrate that you can reason and write, and that you have some kind of intellectual capacity and drive and a sense of human connections, and that you are motivated to become a lawyer. For medicine, you are expected to recount any experience with medicine (such as shadowing doctors), that you have compassion, in addition to demonstrating that you can reason and write. Again, the tips here are primarily directed at graduate school and fellowship essays, and if you are interested in these professional schools you can extrapolate from these suggestions – and consult with the appropriate staff at UAP.

Read the description of the essay carefully, and make sure that you answer the question in the way that it is worded. Pay attention to the word length indicated in the instruction and do not exceed it. These essays are usually very short, and you need to be concise and strategic about which interests or goals you decide to highlight. Do not

try to “fudge” the prompt: answer the question as stated (although most will simply say something like “Write a short statement of purpose”).

Some fellowship applications may require a personal statement that addresses concerns of the fellowship. For example, the Udall asks for an essay responding to Sen. Udall's speeches and writings concerning the environment, the Soros seeks a personal account of what it means to be a New American and how the Constitution and Bill of Rights affect your life, and the Truman asks a series of interlocking questions. Such essays call upon all your critical capacities to present an analysis, opinion or personal reflection, and they are similar to other essays you have written in college.

Statements of purpose are required of all fellowship and graduate school applications. These essays require you to describe clearly your interests, your proposed intellectual projects leading towards major research or dissertation, as well as your plans for the future. They are the committee's introduction to you as a scholar and potential colleague.

A statement of purpose or interest is very different than the personal essay you wrote for undergraduate applications. It is NOT a general biographical sketch, nor is it primarily a personal reflection upon your decisions to enter a field, nor does it focus on your extracurricular activities (unless those activities pertain to your scholarly interests). You will not be asked something like “View a photograph and describe it.” Being a scholar, researcher or teacher will demand your best communication skills, so your essay should reassure the committee that you can communicate effectively and with a deep understanding of your field. You should write in a personable manner but this is somewhat different than writing a personal essay for undergraduate admissions.

Keep in mind that you are writing to a particular audience, usually of faculty in your field(unlike your undergraduate admissions essay, which was directed to a general admissions committee). In other words, if you are applying for a chemistry PhD program, you will be addressing fellow chemists, for history, fellow historians, etc. If you are applying to an interdisciplinary program (e.g., History of Consciousness at Santa Cruz), your audience is a diverse group of scholars (literature, history, philosophy, etc.) all united by a similar concern. If you are applying to a fellowship, your audience is liable to be more general or interdisciplinary.

Be prepared to produce many drafts. These essays are among the most difficult pieces of writing you may do related to graduate school (other than your dissertation and your first job letter) because you must make so many strategic decisions on how to present yourself in such a short amount of space. Allow yourself a lot of time for drafts, and do not get frustrated because of the many times you will need to rewrite. Making multiple revisions is an inevitable part of the process.

Show your drafts to faculty members, particularly those writing letters of recommendation, fellow students, and others. Accept criticisms with as little defensiveness as possible. On occasion you will get conflicting opinions on the presentation of your ideas and you will have to decide which direction to take. If you have a leading faculty mentor, you may defer to his or her opinion over others.

The “trick” of this essay is to transform supplication into conversation, to change begging into exchange. Readers want to get a feeling of your intellect, and in a successful essay they will want to continue the discussion you’ve initiated, which they can only do if they admit you into their program. They will want you to be a part of their community of scholars because you have something to offer. They ask: “Would I be interested in talking to this student about her research over lunch?”

Concentrate on demonstrating what you know about your field and what you hope to accomplish in graduate school and even beyond. Is there a particular area of the field that you find interesting? What do you hope to contribute to the field? Avoid digressions.

Demonstrate your knowledge of the field by making appropriate references to leading scholars, major writers, and current debates or concerns, employing appropriate technical terminology. Avoid jargon that you believe is fashionable in order to appear flashy: most committees can tell superficial use of buzz words. You usually do not need to explain concepts in depth, since admission committees are usually already familiar with the field (although brief explanations for a more general reader may be necessary for fellowship applications). If you do write about an aspect of the field that may be somewhat unusual or controversial, your ability to briefly explain technical or theoretical aspects is a crucial component of how your essay is judged. You are not simply offering a summary of a field, so your ability to present your own arguments demonstrates how creatively you engage the entire field.

Make concrete references to the program you are applying to and to the faculty you would like to study with. However, make sure these references are sufficiently broad so that you do not sound as if you want to study with just one person or have an excessively narrow interest in the field. You may not realize it, but that one person you want to study with may be on sabbatical for two years. Very often, the question is not whether or not you are capable, but whether or not you are a good "fit." So, don't make your interest with the program so narrow as to allow any excuse for an awkward fit. Investigate the program – review their web site, talk to graduate students, visit in person, if you can – to discover its focus, how graduate students are involved in research, its "politics" vis-à-vis the field. Do not inadvertently position yourself on

one or other side of a controversy within the department or field. Often, the discussion of the particular program is at the very end of the essay (which allows you to simply place the appropriate paragraph for each school). This is a regular convention of this genre, everyone expects it, and you do not need to worry because you too write your essay this way. However, you can write it differently: references to a particular program can be woven into the body of the text, as well. This is far more difficult – and requires an original essay for each school – but it can be very effective.

While you should discuss the particular area of your field from which you may develop a dissertation topic, do not present an overly detailed proposal of your anticipated dissertation.

Most young scholars do not have their dissertation topics determined yet, and admission committees anticipate that. Many committees will regard a detailed description of a dissertation topic with suspicion, even deciding that a young scholar who has so determined his or her topic without advanced work is not open-minded enough to other influences in the field. One of the pleasures faculty have is in molding their graduate students. If you seem to have a closed mind, they may find this unappealing. However, if you do have areas of interest, you should explain them – just refrain from writing a detailed proposal.

You are fashioning a "fictional" version of yourself. While your account is always based on truth, you have a great deal of freedom in constructing the image of who you are. You decide what goes in and what does not, and in what order. The notion that you are writing fiction can allow you some distance; the idea that this is "fiction" can free you up to be more creative and less uncomfortable that you are "baring your soul."

However you construct yourself, never lie.

Not only is lying wrong, but lies are usually easily detected and self-defeating.

Construct coherence. No matter how different your intellectual or other relevant experiences may be, seek out some way to bring everything together as a coherent whole. This is tricky and difficult – but everything can be described as part of one sort of process or development or another; there are always underlying connections. Trying to determine these questions is an excellent topic for brainstorming with other people who can see you more clearly because they have more distance.

Techniques for writing drafts. There are many ways to open your essay, many choices on the order in which to present your involvement in the field, many different aspects of your academic career to highlight. However, many people get hung up on producing an exciting opening. In your initial drafting process, experiment with presenting yourself and highlighting your interests in many different ways before settling on which approach is most compelling. One technique is to write separate, independent paragraphs or groups of sentences describing different aspects of your work (such as your research projects) or experiences without worrying about how they connect or flow. At least in this way you can begin to articulate the important elements of your essay and you have material to work with. You can experiment by avoiding any opening and writing the body of your essay; or you can experiment with trying to write one short paragraph that concisely says everything. Be playful in your experiments before you settle on one approach.

Openings. Openings tend to get people hung up. Everyone wants to make a good, first impression. But, often, once someone sets upon an opening, it tends to shape the rhetorical flow of the rest of the essay, even distorting the essay. One suggestion is NOT to have an opening but simply to start – avoid the high-stake gambit altogether. An opening that uses an anecdote about your interest in the field is very popular. It can be very effective, and it's a common way that people can express their interests.

But it's so popular that it may come across as trite, unless it is a very powerful, appropriate anecdote, and it must be short. (Often, people need to write an anecdote in order to get themselves going, and when the anecdote is done, take a look at what happens next: that may, in fact, be your opening.) Opening with a personal narrative (e.g., how I became passionate about this subject) can be effective, but, again, this approach is very popular and even overdone ("When I was six I was hit on the head at the playground, and ever since then I've wanted to be a neuroscientist"). If you do use personal narrative, make it very brief and to the point. Don't spend half your essay relating a story. Another popular approach is to present a chronology of your development. While a chronological account may be tempting – and may be necessary for you to do at an early stage of writing – it is a fairly low-level rhetorical mode.

Another possibility is to open with at the most sophisticated level of your development, such as the advanced research or honors thesis you are currently completing, and then describe how you got to that point in the field. Often, an analysis of some aspect of your research interest or of your own development can provide you with a way to discuss your overall development.

Present your interests according to an underlying theme, framing idea or argument that then draws from the history of your involvement to illustrate your idea. No matter how different your activities may be, you can draw a coherent picture of your development. At first you may not think that climbing Mount Everest connects readily to a doctorate in mechanical engineering or medieval studies – but if presented the right way, it could. Don't reject any experience out of hand. And don't leave out things which you think are obvious. For example, your honors thesis

or research may show up on your c/v, but you give the meaning or “spin” to that reality in your essay.

Do not present a complete list of courses in the field you have taken or an undifferentiated, comprehensive description of your interest. You will need to make strategic decisions on how you present your interest, deciding what is primary, secondary, etc., and making such decisions may be difficult, even painful. You will have a transcript in your application, so you don’t need lists that don’t “spin” explanations.

Address any anomalies in your transcript. If you have any lapses, unusual low grades, withdrawals or anything else that seems strange, explain them in as non-defensive a way as possible. For example, the fact that the first two years of college you were a mediocre student until you discovered your intellectual passion or you withdrew from classes one quarter because of illness or family problems. If you spent time in jail or joined a guerrilla army, you need to figure out how to explain your history. In many respects, you do not need to explain everything– and some things may be none of an admissions committee’s business – but you do need to say something. If you do not explain the situation, your readers will invent explanations for themselves – and their fantasies will probably be far worse than the reality.

Avoid excessive, unreasonable enthusiasm. Extreme effusion backfires. For example, statements such as "I love 19th century British literature so much that I feel that I live in the 19th century" or "I AM Nietzsche" or “I live and breathe sea urchins” suggest possible psychosis, not reasonable enthusiasm. For the most part, exclamation points should be avoided.

Check your writing style for unconscious attempts at forced sincerity or authenticity. This is a form of “begging” and it’s tough to spot, since you often don’t see if for

yourself. For example, check to see if your adjectives are excessive ("I took an amazing/astounding/awesome class").

Often, no adjective is fine or a more restrained one has a better effect. Review "triples" or "doubles" to see if they are indeed necessary and reveal important information. For example, if the flow of rhetoric has you saying "I am dedicated, hard working, and committed," you should note that dedicated and committed are almost identical and the repetition has the effect of undermining your sincerity. The reader gets a subliminal message flashing of "Baloney!" Don't follow rhetorical flow; follow the logic of your underlying coherence.

Be conscious of inflammatory or biased language. You may hold strong opinions about the field or be motivated by particular causes. Do not mask your opinions, but be aware of presenting yourself in a tactful, judicious fashion. You can express various views in such a way as to present yourself as having an opinion yet remaining open-minded. You want to avoid coming across as an extremist or as a crank that cannot enter a dialogue with others.

No jokes. Humor and sarcasm depend upon a shared field of reference – and you have no idea if you and your readers have such a mutual understanding. Most of the time, self-deprecating humor comes across as simply deprecating yourself, and sarcasm can easily be misunderstood.

One student who spent ten years working as a writer for situation comedies refrained from using humor: if she refrained – and she knows the business – you can too. This doesn't mean that you should be leaden or dull, but avoid jokes or smirks or a wise-guy tone.

Do not write what you think the committee wants to read. Be yourself. Often, applicants believe they should write according to some image of proper "academic" seriousness or style.

Your personal style and passion should shine through the essay. Although this is a formal essay and you should avoid slang or overly casual constructions, its tone should be engaging, even personable (though not personal).

Poofread the essay, roofpread the essay, prufreed the essay. Have your friends proofread it.

While this is not a grammar test, excessive typos and other mechanical errors indicate poor work habits and do not make a good impression. Most admissions committees allow one typo (such as “to” for “too”), but when the typos start adding up you’re sending a bad message.

After all this advice and warning, keep in mind that this is actually an exciting process.

Perhaps for the first time in years you are attempting to present a coherent intellectual portrait of yourself. In the process you may actually gain a clearer vision of your interests and goals – and feel even more confident that graduate study is the direction you want to go.

Contact the URP office for editorial review. We will be glad to review your essay at any stage of the process. As you can tell, this is more than a narrowly defined writing process, so we may ask you questions about your interests, your academic career, and other pursuits to see if additional experiences should be included. We’re not trying to be nosey, but students often leave out aspects of themselves that they think are obvious or not important when in fact they are very valuable.