

PERSONAL STATEMENTS FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

PURPOSE

The specific prompt you will be responding to varies from application to application, and the most important job is to *respond to the prompt*. In general, though, the personal statement should answer two questions:

1. Why you?

The personal statement highlights personal, academic, and work experiences that have prepared the writer to successfully meet the challenges of grad school and/or contribute to the program's intellectual community. The admissions committee should understand what makes the applicant stand out. Such self-promotion may be an uncomfortable task, but it is necessary in this genre.

2. Why them?

An effective personal statement answers these questions: why the applicant is pursuing this field, and why the applicant is pursuing this particular school/program. How will this program help him achieve his academic and career goals?

The purpose of a personal statement is *not* to list every relevant course taken or job worked. That's what the CV is for. In the personal statement, the writer gets to comment on select experiences in more depth than in a résumé.

Depending on the kind of program, there may be additional purposes. To learn specific conventions for personal statements in your chosen field, it helps to *talk with professors within or close to that field*. It also helps to consider your audience, so read on!

AUDIENCE

Keeping the audience in mind is crucial, for a few reasons:

1. Departments read hundreds of personal statements.

This means statements need to grab the reader from the start. They must be clear and specific in their descriptions of relevant experience, skills, and career goals. They must also use vivid language and highlight what makes the applicant interesting.

2. Different disciplines; different expectations.

The way to capture the reader's attention depends on the discipline for which you are applying. Different kinds of programs have different expectations for tone and content. Hard science programs expect an unembellished description of specific research, while medical or law schools often look for a more personal narrative that ties the details together.

3. You are writing to an expert audience.

Each department has its own admissions committee that usually includes faculty members. This means personal statements should avoid generalities that experts in the field would already know, but also avoid sounding pretentious.

Admissions Pet Peeves

From *Graduate Admission Essays*

- The phrase “I’ve always wanted to be a _____.”
- Defining “what is chemistry” (for example). The statement should define the discipline relative to the writer’s experience, not the discipline as a whole.
- An essay that reads like it has been recycled for multiple applications. Tailor the statement to the program.

GETTING STARTED

So you know your purpose and your audience. Now what? Here are some steps that can help you figure out where to begin and what to include.

1. Read the question. Many times.
2. Ask questions about yourself, your future plans and how you developed them. Jot down as many quick answers as you can. For example:

- What is the most interesting thing about you? The most impressive?
- When/how did you decide you wanted to study this subject/pursue this career?
- Which writers and texts have influenced you the most? Which professors?
- What experiences have fostered or demonstrated your persistence/work ethic?
- What have you learned from work or research experiences?
- How have obstacles you have faced prepared you for grad school?
- What do you hope to gain from your graduate education?
- What makes this particular graduate program a place where you will thrive?
- Which professors at the program have research interests that align with yours?
- What will you contribute to the program/school?

3. Look at the answers you wrote down. Which ones do you think are strongest, most compelling? Which lend themselves best to narrative? Are there ideas that come up more than once? These ideas may become the backbone for your personal statement.

IN A TUTORING SESSION

- Was there a prompt provided with the application? If so, has the statement answered the questions *in the order in which they are presented on the application*?
- Is the statement within the word limit (if there is one)?

In terms of form...

- How would you describe the tone of the draft? Has the statement maintained a tone that is consistent and audience-appropriate? (See Audience above)
- Is the language vivid? Free of cliché?
- How does the statement connect the writer's experiences, education, and career goals? Are the connections easy to follow?

In terms of content...

- Has the writer answered the “why you, why them” questions (see Purpose, above) and, in doing so, included the following?
 - Specific details about relevant experiences, skills, and education.
 - A clear sense of purpose and interest in this particular graduate program.
 - Long-term professional goals.
 - Where applicable, the names of specific faculty members or research projects.
- What makes this applicant stand out (without being weird for the sake of attention)?

GENRE GUIDE SOURCES

Thanks to Susan Buchanan, Director of Career Development; Kate Runkel '14; and Maggie Eismeier '14. Asher, Donald. *Graduate Admission Essays*. 4th ed. New York: Random House, 2012. Print. Guide made by Natalie Pond and Sabrina Wise.

SAMPLE PERSONAL STATEMENT

Application to UCLA's PhD program in Indo-European Studies

By Maggie Eismeier

When I was ten, I chose J.R.R. Tolkien's Elvish languages as the subject of my fifth grade final project. My teacher was doubtful about this. Was there really enough for me to research? She asked me to show that my topic was substantial before I started. So I headed home after school, booted up the dial-up, and sent out my question on "Ask a Linguist." A day or two later, I got a response (all the way from Finland!) telling me just how complex the languages of Middle Earth were. This, plus the books I tracked down at the library, were enough for my teacher. Long after my poster was finished and my classmates' names translated, I was still greeting everyone I knew in Quenya. I first encountered the word "linguistics" while working on that elementary school project, and have counted in among my interests ever since. When I learned Greek and Latin, I was thrilled to be able to see their influence on Elvish.

When it came time for me to choose a college, Whitman was the best place for me, even without the option of a linguistics major. I trusted that I would find my way to whichever major suited me best. When I signed up for Ancient Greek, I did not plan to take any more courses in the Classics department. Three years and two more ancient languages later, though, it is clear that my intentions changed. At first, I was reluctant to go beyond language learning and into literature. My first upper-level Classics courses terrified me. Even though I was confident I could decipher the Greek words, I was afraid I would not be able to understand the texts. Grammatical and syntactic analysis were my way into appreciating ancient literature. A close reading of ten lines of Oedipus Rex was much less intimidating for me than trying to analyze the play as a whole, and much more productive. My big-picture, conceptual understanding of Classical literature and civilization has developed from my understanding of the Greek and Latin languages.

In my sophomore year, I decided to take some upper-level math classes out of pure fascination with the material but with the knowledge that my GPA would take a heavy hit. Even so, Intro to Higher Math was worth it, both for the content I learned and for the challenge of sticking with the class for a whole semester. I do not have a future as a theoretical mathematician, but I am happy and proud to have learned that the hard way. I attended the 2013 Linguistic Society of America Summer Institute in case I needed to learn the same lesson about linguistics. Before the Institute, I had the very general idea that I wanted to apply to graduate programs in linguistics but not much concept of what I wanted to study, nor proof that I could handle the material. Taking classes in a variety of areas helped me figure out what I want to work on in the future, and gave me confidence that I can succeed as a Ph.D. student at UCLA.

While studying Classics, I have gained critical and aesthetic appreciation of Ancient Greek and Latin language and literature. In my college coursework, I have shown my ability to learn and analyze language, both ancient and modern. Graduate study will give me the opportunity to apply what I have learned about specific languages to the study of language as a whole. I want to deepen my understanding of the connections between Greek and Latin by studying comparative grammar, and to study other ancient Indo-European languages in order to understand the family more broadly. I am particularly interested in studying Sanskrit and Hittite, and in tracing phonological connections among ancient Indo-European languages. While reading the Odyssey last semester, I became interested in Homeric Greek and its relationships to earlier and later forms of the language. I would be very interested to study Homeric and Mycenaean Greek with Professor Vine. While I currently intend to specialize in Indo-European linguistics, it is possible that I will become interested in a particular language family.

I am enthusiastic about the prospect of doing research at UCLA, and about teaching, either classical languages or linguistics. My undergraduate professors have had a tremendous impact on me. I began studying Greek casually, and became a Classics major in large part because of the enthusiasm and commitment of my professors. They drew me into a subject I have now come to love, and I hope someday to do the same for my students. I welcome the department's emphasis on teaching as part of the Ph.D. program. My experience is in peer tutoring, but I am confident that, as a graduate student, I will be able to work effectively with undergraduates. At Whitman, I have worked as a writing fellow for an Encounters (first-year seminar) class, and as an ELL fellow. I am taking a writing tutoring class this spring, covering both practical and theoretical aspects of peer tutoring. I have also been hired to Cardigan Mountain School's new teacher program for the summer.

My bachelor's degree in Classics, as well as my coursework at the LSA Summer Institute, have prepared me for graduate work in Indo-European studies and allowed me to show my aptitude in the area, and my tutoring experience has readied me for eventual teaching assistantships. I am confident in my enthusiasm and ability, and I would love to be a part of the linguistics department at UCLA.