

Graduate School Personal Statements

The Career Exploration Center has interviewed various professionals involved in the graduate school admissions process. These are among the suggestions they have made regarding the content of graduate personal or goal statements.

Academic Experience - Don't be repetitive by describing a project you described elsewhere. Write about what you have learned from working with this project and how this has piqued your interest in further research. This may also be the place to mention any personal qualities, which would make you a good researcher. If you choose to do this, however, be sure to back up those statements with specific examples documenting your skills in these areas.

Research Interests - This is most appropriate for people applying to a research program and not for fields like law. Again, be as specific as possible and point out how this particular program to which you are applying fits with your research interests.

Extracurricular Experiences - This may be particularly important in business and law, where leadership qualities are given priority. Again, don't just describe experiences. Show how these experiences relate to your goals and what they have taught you about your skills in these areas--in other words, analyze these experiences. Look for any experience which sets you apart from the crowd: e.g., conducting a science project in high school, editing the college newspaper, being an officer of a student organization.

Career Goals - Indicate how you plan to use your graduate training.

You don't need to have your life mapped out in detail, but be able to delineate some general goals. Admissions committees are interested in knowing that you have thought about what you want to do with your life, and that a graduate education fits in with these plans. Whenever possible, point out how your goals are congruent with the training you will receive in that particular program.

Personal Attributes, Situations - This is the place to mention anything special about your background or extenuating circumstances relative to your application, such as reasons for a low GPA during a particular semester, etc. The important thing is to explain them in a non-defensive, non-apologetic manner.

A few more comments about your statements:

- Be aware that this is a sample of your writing skills. Therefore, watch for grammatical errors, typos, poor writing, etc.
- Graduate school committees are interested in knowing more about you as a person, and whether or not you fit the kind of advanced degree program they offer.
- Be sure to answer the question they are asking. Avoid canned answers.
- You can bring a typed draft of your personal statement to the Career Exploration Center to receive feedback.
- The Career Exploration Center library has resources to assist you in your writing and provide samples of personal statements for a variety of types of graduate programs.

WRITING THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

Rather than spending a lot of time anticipating and responding to specific questions a committee might ask, we will mainly focus on how to develop audience-awareness as a writer and how this will engage your readers. One thing you need to immediately understand: Committee members look through hundreds of statements during the admissions process. Unfortunately, much of the writing brings on sleep. Why is this? Aren't the statements full of important information, much of it potentially interesting? Maybe. But information itself is not enough. We have human appetites for surprise, emotional connection, and sense perception. When these appetites aren't whetted, then satisfied, by the writing, heads begin to droop.

Ways To Engage An Audience

Building a Connection - You need to establish yourself as a credible, thoughtful person. It's kind of a social contract between the reader and the writer. If you make claims that spark some degree of doubt in the reader, you may have lost them for the rest of the statement. Be honest. Most of the time, a careful reader will sense when the writer is piling it on. You'll find you do your best writing when the subject is heartfelt. You'll also get the best reaction from the reader.

Challenging Expectations - A surprising opening usually creates suspense. It does so by playing against expectations and prompting the reader to raise questions that presumably will be answered, not all at once, but slowly over the course of the statement. For example: "When I graduated from college, I ran away with the carnival." Who spends four years studying to join the carnival? What does this have to do with wanting to go to grad school? Obviously, you are responsible for answering the questions raised in the reader's mind (the whetting of the appetite). Unfortunately, if you aren't aware what questions you're raising, you can't possibly satisfy them.

Specific Language - One of the things we have in common is, of course, our five senses. We grasp the concrete better than the abstract. Most all good statements use concrete particulars.

Economy - Committee members value brevity. They've got a lot to read. Also, it tells them you understand constraints, form. Make your statement memorable, not lengthy. Don't spend two pages "exploring" what could be said in one. Get across the same meaning without a lengthy prepositional phrase. For example: "*I worked for a dermatologist for nothing for a long time.*" becomes "*As an experienced dermatology intern...*"

Revising - Avoid the 10 most common mistakes below. Have as many people proofread your statement as possible, to more likely catch errors.

1. Errors and general sloppiness. This devalues the statement because you didn't care enough to proof your work. They'll assume that you'd be as sloppy in your graduate work.
2. Anything like: "*I have always wanted to be...*"
3. All words and no action. You sound great on paper, but give no details to back it up.
4. Taking too many or too few risks in your writing. Don't be timid, but don't go overboard.
5. Stating personal problems and whining.
6. Too long--indicates a lack of discipline.
7. Too short--indicates a lack of knowledge and/or uncertainty of your future in graduate school.
8. Saying what you think they want to hear--this is very dangerous. They will sense dishonesty, that this not the real you. You lose credibility.
9. Avoiding questions.
10. Mixing up schools in your statement, usually when applying to more than one school.



SAMPLE OPENING PARAGRAPHS

The study of classical guitar never bores me, although most of the work is highly technical. I practice memorization, scales, and finger exercises to build a collection of techniques for playing a piece of music. At times, the work becomes tedious, and the knowledge seems useless to a certain extent. But finally, when I'm well versed in the technological aspects of the piece, after I've memorized the notes, accents, tempos, and fingerings, I just play the music. I enjoy the music: The combination of technology and art, the bridge between the outside world and myself.

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While my co-workers stared at the amazing sight of thousands of blacklegged kittiwakes exploding off the cliff face, I closed my eyes and listened. I had been working in Prince William Sound, Alaska, for a number of months and had noticed that when a colony of sea birds was flushed by a predator, they made a particular descending warble vocalization. In fact, in the hectic life of a kittiwake colony with up to 16,000 birds coming and going, this distinct call seemed to be the trigger for the only coordinated activity in which I ever saw them participate. Later that afternoon, I practiced making the "flush call" until the researchers with me were sick of it, then climbed onto the colony and did my best imitation. The thunder of the entire colony lifting off, as other birds picked up the call, cemented my long-held intention: I want to work with sound. My purpose for undertaking doctoral work in acoustics and animal behavior is twofold. First, my professional goal is to contribute to the existing research on biological systems, which use sound. Second, my personal goal is to convey in-depth understanding and love of these systems to the students I teach.

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My grandmother was the first political activist I knew. Her form of rebellion was not hunger strikes at the Capitol; rather, she used song to voice her protests. Trained as an opera singer in the Ukraine, she sang songs of protest against the Communist regime. She had no higher education, but she understood the dangers posed by the governments of Lenin and Stalin. She remembered the changes, both positive and negative, brought about by the Bolshevik Revolution, and she sang the "underground" protest songs written by artists who would later disappear. My clearest memories of my grandmother are of her singing in her kitchen in San Antonio, seventy years after the revolution began. She sang in Russian, in Yiddish, and in Ukrainian, and she explained the songs to me--their hidden political meanings and the dangers they had once posed for her.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

Available at the Career Exploration Center's Resource Library, Jester A115:

Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice

Essays That Will Get You Into Medical School

Essays That Will Get You Into Law School

Essays That Will Get You Into Business School

Available at other UT libraries:

The Official Guide to U.S. Law School. Law Library Reference Section. Use in library only.

Medical School Admission Requirements, U.S. & Canada. PCL Stacks.

Barron's Guide to Law Schools. E-book available through UT Austin's online library catalog.

WEBSITES

www.gradschools.com - a comprehensive site about graduate school and the application process

www.petersons.com - provides admissions criteria for graduate and professional schools

www2.jobtrak.com/help_manuals/gradschool/essay.html - an online handbook on applying to grad school. The essay section offers tips on how to get started writing the essay, and explains why it is an important part of your application.

www.utexas.edu/cola/lacs/pre-law_services - download the Pre-Law Handbook from the UT-Liberal Arts Career Services. Although geared to law school applicants, their practical tips on how to write a personal statement can be applied to anyone seeking admission to a graduate program.

OTHER

The Career Exploration Center 471-1217 www.utexas.edu/student/cec
Jester A115A
Fall and Spring semester hours:
M-F 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., extended hours on Tuesdays until 7 p.m. (10 a.m. to 4 p.m. in summer)

The Learning Center 471-3614 www.utexas.edu/student/utlc
Jester A332
M-F 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., all year round

The Undergraduate Writing Center 471-6222 www.uwc.fac.utexas.edu
Flawn Academic Center 211 (Remote Site, ECJ 9.236, 7 to 10 p.m.)
Fall and Spring semester hours:
M-Th 9 a.m. to 10 p.m.
Writer's Advice Line: 475-VERB

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