THE PERSONAL STATEMENT FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

Graduate and professional schools often require some sort of written statement as a part of the application. The terminology differs, but may include "statement of purpose," "personal statement," "letter of intent," "personal narrative," etc. Some statements require rather specific information—for example, the applicant's intended area of study within a graduate field. Others suggest subjects which should be addressed specifically. Still others are quite unstructured, leaving the applicant free to address a wide range of matters.

The personal statement, your opportunity to sell yourself in the application process, generally falls into one of two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement:

This allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write and is the type of statement often prepared for standard medical or law school application forms.

2. The response to very specific questions:

Often, business and graduate school applications ask specific questions, and your statement should respond specifically to the question being asked. Some business school applications favor multiple essays, typically asking for responses to three or more questions.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU WRITE:

- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?
General advice

**Answer the questions that are asked**
- If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar.
- Don't be tempted to use the same statement for all applications. It is important to answer each question being asked, and if slightly different answers are needed, you should write separate statements. In every case, be sure your answer fits the question being asked.

**Tell a story**
- Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do is to bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you'll be putting yourself ahead of the pack. If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable.

**Be specific**
- Don't, for example, state that you would make an excellent doctor unless you can back it up with specific reasons. Your desire to become a lawyer, engineer, or whatever should be logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.

**Concentrate on your opening paragraph**
- The lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab the reader's attention or lose it. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.

**Tell what you know**
- The middle section of your essay might detail your interest and experience in your particular field, as well as some of your knowledge of the field. Too many people graduate with little or no knowledge of the nuts and bolts of the profession or field they hope to enter. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field and use the language professionals use in conveying this information. Refer to experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other source of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it. Since you will have to select what you include in your statement, the choices you make are often an indication of your judgment.

**Do some research, if needed**
- If a school wants to know why you're applying to it rather than another school, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. If the school setting would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention.

**Write well and correctly**
- Be meticulous. Type and proofread your essay very carefully. Many admissions officers say that good written skills and command of correct use of language are important to them as they read these statements. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Adhere to stated word limits.

**Avoid clichés**
- A medical school applicant who writes that he is good at science and wants to help other people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from often-repeated or tired statements.

**Determine your purpose in writing the statement**
- Pay attention to the purpose throughout the statement so that extraneous material is left out.
- Pay attention to the audience (committee) throughout the statement. Remember that your audience is made up of professionals in their field, and you are not going to tell them how they should act or what they should be. You are the amateur.
**Determine the content of your statement**

- Be sure to answer any questions fully. Analyze the questions or guidance statements for the essay completely and answer all parts. Usually graduate and professional schools are interested in the following matters, although the form of the question(s) and the responses may vary:
  - Your purpose in graduate study. This means you must have thought this through before you try to answer the question.
  - The area of study in which you wish to specialize. This requires that you know the field well enough to make a decision and are able to state your preferences using the language of the field.
  - Your intended future use of your graduate study. This will include your career goals and plans for the future.
  - Your special preparation and fitness for study in the field. This is the opportunity to join and correlate your academic background with your extracurricular experience to show how they unite to make you a special candidate.
  - Any problems or inconsistencies in your records or scores, such as a bad semester. Be sure to explain in a positive manner and justify the explanation. Since this is a rebuttal argument, it should be followed by a positive statement of your abilities. In some instances, it may be more appropriate to provide this information outside of the personal statement.
  - Any special conditions that are not revealed elsewhere in the application, such as a significant (35 hour per week) workload outside of school. This, too, should be followed with a positive statement about yourself and your future.
- Above all, this statement should contain information about you as a person. They know nothing about you unless you tell them. You are the subject of the statement.

**Determine your approach and style of the statement**

- There is no such thing as "the perfect way to write a statement." There is only the one that is best for and fitting for you.
- There are some things the statement should not be:
  - Avoid the "what I did with my life" approach.
  - Avoid the "I've always wanted to be a " approach.

**These are some things the statement should do:**

- It should be objective, yet self-revelatory. Write directly and in a straightforward manner that tells about your experience and what it means to you.
- It should form conclusions that explain the value and meaning of your experience, such as what you learned about yourself and your field, your future goals, and your career plans. Draw your conclusions from the evidence your life provides.
- It should be specific. Document your conclusions with specific instances, or draw your conclusions as the result of individual experience.
- It should get to the point early on and catch the attention of the reader.
- It often should be limited in length, no more than two pages or less. In some instances it may be longer, depending on the school's instructions.

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