



The Keys to Creating an Effective Professional School Application Personal Statement



Purpose of the Personal Statement

The personal statement is a required part of an application to professional school (such as medicine, dentistry, other health programs, law, business, education, social work, public policy, international affairs, counseling and most other professional degree programs). It is your opportunity to present your qualifications and reasons for choosing a professional education and career. You should discuss how your interest in the program and career developed and how you have pursued that interest while in college. Your statement should persuade the admissions committee that you will be a successful student and that you have the potential to contribute to the profession. This essay should *not* be confused with the statement of intent for academic master's degree and Ph.D. applications. Statements for those programs should focus on academic and research experience, rather than personal history.

Preparing to Write Your Statement

What do you want the admissions committee to know about you? Imagine the statement as a discussion with an admissions officer. Before you begin to write, spend time reflecting on what you know about yourself. It may be useful to develop lists or an outline of what you want to convey. You might list qualities and skills you believe you possess. Is there evidence of these in your record of experiences? These might include your experiences working with people, significant work experience, research experience, independent study, internships, community service or volunteer experience, student government or organizations, leadership, teaching experience, special emphasis within your major and/or minor and education abroad. You should think about how family members, professionals or others have influenced your decision. Planning on what unique aspects of yourself you want to share with the admissions committee is an important step in the process of creating an effective statement, and should not be overlooked.

If you present your experiences in a one-dimensional manner, by merely *describing* them rather than *explaining* their significance to you, your essay will not distinguish you from others or define your individual character. It is *critical* that you reflect on the meaning of your values, skills and interests so that you can write an essay that will reveal to the reader who you are, and not just what you have done. Write about your experiences in a way that conveys how they sharpened your perceptions, taught you important lessons, or clarified your goals. Developing various themes (of community involvement, the role of teamwork, the power of persistence, etc.) might provide a framework within which you can discuss your various experiences and how they reflect concepts you have come to value. Attempt to unify those ideas as you discuss your decision to pursue a professional education.

Checklist for Writing a Statement of Purpose
Vince Gotera | University of Northern Iowa

- ☐ Organization ...
 - ☐ A "hook" that demonstrates your passion for the field
 - ☐ Segué to your background in the field
 - ☐ Description of your academic background in the field
 - ☐ Specific classes you have taken, given by name
 - ☐ Specific professors you have had, especially if well-known in that field
 - ☐ Extracurricular activities in the field
-
- ☐ Publications or other professional accomplishments in the field (perhaps conference presentations or public readings)
 - ☐ Explanations about problems in background (if needed)
 - ☐ Explanation of why you have chosen the specific grad school
 - ☐ Mention one or two professors in that school and what you know of and appreciate about their work
 - ☐ Specific features of the grad program which attract you
 - ☐ Get advice from several of your professors — philosophical advice as well as specific writing advice
 - ☐ Proofread and copyedit; ask friends to proofread and copyedit as well
 - ☐ Keep working on the statement of purpose, even after you have already sent it to school(s) with earlier deadline(s)

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Personal Statement

PERSONAL STATEMENT**GOAL:** For admissions committee members to understand who you are as a person

- Should be a succinct, one-page (e.g., 4500 characters) narrative that displays clear language and writing skills — Remember: Admissions committee members read up to 50 essays a day
- Should address the following:
 - Your motivation for professional school
 - Your story – what makes you unique
 - Your qualifications and experiences

- Be honest! If you lie or exaggerate about an experience, you may find yourself in an awkward position when asked in an interview to describe

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- Take time to do the following:

- Prepare and gather information to include (e.g., your resume, journal, etc)
- Draft
- Review and proofread
- Get feedback from the Health Professions Advising Office, Career Center, and/or Writing Center
- Finalize



WRITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS ONLINE

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Smart Revision Strategies

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In general, good writers love to revise. It gives them a sense of accomplishment, and they find it easier or more satisfying than composing a first draft. I once revised a short story that I wrote over a two-year period, whittling it down from 35 pages to 13, dropping a character, changing the central theme, and ultimately producing one of my most well-published pieces. Some writers even revise their work after it's been published, just for themselves, nagged by some imperfection they perceive or based on how their readers have reacted.

Of course, when you write a personal statement or application essay, you don't have the luxury (or curse) of endless opportunities to revise. Nevertheless, you do have to expect that your first draft of the material might require multiple re-readings and revisions to be ready for submission. My best student writers tend to report that they re-read and revise their personal essays at least seven times, even if they change only one word or two each time, and they seek feedback from professors, advisors, Writing Center tutors, Career Services staff, friends, and even their parents. As they revise, they consider how to effectively use their space, tailor their content, perfect their grammar and mechanics, and improve their tone. As the discussions that follow will show, these principles are often tightly related to one another.

Revising for Space

When revising to save space or meet a word count, the first tactic is to think in physical terms. If your essay runs just a few lines over a boundary, look carefully at your paragraphs. Often, an entire line might be taken up by just a word or two, and shortening that paragraph accordingly can save a line. Of course, in physical terms, you can also experiment slightly with font and form, but keep in mind that astute readers will be critical of anything that is physically difficult to read because of how you managed space.

More important in revising for space is for you to look at your material holistically and ask yourself if any essay part is taking up more proportional space than it should or is simply too long to justify its value. I once worked with a student who was having trouble conforming to her word count, so we looked at her first draft carefully for any weak areas, deciding that her introduction wasn't really worth the space it took up. Here was her original introduction:

There are moments in my day when students buzz by like bees do, I take a confused pause and ask myself: oh no, where am I going? The pause is almost unnoticeable, nevertheless daunting. Of course, the quick answers are: the student union, class, work, and a never ending list of meetings. However the larger question looms over my body as I hustle to register students to vote and plan more ways to increase political awareness on campus. I used

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to dread the exploration of my future possibilities; this looming entity was a cloud ready to break apart and drown me in a rainstorm. Despite my love of running around in rainstorms, I found more comfort in my mother's words: to find out where you're going, you need to know where home is.

Upon reflection, the writer realized that not only was the opening lengthy, it was also redundant with other parts of the application. Readers would learn plenty about her energy and political activism in her resume and list of activities. And as far as the introduction's creativity, the writer realized she was just using it to show off a bit, and in the process using clichés ("students buzz by like bees") and providing irrelevant detail (her "love of running around in rainstorms").

Fortunately, this writer spared her readers and hacked her introduction down to the material that was the most original—her mother's comforting words, which were a central theme in her essay. Her revised introduction read thus:

I have always found comfort in my mother's words: to find out where you're going, you need to know where home is.

Much nicer—crisp, interesting, and meaningful. By revising six sentences down to one, the writer emphasized what she cared about most in her original introduction, which also turned out to be the material that was the most personal.

Revising for Content

Recognizing the audience's need for content, especially guided by the application question criteria you're addressing in a personal essay, you should always consider ways to revise that will provide further substance. For instance, knowing from the application question that his readers were interested in specific details about his planned master's research, one writer changed this:

As part of my master's research at Mythic College I am interested in the information overload issue—it can cause anxiety, poor decision-making, and reduced attention span.

... to this:

For my master's thesis at Mythic College I plan to focus on cognitive architectures that allow us to make simulations of and predictions about human performance in situations such as driving vehicles or piloting fighter aircraft.

In this revision, we learn much more meaningful information about the planned research, including the practical applications of the work. Thus, we are more likely to assess that this student is indeed ready to begin his research.

As this example demonstrates, revising for content is usually about providing more concrete detail based on audience needs, keeping in mind that the content you choose reveals you as a person, as a thinker, and as a student. The

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Postscript

- 10 Commandments for Writing Personal Statements

more these three parts can be blended together through your content revisions, the better.

Revising for Grammar and Mechanics

Like many teachers, I sometimes urge my students to read their work aloud as a proofing tactic and so that they can literally hear how their writing might sound to others. This can be very effective, in that it helps you listen to your own sentence rhythms, sense gaps in logic, intuit where punctuation is needed, and identify words that you're misusing or overusing. However, a curious problem surfaces with this practice. Writers who read their work aloud tend to insert words that aren't really there on the page, or substitute correct words for incorrect ones, not even realizing they're doing it. Cognitively, what's happening is that they're revising, effectively and automatically, even if someone else looking over their shoulder at the printed work has to point it out to them.

The key to revising your work for grammar (both word choice and wording) and mechanics (small but important matters such as punctuation) is to, in effect, listen to your work anew. The best writers adopt an objective "listening ear," learning to detect their problems of grammar and mechanics both intuitively and methodically, pretending they're encountering the work for the first time no matter how many times they've re-read it.

Meanwhile, you can count on two things: (1) we tend to repeat the same errors over and over in our writing, and (2) other writers make the same errors we do. If we have one comma error in an essay, we're likely to have others; if we have a particular usage problem such as the distinction between "affect" and "effect," we can be sure other writers have it too. Therefore, by studying the most common errors and revising accordingly, we're likely to improve our work substantially. And when we make particularly common errors in our personal essays (such as confusing "it's" with "its"), our audience is justified in viewing us as lazy and unthinking, in that such errors are so easy to reason through and correct.

Grammatically, writers tend to make their most obvious errors in these areas:

Subject/verb agreement, which can usually be addressed by identifying each subject and verb in your sentences, ignoring the other words mentally, and making certain that they match in number and sound. Also, remember that the word "and" linking two subjects makes them plural ("Grammar and mechanics are related"), and that when subjects are connected by the word "or" the subject closer to the verb determines the verb's number ("Either the punctuation marks or the usage is flawed").

Verb tense, which must be considered both for consistency and context. Writers can switch verb tenses within a paragraph as long as the context calls for it, but unnatural shifts in verb tense stand out loudly ("The sample was heated and then cool before storage"). As a general principle, the simplest verb tense should be chosen for the circumstances (avoid "has," "have," and "had" as helpers except when necessary), and favor the present tense when possible (it brings the material "closer" to the reader).

Runs-ons and fragments, which can again be addressed by identifying your subjects and verbs, and in some cases by assessing sentence length.

Commonly confused terms, which are easy to look up in any style handbook, and therefore a potential source of great irritation to your educated readers. Just to rehearse and briefly describe a few, "affect" is

usually a verb meaning "to influence," while "effect" is usually a noun meaning "outcome" or "result." "It's," of course, always means "it is," while "its" always shows possession. The abbreviation "e.g." is Latin for *exempli gratia* and means "for example," while "i.e." is Latin for *id est* and means "that is." The word "imply" means "to suggest" or "to indicate," while "infer" involves a person actively applying deduction. The word "that" is used to define and limit a noun's meaning, while "which" is used to provide descriptive information not central to the noun's definition.

From a mechanics standpoint, writers do themselves a great favor by learning to understand punctuation conceptually and fundamentally, as follows:

A comma is a separator. Therefore, when you use one you should identify why the material is worthy of separation. Common reasons include that you used a transition word that creates a natural pause, you wrote a lengthy, complex sentence with multiple subjects and verbs, and that you supplied a list of three or more related items or phrases in a row. All three of these reasons helped me punctuate this paragraph with commas.

A colon is an arrow pointing forward. It tells us that new information, which is promised by the wording before it, is about to arrive. The colon is especially handy for introducing an announced piece of evidence, a focused example, or a list. Contrary to popular belief, the colon can be used to point us forward to a single word or to an entire sentence. My favorite example of the former is an old George Carlin joke: "Weather forecast for tonight: dark."

A semicolon is a mark of co-dependency. This mark is so often mentally confused with the colon that I am often forced to repeat to my students: "The colon is two dots; the semicolon is a comma below a dot." (Though it's sad to have to say it, at least the explanation actually involves a semicolon.) As my explanation demonstrates, the semicolon is usually used to join phrases or sentences having grammatical equivalency, and it emphasizes that the joined parts are related, even co-dependent, in context.

A dash redefines what was just said. I'm amazed at how many writers simply don't use the dash at all—except excessively in e-mails—because they're afraid of it. But the dash is a powerful way to make an important aside, as I did above, and to tack on an additional comment of consequence—a comment that redefines. When typing the dash, be certain that you don't type a hyphen, but two hyphens in a row or a long bar (which Word is perfectly happy to provide automatically as you juxtapose two typed hyphens or via its pull-down symbol map).

Speaking of Word, by all means do use the grammar checker to test grammar and mechanics in your personal essay, but don't trust it blindly. To state the obvious, the grammar checker does not think, and it doesn't know the contextual difference between, say, "mescaline" (an illegal hallucinogen) and the word "miscellaneous." I choose this particular example because one of my students once accidentally claimed on her resume that she was in charge of "mescaline responsibilities" at her summer job. With that one slip, she could have worried and alienated both her former employer and her future one.

Revising for Tone

Put simply, tone is the writer's attitude towards the subject. We discern the

writer's tone by both the words chosen and the content selected, and in personal statements many writers unknowingly send the wrong message about themselves because of their tone. They often do this because they feel they should explain some blemish on their record ("It took me a long time to decide on the right major") or because they mistakenly think that arrogance might be taken as confidence ("I invented a totally new method of scientific research"). Instead, such writers are likely to be perceived as indecisive and lacking in confidence in the first case, and hubristic and naive in the second.

If I had to boil the issue of tone in personal statements down to one word, it would be this: affirmation. Your job is to affirm—what is true, what you've accomplished, what you value, how you think, how you see the world, what your plans are, what your research means, what program you'd like to attend, and so on. Too many writers focus on the negative, stressing their uncertainties, their doubts, and even their failures. There's always a positive way to spin a point—watch the spin doctors and politicians on television news shows if you need a primer—and in a personal statement a positive, affirmative tone is critical.

As examples, here are some sentences taken from personal essays that I've read, but altered so that they're spun as negatives:

I only completed a generalist degree in a field called earth sciences, which gives you a little bit of everything without any real specializations.

Unfortunately, government red tape and bureaucracy are intertwined with how we learn about our environment in school.

My long-term goals remain uncertain, but I feel very sure that I don't want to be a professor.

Though these are altered to make a point, many personal statements do contain such negative attitudes, with writers unwisely expressing dark feelings about themselves and towards the very fields in which they plan to study. Here are the positively spun versions of the same sentences, as they originally appeared:

As a scientist, my training began in earth sciences—a bachelor's degree combination of geography, meteorology, and geoscience.

Many of our existing federal ecosystem management protocols are based on a rich tradition of physiographic study.

My future plans lean more towards industry and research than academia.

As you revise personal essays, concentrate on exuding an affirmative, positive tone. Be upbeat but not overbearing. Explain but don't equivocate. Be realistic but not pessimistic. Speak confidently but don't brag. Be idealistic but not naive. Tell the truth about yourself and your background but don't apologize for either.

Do all this in your tone, and your readers may pay you the simple compliment most commonly coveted by writers: "I like your style."

Statement of Purpose

Kate M. Burgers

Thousands of fireflies, all flashing at random in complete disarray. Then, as if by magic, groups of them begin to flash in synchrony. Suddenly, all of the fireflies flash in unison with no conductor, no leader of any sort. I first saw this incredible video of fireflies in my junior year of college. Dr. Steven Strogatz had come to give a talk titled "SYNC: The Emerging Science of Spontaneous Order". At the beginning of the talk, I didn't really know what a dynamical system is, or why I should care about it. Dr. Strogatz showed a video of thousands of fireflies all flashing at once, then asserted that the model that describes those fireflies also describes the rhythm of a heart and a set of metronomes on a skateboard. I was fascinated.

I wanted to know more about how all of these seemingly different physical things could all be described by the same model. Seeing one lone equation on the screen was not enough for me. Unfortunately, there was no room left in my schedule to add a full class, or even a research credit, so I decided I would audit Dynamical Systems. On the first day of class, I asked the professor about a theorem we had seen in class, and to my surprise, he asked if I would grade for Dynamical Systems. I accepted the job, and through attending class and grading the homework, I learned a lot and gained a great appreciation and enthusiasm for applied math.

When I first entered Harvey Mudd, I did not know that I wanted to study math yet. That year, I was introduced to computer science for the first time. I was intrigued by the puzzles I saw, and the new way of thinking about them. As a result, I decided to apply for research in computer science the following summer. I was chosen for a robotics project. I worked with three other freshmen to program and modify a Roomba to find colored markers in a maze. We added a camera and three sonars to the Roomba to allow it to sense its surroundings, and developed a wall-following algorithm based on its readings from the sonars. In addition we wrote a vision program to allow for fine tuning of the robot's definition of colors. In April of the following year, the team took the robot to the Richard Tapia Robotics Competition, and won first prize.

Although I enjoyed my introductory computer science classes and robotics research, I began to realize that I truly delighted in the mathematics underlying computer science. I enjoyed the looking for algorithms and working solutions, but was less excited by the process of implementing those algorithms. Therefore, I looked for research in math and was accepted to do research at UCLA in hyperspectral imagery. This was my first taste of mathematical research. While the subject matter did not particularly inspire me, I found it thrilling to learn about a specific subject and to contribute to a new field of research. In my first mathematical research experience, I learned that although research can be tedious sometimes, the excitement of finding a new result is always worth putting in the extra effort.

Last summer, I was chosen to participate in the NSF-REU in Extremal Graph Theory and Dynamical Systems at Rochester Institute of Technology. I was originally working with my partner to find an algorithm for detecting anomalies within a social network. However, as we were working on this problem, we discovered that there are very few real networks on which to test our methods. Therefore, we changed the direction of our research to create artificial networks which have adjustable clustering coefficients and average path lengths, allowing the networks to be more similar