

# Guidelines for Writing Personal Statements

Compiled from the Career Planning Guide:  
The Key Career Prep Resource, 2006

A personal statement is also referred to as a personal essay, letter of intent, statement of purpose, or application essay. It gives selection committees a look into your potential as a graduate student and your abilities as a writer.

## **START WITH FUNDAMENTALS**

- ✓ A personal statement serves as a snapshot of who you are as an individual.

## **GENERATE DETAIL**

- ✓ *The Essay Opening: A Selective Snapshot:*  
The fundamental goal of the opening of your essay is to provide a quick, yet meaningful snapshot of who you are as a person.
- ✓ *The Body of the Essay: Evidence and Skills:*  
The body paragraphs of your personal statement discuss your academic background or research in relation to skills you have acquired. In discussing your background and experiences be careful not to rehearse resume-like details about jobs you have held.

Readers will be most interested in specific, skill-oriented detail (e.g. lab techniques acquired; analytical tools gained; participation in team decision-making; journal research and publication experience; oral presentation skills; evidence of leadership; facility with programming languages.)

Think in relation to those skills most valued in your discipline, and describe your background in a way that highlights those attributes. Ideally, you should select detail based on what you wish to study in graduate school, employing your past experience to project future aptitude.

- ✓ *The Closing: Looking Ahead:*  
As you near the close of your essay, define a long-term goal in a positive, broad fashion (e.g. "to work as a professor..." "to work in advertising...".) When defining your goal, keep the needs of your readers in mind. Your readers merely wish to confirm that you are serious in your purpose, and that you have the ability to envision some concrete plans. Your long-term objectives can usually be provided briefly.

Personal goals may be just as relevant as professional ones. In the closing paragraph, nothing impresses a selection committee more than specific reference to the target program, especially if you can name a professor or

research group you would like to work with in graduate school and a rationale for how you made that choice.

### **REVISE YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT:**

- ✓ The best writers report that they re-read and revise their personal essays at least seven times, even if they change only one or two words each time. Additionally, they seek feedback from professors, advisors, writing center tutors, friends, and even their parents.
  
- ✓ *Revising for Space:*  
Seek a sense of balance among essay parts, so that your opening narrative about personal motivation is about the same length as your closing about long-term goals and the choice of your target program.
  
- ✓ *Revising for Grammar and Mechanics:*  
Grammatically, writers tend to make their most obvious errors in these areas:
  - Subject/verb agreement
  - Verb tense
  - Run-ons and fragments
  - Commonly confused terms: “effect” (i.e. an outcome) versus “affect” (i.e. an influence); “e.g.” means for example while “i.e.” means that is or in reference to.

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
  - A colon is an arrow pointing forward
  - A semi-colon is a mark of co-dependency
  - A dash redefines what was just said
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- ✓ *Revising for Tone:*  
Tone is a writer's attitude towards the subject about which he/she is writing. Many writers unknowingly send the wrong message about themselves because of the tone they take in their personal statements. When writing, concentrate on exuding an affirmative, positive tone.

