

Personal Statement Tips

In addition to advice you glean from various books and handouts, as well as what you can see in examples of other students' personal statements, keep in mind the following:

There are several things you **must** accomplish in a personal statement.

1. You must convey (over and over again) your supreme eagerness, enthusiasm, and motivation for graduate school – both for the subject matter and especially for conducting research, if applicable. This involves using words such as eager, enthusiastic, desire, excited, etc.
2. You must show that you are knowledgeable about the field and occupational path you are pursuing. If applying to programs in which you will conduct research (e.g., PhD programs in psychology), you must show that you can talk about research in a sophisticated and articulate way (rather than in a naïve, unsophisticated, or undergraduate-y way). If you have publications or presentations, go into depth about your research experiences. That is, talk about the literature (i.e., the rationale for your interests and predictions), your hypotheses, what you found, and what the outcomes were (e.g., presentation and/or publication). If applying to programs that are practice focused in which you will provide services (e.g., PA programs), you must demonstrate an understanding of current issues facing this field and your reasons for specifically pursuing this line of work as compared to other options (e.g., discuss why you are applying to PA school instead of medical school or nursing programs).
3. You must show that you are a good “fit” with the department or program to which you are applying. For example, use program websites to note which specialized experiences a particular program offers and why these experiences are of interest to you. If appropriate, note which faculty members you'd like to work with and what their research areas are, and mention them specifically. For most doctoral programs, each individual faculty member chooses which graduate students he or she would like to admit, so you want to make sure that at least one of them wants you. Only discuss your genuine interests (i.e., don't lie about your interests, or you may end up doing research or engaging in practice that you hate for several years).
4. **You must follow directions!** Some programs will have a specific question they want answered in the personal statement or have special instructions (e.g., limits on word count). If you do not follow instructions, do not expect your application to be successful.

Let your personality shine through

Do not be content with a “fluffy”, stock, generic statement (i.e., one that looks and sounds like everyone else's). Fluffy, vacuous sentences or paragraphs dilute from the statement's overall impact, so find them and eradicate them! Do not be afraid to be clever or interesting (as long as it is appropriate), especially in the opening paragraph – grab the reader's attention and don't let go.

Sell yourself

You should be confident (but not arrogant) when describing your skills, training, and future plans. Make application reviewers as excited about you as you are about them.

Start early!

Expect to go through multiple revisions (5 or 6 drafts is not uncommon) – preparing for and working on a personal statement for 6 months is not uncommon. Have trusted faculty members, mentors, career counselors, and your graduate-school-bound friends comment on your drafts.

A few other secrets:

When talking about future interests – be broad and mention several interests. For example, it sounds very naïve when a student thinks they are going into graduate school to follow up on an honor's thesis or collect data for a project designed as an undergraduate student.

It is fine to not know exactly what you want to do and to mention a few possibilities. Most PhD programs are in the business of training future academics, and even though they know that not everyone will go into academia, they are not going to be enthusiastic about a candidate who says this up front.