

Writing a Personal Statement

What is the goal of a personal statement?

- Instead of personal statement, it should be called the “why you should pay me lots of money to research at your school statement” or “professional statement.”
- Don’t get your application thrown into the “crazy” pile. No matter what led you to be interested in psychology and what you plan to do after you get your degree, research should be the main focus of your personal statement.
 - Leave out pathology, religion, or traumatic experiences.
 - Use regular white paper.
 - No smiley faces.
- Steer away from the fact that your grade-school teacher thought you would make a great psychologist and any other dramatic or general stories that are monotonous.
- Admissions committees are interested in what you have *learned* from your wins and losses. This is not a list of experiences (that’s your vita). Talk about what your experiences meant, how they impacted you, some themes throughout, and why they led you to go to grad school.
- Main things that grad schools want to know:
 - How did you develop your interest in the field?
 - What experiences have you had that have prepared you for graduate study?
 - Why do you want to pursue a PhD?
 - Why do you want to attend their school over other programs?

Talk about your specific research interests.

- “Through my personal and work experiences, I’ve become very interested in working on X topic(s).” Do not use overly broad statements (“I love all research in I/O”) but don’t be so specific that they no longer fit the department (“I want to research the career aspirations of male teenagers who studied abroad”). The research interests you list should match with at least one faculty member at the school you’re applying to. If you don’t have past experience with their research area, expressing an interest and talking about the research skills you’ve gained earlier in the personal statement is acceptable.
- It is a good idea to list at least two faculty members you are interested in working with in case something happens (no longer accepting students). Out of the two, don’t make it sound like one is a favorite and the other is a consolation prize.
- When you talk about your experiences in the lab, try to show that you understood the purpose of the project beyond your role in it.

Talk about coursework only if you did something beyond the requirements.

- Ex: Intermediate Statistics
- Class outside of your major that fits
- Study abroad experience only as it applies to graduate school (for example, you want to study cross cultural I/O)

Be careful about how you present your motivation to get in.

- Be confident in your tone and sell yourself, but don't go overboard. Don't make it sound like you think you're G-d's gift to grad schools. Don't make it sound like you are unsure about the decision to attend a PhD program.
- Don't say that you want to get in because you heard that people with graduate school degrees are super famous and super wealthy.

End with one or two paragraphs about the specific school.

- "I had the opportunity to correspond with Dr. X to talk about his current research. I feel that it matches my interests and would like to further pursue X."
- "I am interested in Dr. X's work on _____. I have had some background in this topic from my work on _____."
- You can also cite a RECENT paper, but you don't have to.
- Many professors' websites are outdated. Find their vita and use Psych Info, even if you just look at the abstracts.
- Sometimes the person you want to work with won't be taking students. Mention two or three faculty members to help your chances.
- Show that you did your homework! Conclude your personal statement with a paragraph that includes other aspects that draw you specifically to that program. A unique research center or on-site consulting company, for example, are added benefits to some programs and including those aspects in your personal statement shows the admissions committee that you spent the time to research their program and that you are interested in attending their school over others in the field.

General Writing Advice

- The personal statement is almost impossible to get right on the first try. Be prepared for multiple drafts and get feedback from others. It's a good idea to solicit a variety of advice about your personal statement (a professor, another psychology student, someone who doesn't know anything about I/O).
- Aim for about two or three double-spaced pages, although some schools will have different word limits. You may have several versions of your statement.
- Don't forget this is a writing sample. Do your best to write it well. A well written statement not only reflects your writing ability, but also your level of conscientiousness and attention to detail.
- Big words aren't always better. Neither are big sentences. Vary your sentence structure.
- Start early – it takes longer to write than you think.
- While the first one or two pages are about you and your experiences and can be mostly reused for each application you submit, the last page should be tailored to each specific school.