

WHAT IS IT?

Graduate school applications often require a personal statement (also called an application essay or statement of purpose) in which you discuss your education and experiences in light of your goals and choice of a particular graduate degree program and institution. You want to make the most of this opportunity to distinguish yourself from other applicants and help the admissions committee see you as more than just a transcript or set of test scores.

CONTENT

Be meticulous in reviewing application instructions as requirements for personal statements differ among institutions and programs. In general, successful application essays include certain kinds of information:

- compelling, specific reasons why you identified this particular degree from this particular school as the best *match* for your strengths, needs, and goals
- unique traits, experiences, or perspectives that would help you contribute to the program and school
- meaningful details and examples to back up the points that you make
- details and examples that demonstrate who you are as a person/student/professional
- a realistic and mature perspective on attending graduate school and your goals in your intended field
- evidence that you have carefully researched your chosen program (including the school and faculty)
- answers to any specific questions asked in the application instructions

FORMAT AND STYLE

Your goal is to convince your audience of your message (i.e., that you belong in this graduate program). Draft your personal statement early so that you can revise it often and with help. You want to ensure your final product is

- logically organized with an introduction, body, conclusion, and transitions to guide your readers
- written in a tone and voice that is professional yet gives readers a sense of who you are
- free of clichés and obvious/trite statements (e.g., “I am pursuing an MA in teaching because I love children” could appear on anyone’s application; make your claims as unique to you and as specific as possible.)
- clear, concise, and error-free (*proofread* multiple times and enlist other trusted readers to help)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Can I use the first person?

Absolutely. Your essay is about you – your goals, background, and “fit” for a graduate program.

How much detail do I provide about my previous education and experiences?

Ask yourself what you *most* want the admissions committee to notice and select examples and details accordingly. Make sure you address *why* those details are noteworthy and *how* they support your application. Take care not to repeat information readily available in other parts of your application (i.e., a résumé or c.v.).

Can I include pre-college experiences?

An experience from any point in your life is appropriate as long as you meaningfully connect it to your goals or your “fit” for a graduate program. Take care not to provide a chronology of your life up until this point, however.

Should I avoid mentioning negative incidents? Should I explain poor grades?

Offering explanations for negative aspects of your academic or professional record can help allay concerns a committee might have. Be brief and never offer excuses or place blame on others. Demonstrating what you have learned from a negative experience is a useful way to frame this discussion.

How long should the essay or statement be?

Most schools will specify a length; if not, two pages is generally appropriate. *Never* exceed the stated limit.