

How to Get Started on Your Graduate School Personal Statement

Workshop and Q&A

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR
Career Education



Agenda

What we'll be doing today!

Goals

How to get started in writing a personal statement for graduate school applications.



Part 1

Purpose, Tips and Resources

Part 2

Lab and Questions

Quick Poll:

Who is in the room?

**What is a graduate school
personal statement?**

A big-picture definition:*
a graduate school personal statement is a 1–3 page essay you submit as part of a graduate school application.

** We will go into more nuance shortly.*

Personal statements: What they do

Your statement should demonstrate the following:

- **Why this degree?** *Why do you want to pursue this graduate degree in this field?*
- **Why now?** *Why is graduate school the ideal next step for you at this time?*
- **Why this program?** *Why do you want to pursue this graduate degree at this school?*

Personal statements vs. Statements of purpose

The statement of purpose structure

- A very common framework for a graduate school statement — it speaks clearly and straightforwardly to the “why” questions
- Typical for research-intensive programs (PhDs, some master’s) and may be used for many others
- Tends to follow a present, past, future structure

Statement of purpose: sample prompts

- “Please upload a statement of 500–1,000 words explaining why you are applying to Yale for graduate study. Describe your research interests and preparation for your intended field(s) of study, including prior research and other relevant experiences. Relate how the faculty, research, and resources at Yale would contribute to your future goals.” ([Source](#))
- “What are your vocational objectives and how will your proposed plan of graduate study relate to them and allow you to achieve them? Within your major field, are there special areas of interest to you? Please explain. Are there any special circumstances related to your academic record that you wish to explain or that we should know?” ([Source](#))

Present: The introduction

The introduction of a SoP-style essay includes:

- A straightforward statement of why you intend to pursue this degree at this time
- Big-picture information about you, relevant to the degree
- May or may not begin with a hook
- May introduce a core theme that will thread through the statement

Past: The body

The body of a SoP-style essay:

- Typically takes up 2/3+ the space of the essay
- Shows how your experiences have:
 - Helped you hone in your planned area of study
 - Prepared you for success in graduate school

Future: The conclusion

The conclusion of a SoP-style essay:

- Is typically 1–2 paragraphs
- Tells the reader:
 - What you hope to do in graduate school
 - Why you hope to do those things in this program
 - How you'll contribute as a member of their community
 - Where you hope the degree takes you (often career)

The personal statement structure

- Rooted in or centered around a (typically: relatively recent) story about a pivotal experience in your life
- Goal of that story: show that you have the key qualities sought by the program or crucial for the career it prepares you for; show how you'll contribute to their community
- Sometimes synonymous with or explicitly framed as a diversity statement

Personal statement: sample prompts

- “In addition, applicants must provide responses for two of the following prompts (300 words each): (2) Please tell us about a time you’ve had to overcome a challenge or difficulty.” ([Source](#))
- **“Essay A: What matters most to you, and why?** For this essay, we would like you to reflect deeply and write from the heart. Once you’ve identified what matters most to you, help us understand why. You might consider, for example, what makes this so important to you? What people, insights, or experiences have shaped your perspectives?
([Source](#))

“Simply put, the statement of purpose is about your work, while your personal statement is about you—and how you’ll contribute to the diversity of ideas. Draw on your unique background to present yourself as an ideal candidate for the graduate program to which you are applying.”

—University of California Graduate Admissions

Your essays are not just about what you've done; they should show how you uniquely think.

**How do I get started
in my writing process?**

To understand expectations for your essay:

- Pay close attention to the prompt
- Take note of guidance from the program (in the application, from admissions webinars, from FAQs)
- Seek insight from mentors in the field (e.g., professors, graduate students, supervisors at related internships) about discipline-specific expectations

Writing Process

START

END

Make a Plan

Create a timeline; set goals and reminders

Research & Reflect

Compile program information and application requirements; reflect on essay prompts

Draft

Freewrite, outline, write

Revise

Review, collect feedback, revise; likely to be iterative!

Polish

Final proofread and submit!

Consider these questions:

- Is the program research-oriented? (e.g., PhD, thesis-oriented master's program)
 - > You'll likely write an essay with a "statement of purpose" structure.
- Is the program clearly pre-professional in nature? (e.g., nursing, MBA, clinical psychology PhD)
 - > Your essay should make clear how the degree will help you advance toward your career goals.
- Do the graduate programs you're applying to prioritize key personal qualities or values among applicants? (e.g., a medical degree, a law degree)
 - > Your essay should demonstrate how you have demonstrated one of those core values or qualities. *NB: These programs have very unique requirements, so be sure to do your research and work closely with a pre-professional advisor!*

Reflection Questions:

- What information does the application committee want to see?
- Why do you want to go to graduate school? Why this program? Why now?
- How do you know that you will be successful in the program? What is your transferable experience?
- How does this program connect to your career goals?

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What resources are available to support me in my statement-writing process?

Resources

CCE career
counseling and
online resources

Faculty, PIs,
major advisors,
grad mentors

Writing Center

Preprofessional
advisors at CSA
or GS

URF advisors (for
post-graduate
fellowships)

Professional
mentors and
alumni

Part 2: Lab and Questions

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