

## Personal Statements

### **What is the purpose of the personal statement?**

In general, the personal statement is used by graduate school faculty to supplement and enrich the information present in the rest of the application. Because much of the rest of the application is factual, and in many cases, statistical information, the personal statement allows the faculty to learn about the applicant in a somewhat different manner. First, it is used to learn why the applicant is interested in graduate school. What got you interested in psychology, what are your career goals, and how motivated and passionate are you about the field? Second, it is used to evaluate how well the applicant's interests correspond to the interests of the program to which the applicant is applying. Are your interests and goals consistent with what that graduate program can provide for you? Third, it is used to assess the applicant's writing ability. Do you write in a coherent, organized, and succinct fashion? Fourth, the personal statement is used to differentiate applicants who are in the middle range, with good, although not outstanding, scores and grades. What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?

### **Some Questions to Get You Started**

- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- How have you learned about this field--through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school--and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

## **General advice**

### **Answer the questions that are you asked**

- If you are applying to several schools, may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar.
- Don't be tempted to use the same statement for all applications. It is important to answer each question being asked, and if slightly different answers are needed, you should write separate statements. In every case, be sure your answer fits the question being asked.

### **Tell a story**

- Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do is to bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you'll be putting yourself ahead of the pack. If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable.

### **Be specific**

- Don't, for example, state that you would make an excellent doctor unless you can back it up with specific reasons. Your desire to become a lawyer, engineer, or whatever should be logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story. Also, specifics never sound like bragging. If you say in your statement that you are a dedicated worker who always achieves excellence, readers might not only disbelieve you, but you might also come across badly. On the other hand, if you say you worked 30 hours per week and still managed to win the "outstanding senior" award in your department, they'll both believe and like you.

### **Find an Angle**

- If you're like most people, your life story lacks drama, so figuring out a way to make it interesting becomes the big challenge. Finding an angle or a "hook" is vital.

### **Concentrate on your opening paragraph**

- The lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab the reader's attention or lose it. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.

### **Tell what you know**

- The middle section of your essay might detail your interest and experience in your particular field, as well as some of your knowledge of the field. Too many people graduate with little or no knowledge of the nuts and bolts of the profession or field they hope to enter. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field and use the language professionals use in conveying this information. Refer to experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other source of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it. Since you will have to select what you include in your statement, the choices you make are often an indication of your judgment.

## **Do some research**

- Schools want to know why you're applying to it rather than another school, so do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. This information should not focus on how beautiful Oregon is in the summer or that you want to be in the area for some other reason. This section of the statement is meant to show the university that you know about their program, have researched it, and are a good match for them.

## **Write well and correctly**

- Be meticulous. Type and proofread your essay very carefully. Many admissions officers say that good written skills and command of correct use of language are important to them as they read these statements. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Adhere to stated word limits.

## **Avoid clichés**

- A medical school applicant who writes that he is good at science and wants to help other people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from often-repeated or tired statements. Avoid clichés such as "I want to help people" or "I want to make the world a better place." Try to be down to earth.

## **Avoid Understatements**

Many students are hesitant to make statements about their strengths. In some ways this humility is endearing. At the same time, however, if *you* don't say it, who will? You can't be sure what your referees will say about your assets. If what you are skilled in is relevant to their program, tell them. Any proof you have about your abilities should be included. If you were handpicked by a faculty member to become a research assistant, mention that. Many students make statements like, "I was lucky enough to be asked to work on a research project with Professor Smith." Did luck really have anything to do with your being asked? Although you may "feel" lucky for having been asked, it was undoubtedly Professor Smith's perceptions of your abilities that motivated her to ask.

Other students make statements about working while going to school. If you worked 40 hours per week, carried an average course load of 15 credit hours, and still managed to volunteer for the suicide hot line, that is impressive. So make the statement speak as "loudly" as possible. Don't say, "Hey, look at me, aren't I amazing?" but do state the simple facts. A student who can work a full-time job, successfully complete an undergraduate program, and still contribute to the community would seem to be a good candidate for graduate school. The point being made is that you should state your accomplishments in specific detail and show the reader how those things relate to your success in their program.

## **Some other things to Avoid**

- Avoid the "what I did with my life" approach.
- Avoid the "I've always wanted to be a " approach.
- Avoid a catalog of achievements. This is only a list of what you have done, and tells nothing about you as a person. Normally, the statement is far more than a resume.
- Avoid lecturing the reader. For example, you should not write a statement such as "Communication skills are important in this field." Any graduate admissions committee member knows that and is not trying to learn about the field from the applicant.

## Is Your Letter Personal Enough or Too Personal?

If the personal statement reads more like a resume than a letter, it is too impersonal. On the other hand, if it reads more like a "this is my tragic life" excerpt, it is probably too personal. Rather than trying to develop a formula for level of personal detail, however, you should ask yourself a few fundamental questions.

- **Do the personal details I have included in the statement seem relevant to my ability to be a successful graduate student?** If the answer to this question is no, you may want to strongly consider eliminating those details.
- **Do the personal details I reveal demonstrate characteristics of my "self" that reflect maturity, adaptability, and motivation?** These are buzzwords that many graduate programs consider to be important qualities in incoming students.
- **Do the personal details convey a convincing portrayal of my abilities to succeed in this school's graduate program?** If you are applying for a clinical psychology program, for example, your experience with a family member who was raped may be significantly more telling than your experiences as a lifeguard.

Parts of this handout have been adapted from the following sources:

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Osborne, Randall E. "The 'Personal' Side of Graduate School Personal Statements." Indiana University

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## Personal Statement for Public Health

What if people lived healthier lives, practiced preventive medicine, and took precautions against illness and disease? My days in the physical therapy department often made me think about the prevention of injuries as well as the injuries themselves. I was already doubting my future career choice as a physical therapist. Although I loved the science of it and helping people, the lack of variety within the field and its limited options for growth bothered me. I needed a career that helped a large number of people, emphasized prevention and primary care rather than tertiary care, and would continually challenge and motivate me to improve. Knowing that I really did not want to pursue physical therapy as I had originally planned, my thoughts wandered to the area of public health, particularly health management.

My first true introduction to the public health arena came in a class offered through the Big U School of Public Health. As I listened to experts speak about contemporary health issues, I was intrigued. The world of "capitation," "rationing of care," and Medicaid fascinated me as I saw the range of problems that public health professionals were trying to solve in innovative ways. This one semester class provided me with a basic but thorough understanding of the issues faced in health care today. In the last two years I have continued to learn about public health both through coursework and work in the field.

Because field experience is such a valuable learning tool, I searched for a research assistant position that would allow me to view public health at a different level. I worked on a project at a county health clinic in Englewood, a low-income, minority community. The program attempted to increase treatment compliance rates for adolescents diagnosed with tuberculosis who must complete a six-month medical program. Working for the county exposed me to a different side of health care that I had previously seen. Service and organization were not assets of the county and yet its role in the public health "ecosystem" was and is critical. Its job of immunizing thousands and interacting with all members of the community is often forgotten, but is important for keeping an entire community healthy.

My work at the county health clinic as well as my knowledge of some areas of public health led me to accept an internship in Washington D.C. this past summer. The internship provided me with a greater understanding of a federal public health agency's operations and allowed me to contribute in a variety of ways to the XYZ Department in which I worked. Most importantly I worked on "policy issues" which involved identifying and summarizing problems that were out of the ordinary as well as documenting resolved issues in order to establish protocols to increase the department's efficiency. In addition I served on a scientific review panel, which was responsible for editing a seventy-page proposed regulation before its submission.

Along with my duties at XYZ, I attended seminars and met with public health leaders at different functions and events. All these activities confirmed my growing interest in preventive medicine, outcomes and effectiveness, and quality of care, particularly within the private/managed care sector. These are my strongest interests because I believe they are fundamental to our nation's health. We must achieve efficiency and access without sacrificing quality.

The University of California at San Francisco would help me achieve my goals of furthering my public health education through the specialize coursework offered as part of its health administration program. I am particularly interested in working with Dr. Carlos Sanchez and Dr. Ruth Hayes. Their work on inner city poverty and public health goals has showed me an entirely new way of looking at public health in cities, particularly in terms of accessibility and preventative care. In addition, I am very interested in the linked program they run between UCSF and the Bay Area Citizens Health Association, started two years ago. This program would allow me to make a difference in the lives of

San Francisco working poor, while at the same time giving me experience in how to make non-profit health organizations successful and their benefits available to the most people.

Since rejecting physical therapy as a career possibility, my interest in public health has only grown. I welcome the challenge of serving a large community and participating in such a dynamic and challenging field. What if an aspirin a day could prevent heart attacks? What if abandoning unnecessary procedures saved thousands of dollars, which then allowed a hospital to treat other patients needing care? What if every person was guaranteed care and that care was good? I would like to find answers for these questions during my career as a public health graduate student and professional.

### Letter for Admission to Dentistry School

Sitting at the corner of an examination room at a dentist's office, I translated to my grandmother the dentist's explanation of the procedure she was about to undergo, from English to Chinese. Starting at the age of 12, I often accompanied my grandparents on such visits to the dentist. The dentist would explain what he was going to do and show me the tools he was going to use. During these visits, I felt useful and professional for the first time in my life. I was not just an average Chinese girl; instead I was someone who could help my grandparents, a girl who could be helpful, even to someone as important as a dentist. These experiences acted as a personal introduction to the field of dentistry. Over the following years, I sought out opportunities to further explore the profession, including observing at multiple dental practices and attending Dental Careers Institute at Oregon Health & Science University. Witnessing some of the rewarding, the intriguing, as well as the difficult aspects of this field, solidified my determination to develop my early interest in dentistry into a life-long career.

I first began seeking out opportunities to further my understanding of dentistry in high school, leading me to shadow several dentists at a Kaiser dental clinic. Here is where I acquired my first exposure to hands-on experience in this discipline as I was given the opportunity to practice impression taking. Moreover, because this office housed multiple specialties, including general dentistry, orthodontics, and pediatrics, it enabled me to observe the diverse areas of this profession. Consequently, I began to appreciate the importance of cooperation and coordination among different specialists to achieve one goal-- complete comprehensive oral health care for patients.

Also, during high school, I participated in Dental Careers Institute at Oregon Health & Science University School of Dentistry, a weeklong program for high school students with an interest in the field. In addition to the daily lectures addressing different areas of dentistry, many hands-on activities were encouraged. The exercises I participated in included performing an entire examination procedure on one of my peers as well as utilizing a wax model to simulate various practical procedural skills. These exercises, along with many others, supplied further confirmation, to me, that the technical aspects of this field is appealing and rewarding.

I continued to further expand my experience with dentistry during my undergraduate education by shadowing additional dentists. First, I sought out and shadowed Dr. John Krump of Clackamas Jaw Surgery. In addition to exposing me to procedural aspects of dentistry that I had not previously observed, such as surgical tooth extractions and cysts removals, this experience also presented the opportunity to observe an aspect of private practice that is often overlooked by students: the complex, and frequently frustrating, financial matters. One particular situation that had an impact on me dealt with a patient who had recently been laid off from work and had no insurance coverage. Despite the serious pain his infected tooth was causing, he was still reluctant to allow Dr. Krump to perform the

extraction due to financial concerns. In keeping with his values and priorities, Dr. Krump along with his staff reduced the cost of the procedure by donating many of the hours and supplies involved. Through this experience, I realized that financial hurdles are often involved when providing patients with the needed care. However, these same experiences also demonstrated how such difficulties could be overcome when a care provider remains true to his/her principles.

My second shadowing experience during my undergraduate years was with Dr. William Ten Pas, practicing general dentistry. Dr. Ten Pas's schedule allowed him to spend more time with his patients, which showed me the development of strong patient-doctor relationships and how vital they are to the patients' care. This was particularly true when patients' demonstrated apprehension to procedures. As a result, I learned that when comforting patients during his/her visit, one needs to not only understand their oral needs, but also the patients' individual needs. Witnessing this and the fulfillment it brought to both patient and dentist, further confirmed my aspirations to pursue a career in dentistry.

As I complete my undergraduate education, I pursue a career in the field of dentistry with confidence. Confidence in that, after carefully investigating the challenges, frustrations, and rewards associated with a career in this profession, dentistry is one I am truly passionate about. Now, I am prepared to pursue and develop the knowledge and skills necessary to dedicate myself to the profession of dentistry.

#### Statement of Purpose for Theatre

When I declared a theatre major at Oregon State University, I undertook a journey of artistic discovery and self-expansion that led naturally to my pursuit of a Ph.D. Through courses in acting, directing, and theory, I acquired a passion for theory and criticism. As my drive to study this area intensified, so did my desire to teach at the university level. Both in high school and in college, my directors played an instrumental part in my growth, teaching me about life and leadership as well as performance. I wanted to have a similar impact on other students' lives, and I also wanted to challenge them on deep artistic and intellectual levels. As a professor, I realized, I could facilitate students' growth while contributing to current research in the arts.

In light of these goals, a Ph.D. in dramaturgy is a vital next step in my education. As a doctoral student, I want to study performance theory from an interdisciplinary perspective. By integrating approaches from literature, film, and drama, I hope to discover new ways of describing the creative process. Feminist and cultural criticism, the semiotics of theatre, and reception theory particularly intrigue me. Utilizing these frameworks, I plan to explore how artistic signs and dominant cultural paradigms construct meaning for audiences. My increased awareness of these issues should also make me a stronger, more audience-conscious director.

The University of Michigan offers an ideal environment for my studies, as I seek a department that emphasizes both production work and rigorous scholarship. I am drawn to the expertise of the faculty, especially Leigh Woods. Dr. Woods' research in and knowledge of acting history would, I believe, correlate well with my academic interests. Also, I am eager to take advantage of the unique opportunities to earn my certificate in film studies and to participate in the Michigan Shakespeare Festival.

To prepare for graduate school, and to broaden the scope of my education at Oregon State University, I am presently conducting an independent study in theatre. I am researching modern literary theory and composing a substantial essay on its relationship to the semiotics of theatre. Next term, I will apply my research by creating a piece of devised theatre with local high school students. In addition to maintaining a strong commitment to academic excellence, I remain active in the OSU theatre.

Through participation in fifteen OSU productions, I have developed versatility and confidence as a theatre practitioner. Currently, I play Katherine, Scroop, and part of the Chorus in our upcoming production of *Henry V*. Last year, I directed *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls*, an experience that reinforced my desire to direct at the university level. I also sought out two teaching assistantships in Introduction to the Theatre and Fundamentals of Acting I. These positions gave me invaluable experience in lecturing, grading, and coaching, and confirmed my commitment to a career in education.

Outside of the theatre, I value serving the OSU community as a whole. At the Center for Writing and Learning, I enjoy tutoring student writers, especially on challenging projects, such as the dissertation I edited this summer. This term, I work regularly with two master's students in anthropology and geography. I have also helped train new writing assistants. Last year, I served as a College of Liberal Arts Ambassador and assisted with presentations for prospective students. Due to my contributions to the theatre and OSU, last spring I was named an Outstanding Senior in the College of Liberal Arts. I am committed to full involvement in the University of Michigan community as well, and to building strong, professional relationships with the faculty and my peers.

The academic "stage" in Ann Arbor is the most complex and promising one I have ever approached, and my potential role as a doctoral student the most demanding. I look forward to meeting this challenge with excitement, dedication, and confidence.

#### Personal Statement for a Geology Graduate Program

Growing up in Canada with a life-long fascination for Canadian geography and the environment, I have always been interested in returning to the country. Although my family moved to the United States before I entered high school, I have always kept my eyes turned north, especially in recent years as I began to read journal articles about research conducted at the University of Alberta on John Evans Glacier, located about 80° N latitude. Now I see the opportunity to return to my birthplace and study a topic I am passionate about. Graduating next semester with a B.S. in computer science and engineering and a minor in geographic information systems, I am especially interested in attending the University of Alberta for graduate study.

Geographic information systems (GIS) is a field especially suited to investigating spatial patterns, unearthing elusive geographic parameters, modeling diverse scenarios and overlaying spatial data. This semester, in my advanced GIS course, Spatial Data Structures and Algorithms, I am part of a team developing a temporal database and program for tracing historical trading data. My computer science skills have also been put to use in two summer internship projects, where I acquired proficiency with using LIDAR (light detection and ranging) technology, now favored by NASA in its current 10-year study of Greenland and changes in the ice cap extent. Through my coursework and project experience, I have also accrued skills in using Arc/Info, ArcView, Microstation, and RDBMS software packages, and I am equally comfortable programming in Visual Basic, C++ and Java.

For my graduate research project, I would like to investigate methods for improving current GIS data models to better incorporate time as a variable in studying climate change. Changes in glaciers and polar environments occur rapidly, and these changes become important indicators of broader, potentially catastrophic, global changes. By developing and applying temporal GIS methods to glaciology, I can contribute to improved spatio-temporal analysis techniques that will provide better insights into the factors impacting the polar environment and glaciers. In addition, I can discern which temporal methods generally serve as the best predictors, and provide benefits to the GIS research community that apply to areas other than glaciology.

Once completing my master's program, my long-term goals include either entering the GIS field as a professional consultant or continuing my research and earning my Ph.D. at another program of international reputation. Having advanced experience with temporal GIS technology would make me a valuable consultant to a company, especially in the twin burgeoning fields of computer science and GIS. If I decide to continue on the research path, I would be most interested in a Ph.D. program that allows me to conduct field research in Antarctica.

The University of Alberta is an ideal location for my master's degree study because it allows me to integrate my facility for computer science with my chosen application area—geology. My academic advisors and my own research into your university programs have confirmed your strengths in both computer science and glaciology, and the recent application of these areas to field research at Ellesmere Island in Nunavut, Canada, is especially appealing to me. With my deep-rooted interest in Canadian geology and recognition of the quality of your university programs, I hope you will give my application every consideration.

### Personal Statement for Ecosystem Science

I plan to graduate with a Bachelors of Science in Natural Resources from Oregon State University in the spring of 2001. Majoring in Natural Resources—an interdisciplinary program administered by the College of Forestry—has given me a great deal of freedom to pursue my own interests within the general area of natural resources. I have chosen to concentrate on ecosystem science with a strong emphasis on research, specifically using molecular techniques to answer questions about the ecology of ectomycorrhizae.

I began working with researchers Dan Louma, Joyce Eberhart, and Tom Horton in the fall of 1999. I was first hired to perform simple DNA extractions and PCR amplification from ectoycorrhizal root tips and sporocarps. Since then, I have used ITS-RFLP and DNA sequencing analyses to match fruiting bodies to ectomycorrhizae root tips, allowing ectomycorrhizal fungi to be identified directly from root extractions.

My lab work included a part time position throughout the school year (1999-2001) and a full time research position during the summer of 2000. During my summer research project, I was successful in securing my own funding through the McNair program and completed an independent project matching *Suillus lakeii* sporocarps with their ectomycorrhizae root tip counterparts using DNA sequencing and ITS-RFLP analyses. I intend to pursue publication of these results during the upcoming school year. I presented the results of my summer research project at the McNair conference held at Oregon State University in August and at the November McNair conference in Delvin, Wisconsin, hosted by the University of Illinois. This limited introduction to research has instilled in me a scientific curiosity of mycology and ecology, which I am prepared to pursue into graduate school and professional research in academia.

UC Berkeley's stellar reputation, excellent teacher/student relations, and access to cutting edge technology has led me to actively pursue admissions to UC Berkeley. I am particularly interested in the Environmental Science, Policy and Management (ESPM) program. Tom Bruns and Ignacio Chapela—two researcher with strong credentials and appointments in ESPM—are studying questions directly related to my area of interest. Their strong work in mycology, the interdisciplinary nature of the ESPM program, and UC Berkeley's reputation are what I am looking for in a quality education that will allow me to contribute to the body of scientific knowledge.