

## Writing the statement of purpose for graduate school

### UC Berkeley

#### Graduate School - Statement

Graduate and professional schools often require some sort of written statement as a part of the application. The terminology differs, but may include "statement of purpose," "personal statement," "letter of intent," "personal narrative," etc. Some statements require rather specific information--for example, the applicant's intended area of study within a graduate field. Others suggest subjects which should be addressed specifically. Still others are quite unstructured, leaving the applicant free to address a wide range of matters. Some applications call for one statement, while others require responses to a series of six or more questions, ranging from 250 to 750 words each. The importance of the statement varies from school to school and from field to field.

- Determine your purpose in writing the statement
- Determine the content of your statement
- Determine your approach and style of the statement
- Words and phrases to avoid without explanation

#### Determine your purpose in writing the statement

Usually the purpose is to persuade the admissions committee that you are an applicant who should be chosen. You may wish to show that you have the ability and motivation to succeed in your field, or you may wish to show the committee that, on the basis of your experience, you are the kind of candidate who will do well in the field. Whatever its purpose, the content must be presented in a manner that will give coherence to the whole statement.

- Pay attention to the purpose throughout the statement so that extraneous material is left out.
- Pay attention to the audience (committee) throughout the statement. Remember that your audience is made up of professionals in their field, and you are not going to tell them how they should act or what they should be. You are the amateur.

#### Determine the content of your statement

Be sure to answer any questions fully. Analyze the questions or guidance statements for the essay completely and answer all parts. Usually graduate and professional schools are interested in the following matters, although the form of the question(s) and the responses may vary:

- Your purpose in graduate study. This means you must have thought this through before you try to answer the question.
- The area of study in which you wish to specialize. This requires that you know the field well enough to make a decision and are able to state your preferences using the language of the field.

- Your intended future use of your graduate study. This will include your career goals and plans for the future.
- Your special preparation and fitness for study in the field. This is the opportunity to join and correlate your academic background with your extracurricular experience to show how they unite to make you a special candidate.
- Any problems or inconsistencies in your records or scores, such as a bad semester. Be sure to explain in a positive manner and justify the explanation. Since this is a rebuttal argument, it should be followed by a positive statement of your abilities. In some instances, it may be more appropriate to provide this information outside of the personal statement.
- Any special conditions that are not revealed elsewhere in the application, such as a significant (35 hour per week) workload outside of school. This, too, should be followed with a positive statement about yourself and your future.
- You may be asked, "Why do you wish to attend this school?" This requires that you have done your research about the school, and know what its special appeal is to you.
- Above all, this statement should contain information about you as a person. They know nothing about you unless you tell them. You are the subject of the statement.

### **Determine your approach and style of the statement**

There is no such thing as "the perfect way to write a statement." There is only the one that is best for and fitting for you.

There are some things the statement should **not** be:

- 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. Some statements do ask applicants about \* their understanding of the field.

These are some things the statement **should** do:

- It should be objective, yet self-revelatory. Write directly and in a straightforward manner that tells about your experience and what it means to you. Do not use "academese." This is not a research paper for a professor.
- It should form conclusions that explain the value and meaning of your experience, such as what you learned about yourself and your field, your future goals, and your career plans. Draw your conclusions from the evidence your life provides.
- It should be specific. Document your conclusions with specific instances, or draw your conclusions as the result of individual experience. See below a list of general words and phrases to avoid using without explanation.
- It should be an example of careful persuasive writing. Career Center Counselors can help you determine if this is so by reviewing your draft statement.
- It should get to the point early on and catch the attention of the reader.

- It often should be limited in length, no more than two pages or less. In some instances it may be longer, depending on the school's instructions.

**Words and phrases to avoid without explanation**

significant	appealing to me	meaningful
interesting	appealing aspect	helping people
challenging	feel good	I like helping people
satisfying/satisfaction	I like it	remarkable
appreciate	it's important	rewarding
invaluable	meant a lot to me	useful
exciting/excited	incredible	stimulating
enjoyable/enjoy	gratifying	valuable
I can contribute	fascinating	helpful

**The Grad School Statement of Purpose**  
**EssayEdge.com**  
**by Geoffrey Cook**

The best way to approach your personal statement for graduate school is to imagine that you have five minutes with someone from the admissions committee. How would you go about making the best case for yourself while holding the listener's interest?

What would you include and omit in your story? Figuring out the answer to these questions is critical to successfully preparing an effective statement.

To arrive at these answers, you should begin by asking yourself two specific questions:

- Why have I chosen to attend graduate school in this specific field, and why did I choose to apply to this particular school's program?
- What are my qualifications for admission?

The answers will not necessarily come easily to you, but this exercise will have great practical benefit in readying you to write an outstanding personal statement. By answering each question thoroughly, you will have given much thought to yourself, your experiences, and your goals, thereby laying the groundwork for formulating an interesting and persuasive presentation of your own personal story.

As the founder of EssayEdge.com, I have seen firsthand the difference a well-written application essay can make. If you remember nothing else about this article, remember this: **Be Interesting. Be Concise.**

Why Graduate School?

Graduate school is a serious commitment, and it may have been your goal for a long time. Describing your early exposure to a field can offer effective insight into your core objectives. Watch out, however, that you do not make your point in such a clichéd, prepackaged way as to make your reader cringe. For example, you should not start your essay, "I have always wanted to" or "I have always known that \_\_\_\_\_ was my

calling." Instead, you should discuss specific events that led to your interest in the field.

Graduate school is, of course, a means to an end, and admissions committees prefer students who know where they're going and to what use they'll put their education (though the occasional soul-searcher, who may exhibit exceptional raw potential, is welcomed). For many people, the long-term goal is to work in academia, and to differentiate yourself in such cases, you can stress more specific objectives such as your research interests.

**Note:** Read the instructions carefully. Sometimes schools will ask for a statement of purpose describing your specific research interests in lieu of, or in addition to, a personal statement that emphasizes your character and qualities. For these types of essays, you can assume that a faculty member will be reading your statement, but it should still be accessible enough for a non-specialist to understand. Remember that

such essays should also still aim to engage the reader in a way that conveys your own enthusiasm for the subject matter.

Avoid mistakes like discussing the school's rank or prestige, or simply offering generic praise. Instead, mention faculty members by name and indicate some knowledge of their work. Consider contacting faculty members first and discussing their current research projects and your interest in studying under them. Then refer to these contacts in your essay.

### Why Am I Qualified?

The way to prove your qualification is not to list attributes you believe you possess but to discuss concrete experiences that show your abilities and qualities. As always, details are paramount. The rest of your application has already summarized your accomplishments and your activities. Show the reader what you did in concrete terms, and again, highlight your active roles.

The experiences that demonstrate your qualification are not necessarily distinct from those that explain your motivation. You shouldn't plan on dividing the essay into two separate sections for each, but rather organize the structure by topic and extrapolate insights as they develop. It's important that you think of the essay as an integrated whole, not as a checklist of questions you must answer.

Focus on research experience, since research will be your main job for the duration of your studies. Be specific about what you did. If you worked for a year under a professor, you might consider emphasizing one particular project and exploring that in depth. The experience does not have to have been a major undertaking: Any practical experience can be used as long as you demonstrate your enthusiasm and aptitude for the field of study.

Remember to keep the discussion personal. Do not get bogged down in minute details and jargon. Ultimately, the focus of the story should remain on you and your growth or success.

## **TOP 10 GRADUATE SCHOOL ESSAY WRITING TIPS**

### **1. Don't Write a Term Paper.**

As a prospective graduate student, you may be tempted to try to impress your reader with an already tight grasp of academic style. Resist this temptation! You will have plenty of time to produce labyrinthine sentences and sophisticated vocabulary. Your reader will have seen too many essays to appreciate bewilderingly advanced prose. Write clearly and personably.

### **2. Don't Bore the Reader. Do Be Interesting.**

Admissions officers have to read hundreds of essays, and they must often skim. Abstract rumination has no place in an application essay. Admissions officers aren't looking for a new way to view the world; they're looking for a new way to view you the

applicant. The best way to grip your reader is to begin the essay with a captivating snapshot. Notice how the slightly jarring scene depicted in the "after" creates intrigue and keeps the reader's interest.

*Before: I am a compilation of many years of experiences gained from overcoming the relentless struggles of life.*

*After: I was six years old, the eldest of six children in the Bronx, when my father was murdered.*

### **3. Do Use Personal Detail. Show, Don't Tell!**

Good essays are concrete and grounded in personal detail. They do not merely assert "I learned my lesson" or that "these lessons are useful both on and off the field." They show it through personal detail. "Show don't tell," means if you want to relate a personal quality, do so through your experiences and do not merely assert it.

*Before: If it were not for a strong support system which instilled into me strong family values and morals, I would not be where I am today.*

*After: Although my grandmother and I didn't have a car or running water, we still lived far more comfortably than did the other families I knew. I learned an important lesson: My grandmother made the most of what little she had, and she was known and respected for her generosity. Even at that age, I recognized the value she placed on maximizing her resources and helping those around her.*

The first example is vague and could have been written by anybody. But the second sentence evokes a vivid image of something that actually happened, placing the reader in the experience of the applicant.

### **4. Do Be Concise. Don't Be Wordy.**

Wordiness not only takes up valuable space, but also confuses the important ideas you're trying to convey. Short sentences are more forceful because they are direct and to the point. Certain phrases, such as "the fact that," are usually unnecessary. Notice how the revised version focuses on active verbs rather than forms of "to be" and adverbs and adjectives.

*Before: My recognition of the fact that the book was finally finished was a deeply satisfying moment that will forever linger in my memory.*

*After: Completing the book at last gave me an enduring sense of fulfillment.*

### **5. Do Address Your Weaknesses. Don't Dwell on Them.**

The personal statement may be your only opportunity to explain deficiencies in your application, and you should take advantage of it. Be sure to explain them adequately: "I partied too much to do well on tests" will not help your application. The best tactic is to spin the negatives into positives by stressing your attempts to improve; for example,



mention your poor first-quarter grades briefly, then describe what you did to bring them up.

## **6. Do Vary Your Sentences and Use Transitions.**

The best essays contain a variety of sentence lengths mixed within any given paragraph. Also, remember that transition is not limited to words like nevertheless, furthermore or consequently. Good transition flows from the natural thought progression of your argument.

*Before: I started playing piano when I was eight years old. I worked hard to learn difficult pieces. I began to love music.*

*After: I started playing the piano at the age of eight. As I learned to play more difficult pieces, my appreciation for music deepened.*

## **7. Do Use Active Voice Verbs**

Passive-voice expressions are verb phrases in which the subject receives the action expressed in the verb. Passive voice employs a form of the word to be, such as was or were. Overuse of the passive voice makes prose seem flat and uninteresting.

*Before: The lessons that have prepared me for my graduate studies were taught to me by my mother.*

*After: My mother taught me lessons that will prove invaluable as I pursue my research interests.*

## **8. Do Seek Multiple Opinions.**

Ask your friends and family to keep these questions in mind:

- Does my essay have one central theme?
- Does my introduction engage the reader? Does my conclusion provide closure?
- Do my introduction and conclusion avoid summary?
- Do I use concrete experiences as supporting details?
- Have I used active-voice verbs wherever possible?
- Is my sentence structure varied, or do I use all long or short sentences?
- Are there any clichés such as "cutting edge" or "learned my lesson?"
- Do I use transitions appropriately?
- What about the essay is memorable?
- What's the worst part of the essay?
- What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear?
- What parts of the essay do not support my main argument?
- Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This must be the case.
- What does the essay reveal about my personality?

## **9. Don't Wander. Do Stay Focused.**

Many applicants try to turn the personal statement into a complete autobiography. Not surprisingly, they find it difficult to pack so much information into such a short essay, and their essays end up sounding more like a list of experiences than a coherent, well-organized thought. Make sure that every sentence in your essay exists solely to support one central theme.

### **10. Do Revise, Revise, Revise.**

The first step in improving any essay is to cut, cut, and cut some more.

### **SAMPLE ESSAY**

I have been planning a career in geological sciences for several years, but as an undergraduate I concentrated on getting a solid background in math and science. After graduation, I took a job to allow myself time to thoroughly think through my plans and to expose myself to a variety of work situations. This strategy has been very valuable to me in rounding out my career plans.

During the past 18 months I have had firsthand experience with computers in a wide array of business applications. This has stimulated me to think about ways in which computers could be used for scientific research. One idea that particularly fascinates me is mathematical modeling of natural systems, and I think those kinds of techniques could be put to good use in geological science. I have always enjoyed and been strong in areas that require logical, analytical thought, and I am anxious to combine my interest in earth science with my knowledge of, and aptitude for, computer-related work. There are several specific areas that I have already studied that I think would lend themselves to research based on computing techniques, including mineral phase relations in igneous petrology and several topics in structural geology.

I have had both lecture/lab and field courses in structural geology, as well as a short module dealing with plate tectonics, and I am very interested in the whole area. I would like to explore structural geology and tectonics further at the graduate level. I am also interested in learning more about geophysics. I plan to focus on all these areas in graduate school while at the same time continuing to build up my overall knowledge of geology.

My ultimate academic goal is to earn a Ph.D., but enrolling first in a master's program will enable me to explore my various interests and make a more informed decision about which specific discipline I will want to study in depth. As far as long-term plans, I hope to get a position at a university or other institution where I can indulge my primary impulse, which is to be involved in scientific research, and also try my hand at teaching.

My decision to focus on math and science as an undergraduate and to explore the computer industry after college has equipped me with a unique set of strengths to offer this program. The depth of my interest in geology has only grown in my time away from academia, and although I have identified several possible areas of specialization through prior studies, I look forward to contributing my fresh perspective on all subjects.



## Purdue University Online Writing Lab – OWL

### Grad school personal statements

The personal statement, your opportunity to sell yourself in the application process, generally falls into one of two categories:

#### **1. The general, comprehensive personal statement:**

This allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write and is the type of statement often prepared for standard medical or law school application forms.

#### **2. The response to very specific questions:**

Often, business and graduate school applications ask specific questions, and your statement should respond specifically to the question being asked. Some business school applications favor multiple essays, typically asking for responses to three or more questions.

Questions to ask yourself before you write:

- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- 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 asked**

- If you are applying to several schools, you 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.

### **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.

### **Don't include some subjects**

- There are certain things best left out of personal statements. For example, references to experiences or accomplishments in high school or earlier are generally not a good idea.

Don't mention potentially controversial subjects (for example, controversial religious or political issues).

### **Do some research, if needed**

- If a school wants to know why you're applying to it rather than another school, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. If the school setting would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention.

### **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.

## **Some examples of successful statements**

### **Statement #1**

My interest in science dates back to my years in high school, where I excelled in physics, chemistry, and math. When I was a senior, I took a first-year calculus course at a local college (such an advanced-level class was not available in high school) and earned an A. It seemed only logical that I pursue a career in electrical engineering.

When I began my undergraduate career, I had the opportunity to be exposed to the full range of engineering courses, all of which tended to reinforce and solidify my intense interest in engineering. I've also had the opportunity to study a number of subjects in the humanities and they have been both enjoyable and enlightening, providing me with a new and different perspective on the world in which we live.

In the realm of engineering, I have developed a special interest in the field of laser technology and have even been taking a graduate course in quantum electronics. Among the 25 or so students in the course, I am the sole undergraduate. Another particular interest of mine is electromagnetics, and last summer, when I was a technical assistant at a world-famous local lab, I learned about its many practical applications, especially in relation to microstrip and antenna design. Management at this lab was sufficiently impressed with my work to ask that I return when I graduate. Of course, my plans following completion of my current studies are to move directly into graduate work toward my master's in science. After I earn my master's degree, I intend to start work on my Ph.D. in electrical engineering. Later I would like to work in the area of research and development for private industry. It is in R & D that I believe I can make the greatest contribution, utilizing my theoretical background and creativity as a scientist.

I am highly aware of the superb reputation of your school, and my conversations with several of your alumni have served to deepen my interest in attending. I know that, in addition to your excellent faculty, your computer facilities are among the best in the state. I hope you will give me the privilege of continuing my studies at your fine institution.

(Stelzer pp. 38-39)

## **Statement #2**

Having majored in literary studies (world literature) as an undergraduate, I would now like to concentrate on English and American literature.

I am especially interested in nineteenth-century literature, women's literature, Anglo-Saxon poetry, and folklore and folk literature. My personal literary projects have involved some combination of these subjects. For the oral section of my comprehensive exams, I specialized in nineteenth century novels by and about women. The relationship between "high" and folk literature became the subject for my honors essay, which examined Toni Morrison's use of classical, biblical, African, and Afro-American folk tradition in her novel. I plan to work further on this essay, treating Morrison's other novels and perhaps preparing a paper suitable for publication.

In my studies toward a doctoral degree, I hope to examine more closely the relationship between high and folk literature. My junior year and private studies of Anglo-Saxon language and literature have caused me to consider the question of where the divisions between folklore, folk literature, and high literature lie. Should I attend your school, I would like to resume my studies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with special attention to its folk elements.

Writing poetry also figures prominently in my academic and professional goals. I have just begun submitting to the smaller journals with some success and am gradually building a working manuscript for a collection. The dominant theme of this collection relies on poems that draw from classical, biblical, and folk traditions, as well as everyday experience, in order to celebrate the process of giving and taking life, whether literal or figurative. My poetry draws from and influences my academic studies. Much of what I read and study finds a place in my creative

work as subject. At the same time, I study the art of literature by taking part in the creative process, experimenting with the tools used by other authors in the past.

In terms of a career, I see myself teaching literature, writing criticism, and going into editing or publishing poetry. Doctoral studies would be valuable to me in several ways. First, your teaching assistant ship program would provide me with the practical teaching experience I am eager to acquire. Further, earning a Ph.D. in English and American literature would advance my other two career goals by adding to my skills, both critical and creative, in working with language. Ultimately, however, I see the Ph.D. as an end in itself, as well as a professional stepping stone; I enjoy studying literature for its own sake and would like to continue my studies on the level demanded by the Ph.D. program.

(Stelzer pp. 40-41)

## **Some advice from admissions representatives:**

**Lee Cunningham**

**Director of Admissions and Aid**

**The University of Chicago Graduate School of Business**

The mistake people make most often is not to look at what the questions are asking. Some people prepare generic statements because they're applying to more than one school and it's a lot of work to do a personal essay for each school. On the other hand, generic statements detract from the applicant when we realize that we're one of six schools and the applicant is saying the same thing to each and every school despite the fact that there are critical differences between the kinds of schools they may be applying to. They don't take the time. They underestimate the kind of attentions that is paid to these essays. Take a look at what the essay asks and deal with those issues articulately and honestly.

At least 2, and sometimes 3, people read each essay. I read them to make the final decision. Our process works so that each person who reads the application does a written evaluation of what he or she has read and the written evaluations are not seen by the other reader.

(adapted from Stelzer, p. 49)

**Steven DeKrey**

**Director of Admissions and Financial Aid**

**J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management (Northwestern University)**

We're looking for a well-written, detailed essay that responds directly to the question. The questions are about extracurricular activities, motivation, challenges, commitment to the school that kind of thing. We see a variety and that's fine. Our approach is very individualized. The way the applicant devises the answer, determines the length, develops the response, is all part of the answer. The level of effort applicants put into essays varies considerably, which sends messages to the admissions committee as well. Over-involved, elaborate essays send one message, while very brief and superficial essays send another message.

Trying to second-guess what we are looking for is a common mistake--which we can sense.

We can tell when applicants use answers to other schools' questions for our essays; we're sensitive to this. Poorly written essays are a bad reflection on the applicant.

Don't over-elaborate; we're reading a lot of these kinds of essays. Also, don't be too brief or superficial. We like to have major ideas presented well.

( adapted from Stelzer, p. 55)

**Michael D. Rappaport**  
**Assistant Dean of Admissions**  
**UCLA School of Law**

Applicants should take the time to look at what the law school is asking them to write about. At UCLA, we say, "we know you have lots of extracurricular activities--we want to know how you differ, what makes you unique? What can you bring to the first year class that's going to make you distinctive from the other 99 people who are already there?" The fact that you were active in your fraternity or sorority is really not going to do it. What we're looking for is somebody who, in their personal statement, stands out as being so unusual, so diverse, that they're extremely attractive as a law student for the first-year class. Maybe what's going to make them distinctive is the fact they spent six months living in a log cabin in Alaska. You try to give the law school some justification for admitting you. With a lot of people, there's nothing that's going to make them distinctive. If that's the case, they've got to recognize that, indeed, the essay is not going to make that much difference here at UCLA.

We're also asking if there's any reason their LSAT or grades are not predictive. You'd be amazed at the number of people who completely ignore this--they don't take

advantage of the opportunity.

Most law schools operate fairly similarly. There's a certain group of applicants whose grades and LSAT scores are so high that the presumption is that the applicants are going to be admitted unless they do something terribly stupid to keep themselves out. I have seen applicants whose personal statement has done that, but it's extremely rare. At the other extreme is another group of applicants who, no matter what they write, are not going to get in.

The applicant has to realize, first of all, where he or she stands. If you have a straight-A grade point average and a perfect LSAT score, you don't have to spend a lot of time worrying about your personal statement. On the other hand, if you know you're in the borderline area, that's where the personal statement becomes very, very important.

The applicant should take the time to read the application to see what the schools are asking for. Sometimes the school will ask for a general description of why you want to go to law school, or why they should admit you, something of that nature. In such case you can be fairly sure that the school is just interested in the essay to see how well you write. So what you say isn't as important as how you say it. On the other hand, some schools are more specific--UCLA being a very good example of that.

Make sure the essay is grammatically and technically correct and well written. Avoid sloppy essays, coffee stained essays, or ones that are handwritten so you can't read them. You'd be amazed at what we get!  
(Stelzer, pp. 70-71)



**Beth O'Neil**

**Director of Admissions and Financial Aid**

**University of California at Berkeley School of Law (Boalt Hall)**

We're trying to gauge the potential for a student's success in law school, and we determine that, principally, on the basis of what the student has done in the past. The personal statement carries the responsibility of presenting the student's life experiences.

Applicants make a mistake by doing a lot of speculation about what they're going to do in the future rather than telling us about what they've done in the past. It is our job to speculate, and we are experienced at that.

Applicants also tend to state and not evaluate. They give a recitation of their experience but no evaluation of what effect that particular experience had on them, no assessment of what certain experiences or honors meant.

They also fail to explain errors or weaknesses in their background. Even though we might wish to admit a student, sometimes we can't in view of a weakness that they haven't made any effort to explain. For example, perhaps they haven't told us that they

were ill on the day that they took the LSAT or had an automobile accident on the way. Such things are legitimate reasons for poor performance. I mean, we understand that life is tough sometimes. We need to know what happened, for example, to cause a sudden drop in the GPA.

Another mistake is that everyone tries to make himself or herself the perfect law school applicant who, of course, does not exist and is not nearly as interesting as a real human being.

Between 1 and 5 people read each application.  
(Stelzer, p. 72)

**Dr. Daniel R. Alonso**

**Associate Dean for Admissions**

**Cornell University Medical College**

We look for some originality because nine out of ten essays leave you with a big yawn. "I like science, I like to help people and that's why I want to be a doctor." The common, uninteresting, and unoriginal statement is one that recounts the applicant's academic pursuits and basically repeats what is elsewhere in the application. You look for something different, something that will pique your interest and provide some very unique insight that will make you pay some notice to this person who is among so many other qualified applicants. If you're screening 5,500 applications over a four- or six-month period, you want to see something that's really interesting.

I would simply say: Do it yourself, be careful, edit it, go through as many drafts as necessary. And more important than anything: be yourself. really show your personality. Tell us why you are unique, why we should admit you. The premise is that 9 out of 10

people who apply to medical school are very qualified. Don't under any circumstances insert handwritten work or an unfinished piece of writing. Do a professional job. I would consider it a mistake to attempt to cram in too much information, too many words. Use the space as judiciously as possible. Don't submit additional pages or use only 1/20th of the space provided.

(Stelzer, p.81)

**John Herweg**  
**Chairman, Committee on Admissions**  
**Washington University School of Medicine**

We are looking for a clear statement that indicates that the applicant can use the English language in a meaningful and effective fashion. We frankly look at spelling as well as typing (for errors both in grammar and composition). Most applicants use the statement to indicate their motivation for medicine, the duration of that motivation, extracurricular activities, and work experience. So those are some of the general things we are looking for in the Personal Comments section.

We also want applicants to personalize the statement, to tell us something about themselves that they think is worthy of sharing with us, something that makes them unique, different, and the type of medical student and future physician that we're all looking for. What they have done in working with individuals--whether it's serving as a checker or bagger at a grocery store or working with handicapped individuals or tutoring inner city kids--that shows they can relate to people and have they done it in an effective fashion? What the applicant should do in all respects is to depict why he or she is a unique individual and should be sought after. Of course, if they start every sentence on a whole page with "I," it gets to be a little bit too much.

(Stelzer, p. 82)

## **The Structure and Organization of a Personal Statement**

From Tara Kuther, Ph.D.

There are several different ways you can structure your essay but the most common format includes an introduction, a body, and a concluding paragraph.

### **Introduction:**

- The introduction is the most important part of the essay, especially the first sentence. The first sentence can say a lot about the content and format of your essay.
- Keep the reader interested by making them continue to read your essay after reading the first paragraph.

- The first sentence should be unique and compelling, possibly thought provoking or attention-grabbing.
- First sentences may explain your desire to study the subject of interest or discuss the motivation that influenced your desire to study the subject of interest. State it in a creative manner.
- The sentences following the first sentence should provide a brief explanation that supports the claim stated in the first sentence.

### **The Body:**

- The body should include several paragraphs (usually about 3) that provides detailed evidence to support the statement made in the introductory paragraph. The paragraphs should flow by using transitions and resolutions.
- Each paragraph should have a transition, which starts each paragraph with a topic statement that will be the theme of that paragraph (See more on transitions and resolutions below).
- Each paragraph should have a resolution, which ends each paragraph with a meaningful sentence that provides a transition to the next paragraph (See more on transitions and resolutions below).
- Experiences, accomplishments, or any other evidence that can support your claims should be included in the body. Future Goals should also be mentioned in the body.
- A short summary of your educational background can be discussed in the 1st paragraph.
- Personal experiences and the reasons for wanting to attend the school can be discussed in the 2nd paragraph.
- Do not repeat what was stated in the application.
- The last paragraph should explain why you should be accepted.

### **Conclusion:**

- The conclusion is the last paragraph of the personal statement.
- State why you are interested in studying the subject of interest.
- State the key points mentioned in the body, such as your experiences or accomplishments, that explain your interest in the subject. State it in a conclusive and brief manner.
- End on a positive note with one or two attention-grabbing sentences.

It is crucial that your paragraphs have transitions and resolutions. Transitions start a paragraph by providing a statement that suggests the theme for that paragraph. This allows the reader to be aware of the direction the essay is heading in. Transitions connect paragraphs to other paragraphs (usually

preceding paragraphs), which causes the essay to flow smoothly. Resolutions, on the other hand, are statements that end paragraphs and allow for transition to the next paragraph. The resolution should not be a general statement but rather a meaningful one that connects facts included in the current paragraph. Both transitions and resolutions are beneficial in terms of making your essay clear and understandable.

Your essay should include enough detail, be personal, and specific. The purpose of a personal statement is to show the admission committee what makes you unique and different from other applicants. Your job is to display your distinct personality and provide evidence that confirms your passion and desire for the subject and the school. However, even if you can write an interesting and compelling essay, the structure and organization may not be appropriate. Therefore, it is necessary that you follow the proper structure of an essay and allow all your paragraphs to flow smoothly. The structure and organization of your personal statement will not only make your essay more comprehensible and fascinating but it will also increase your chances of being accepted.