

*Human Development and Family Science
North Dakota State University
Information About Graduate School Applications*

How to Write a Personal Statement

Why Do I Need One?

Most graduate school programs require you to submit a personal statement.

The personal statement is a letter indicating your desire for admission to the program and a narrative about your commitment to the field, your academic experience that makes you a good candidate, your personal and life experiences that have led to your desires to be in this program and field of work, your educational and career goals, and your own skills and abilities that will help you do well in graduate school.

The personal statement is your opportunity to sell yourself in the application process. This is also your chance to demonstrate that you can write well.

Questions To Ask Yourself Before You Write

- How does your statement provide evidence of your achievements that is not reflected in other parts of your application?
- What is special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems & strengths, 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? How will a graduate degree help you achieve those?
- 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.
- Do not 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. Do not bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you will be putting yourself ahead of the pack. If you

distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable. But also be sure to be genuine and truthful.

Be specific

- Do not, for example, state that you would make an excellent therapist unless you can back it up with specific reasons. Your desire to be in the field you are applying for 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 are like most people, you do not recognize what is exciting about your unique life story and you may think it lacks drama. Talk with a trusted family member or friend to get their perspective of you. Discover what in your personality and/or experience makes you interesting and unique. 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, theories you are most interested in, 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.

If you’re a minority student, discuss it

- Graduate schools are most often very interested in recruiting minority students. Share your unique cultural experience. Tell about any

challenges and hardships you have faced due directly to your minority status. Be honest and forthright. Be clear about any links between your minority status and your reason for application. Tell about your interest in studying, researching, or working with minority populations you are a part of and minority issues in general. *If you are not a minority student* but have strong interests in studying, researching, and working with minority populations and issues definitely write about this. If issues of social justice are applicable for the programs you are applying to, specifically discuss your interests in this area.

DO NOT 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. Be cautious about mentioning potentially controversial subjects unless they are specifically asked about or being sought (for example, controversial religious or political issues).

Do some research on the school and the program

- Some schools might want to know why you are 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.
- If there are faculty members in the department whose research interests mesh particularly well with yours, discuss this. Some departments will only accept students that a current faculty member agrees to work with. Your letter can bring you to those people's attention.
- It can be helpful to know what the program values and make sure you emphasize that in your letter. For instance, some programs might highly value research, and so a discussion of the research experiences you have had can clarify why you would be a good fit for their program. Similarly, programs might emphasize such things as applied experience, social justice interests, etc.

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

- An HDFS applicant who writes that she 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.