

Writing an Effective Statement of Purpose/Personal Statement



Brian Rybarczyk, Ph.D.

*Assistant Dean, Academic &
Professional Development*

The Graduate School
UNC Chapel Hill



THE GRADUATE
SCHOOL

PS content

Components of degree

Masters

Coursework
Desire for field and
building new skills

Coursework
Direct experience in field

Ph.D.

Research experience
Coursework in advanced topics
Interest in discipline

Coursework
Research projects
Publications & presentations

MD

MPA

PA

PharmD

Passion for medical field
Exposure to environment
Patient interaction
Know what you're getting into

Coursework
Patient interaction
Clinical hours
Direct experience in specialty



THE GRADUATE
SCHOOL

ScienceCareers

Sell Yourself: Guidance for Developing Your Personal Statement (2006, Part 1)

Sell Yourself: Refining the Personal Statement (2010, Part 2)

Sell Yourself: Adding Substance to Your Personal Statement (2014, Part 3)



THE GRADUATE
SCHOOL

Objectives



- What is a Statement of Purpose?
- Review structure and guidelines for writing
- Begin formulating your own statement

Statement of Purpose

- Focus on your specific research interests within a particular field
- Detail how your academic and professional experiences have developed those research interests and prepared you to pursue them at a higher academic level
- Explain how those research interests can be pursued at this particular institution in this particular program

Personal Statement (more biographical)

- Focus on the intersection of your personal, academic, and professional lives
- Detail various life experiences that have developed your character, work-ethic, and perspective
- Explain how your background particularly suits you for this program and/or will allow you to contribute a unique perspective to the community



THE GRADUATE
SCHOOL

Personal Statement



- Purpose:
- Tell A Story!
 - Who you are as a professional
 - What you want to do
 - WHY – be specific



THE GRADUATE
SCHOOL

What are Review Committees Looking For?

- Who are the review committee members?
- Fit with program of interest
- Readiness for graduate level academics
- Connection to career goals – professional and scholarly
- Communication/writing skills



Aspects of Effective Persuasive Writing



THE GRADUATE
SCHOOL

Aspects of Effective Persuasive Writing

- Clear purpose/thesis statement
- Support with evidence
- Provide examples
- Accurate facts
- Organization & clarity
- Know your audience – convincing

Structure



- **Intro:** hook, unique perspective, draw reader in
- **Body:** experiences, skills, goals, areas of interest, challenges, gaps, justification for application, how you fit
- **Conclusion:** reaffirm your preparation, confident that *Program X* is right for you

Describing Your Scholarship and Areas of Interest



THE GRADUATE
SCHOOL

Essay Prompts

- 1) *Tell us about your academic background and future goals. What have been your major achievements in the past? What do you hope to accomplish in the future? How do you see this program helping you achieve these goals?*
- 2) *A statement of purpose describing your research interests*
- 3) *In your statement, please discuss:*
 - *Your background: how your experiences (education, work, volunteer, and/or personal) have prepared you for graduate study;*
 - *Your objectives for graduate study: your career goals, possible faculty mentors, and (for doctoral students) initial research interests;*
 - *Your decision to apply to HGSE: why you think there is a good fit between your objectives and our program;*





Examples of personal statements...
group critique
10 minutes + reporting out

Why do you want to pursue graduate education?

- “Help people” = no
- Contribute to research in...
- Expand/refine skills such as...
- Develop skills in..
- Change how “x” works
- Pursue a career as a...



Do's



- Include **justification** for why you are applying to that program/graduate school, etc
- Keep **focused**, remember your **audience**
- Explain research interests, areas of science, accomplishments, sources of motivation
- **Address** specific aspects of a particular program and **apply** it to your career goals
- Give your essay to at least 3 other people to provide **critique** and suggestions for improvement

Don'ts



- ...don't make up experiences you never had
- ...don't send in a first draft
- ...don't wait to start your essay until the night before the due date – CHECK DUE DATE!!
- ...don't plagiarize from someone else
- ...don't make it too long (or too short)
- ...don't spend lots of space on negative
- ...don't use pretentious words to sound intelligent

Questions



- Why do you want to participate in this research area/graduate program/medical school program, etc?
- What experiences make you qualified?
- What are your areas of interest and why, why not other areas of science?
- Career goals and why?

Intentionality

- Record of opportunities you explored for a purpose
- Clear path, plan and vision
- *Why did you choose to participate in summer program X?*
- *What did you learn from experience Y?*



Tailoring

Match your skills, interest and readiness to program

- Area of scholarship/research
- Faculty member(s)
 - Area of specialty not offered through other programs
- Structure of program fits with your goals, needs
 - Flexibility, course sequence, length of time, opportunities for selecting coursework, other unique aspects of training
- Resource availability, Type of institution
 - Library collections, equipment, collaborations, proximity to other institutions/research centers, etc.



Kiss of Death...

- Excessive self-disclosure
- Personal mental health
- Excessive altruism – “I can save the world”
- Professional inappropriateness (*humor, clever, religion, politics*)

- Poor writing skills



What NOT to include...

- A long biography starting when you were 3 years old and your discovery of “science” in your backyard
- A sob story...
- Sounding desperate... I need to get into program X
- How great Institution X is...”I would be honored to study at” ...”what a fine institution...”
“distinguished faculty” “amazing reputation”



Common Errors

- 1) Missing description of research/scholarship
 - What were the outcomes?
 - What are the next steps?
 - Connection to future graduate work?
- 2) Rationale... why?
 - I want to do this because
 - I did this in order to...
- 3) SKILLS – what do you bring?
- 4) Organization & transitions
- 5) Connect to program of interest – not following prompts
- 6) Too negative/cynical
- 7) Lack of personality



Next steps...

- 1) Finalize examples research/scholarship description of this summer experience
- 2) Investigate programs of interest, what are they asking for? Due dates?
- 3).....

Resources

- <https://www.prepscholar.com/gre/blog/graduate-school-statement-of-purpose-sample/>
- Personal statements in the humanities
<https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/personal-statement-humanities-1.original.pdf>
- Tips from UC Berkeley: <https://ls.berkeley.edu/academic-programs/arts-humanities/graduate-diversity-office/prospective-students/statement-purpose>
- Successful examples in humanities:
<http://statementofpurposeexamples.com/humanities-statements-of-purpose/>
- 4 more samples:
<https://www.csuci.edu/careerdevelopment/services/sample-graduate-school-admissions-essays.pdf>



Brian Rybarczyk, Ph.D.

*Assistant Dean, Academic & Professional
Development*

The Graduate School

brybar@unc.edu



**THE GRADUATE
SCHOOL**