

# How to Write Your PERSONAL STATEMENT

*for graduate or professional school*

[Also called "Autobiographical Statements", "Statements of Intent (or Purpose)", or just "Essays"]

by Eric R. Anderson

This is one section of the larger booklet:

**How to Get Into  
GRADUATE and  
PROFESSIONAL  
SCHOOL**



Read the whole thing!

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## HOW TO GET HELP WITH YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

1. Use this guide to write a draft of your personal statement (you can also meet with a PCA (see below) just to discuss ideas for your personal statement, and then use the guide to write your draft).
- 2: Meet with a Peer Career Advisor (PCA)
  - Schedule an appointment with a Peer Career Advisor using Handshake. You can also call 614-236-6606, or email CareerDevelopment@capital.edu

### Personal Statement PCAs:

Joyce Barr

***Always provide guidelines, directions, or prompts from graduate or professional school programs so we know which kind of personal statement you're writing!***

- 3: After your personal statement is reviewed by Joyce, revise your statement and ask for it to be reviewed again to make sure you made the appropriate changes. Make sure to save your first draft and new draft as two separate documents.
4. Email CareerDevelopment@capital.edu to schedule an appointment with Jenny Vrobel or Eric Anderson to talk about your revised personal statement.
5. When you schedule your appointment, send both drafts (your original and revised personal statement), along with the guidelines you received, at least 2 days prior to your appointment.

## WRITING "PERSONAL STATEMENTS"

Also called "Autobiographical Statements", "Statements of Intent (or Purpose)", or just "Essays"

These short essays, usually 1-3 double-spaced pages, provide an opportunity to share your goals and reasons for considering a particular program, as well as to demonstrate to the committee that you are a person who will be a valuable asset to their program. They take time to write; they're not a "weekend project".

## TYPES OF PERSONAL STATEMENTS

### 1. Guided Statements (When the program provides very specific guidelines/directions)

For statements requiring you to respond to specific essay questions or follow specific guidelines, it is very important that you don't just cut-and-paste from your typical personal statement, and don't include a lot of details that they don't ask for. Also, some law schools will ask you to write "about anything", which makes the essay more of a general writing sample that provides insight into the kind of person you are.

In these cases, you might **not** want to follow the guidelines below!

### 2. Typical Personal Statements (When the program provides only general direction)

Typical statements are about your interests and experience as they relate to a specific program.

If the program simply requests a "personal statement" (or if the program uses a similar term), you **will** want to follow the guidelines below.

## BEFORE YOU BEGIN WRITING

Allow plenty of time to write and revise your statements. It's not a weekend project. Start by brainstorming. You will need to tell your career/academic story, so think about your own personal experiences ***that are relevant to the graduate or professional school program.***

Some possibilities include:

- Relevant internship experiences that made your career path clear to you
- Relevant skills that you have developed
- Mentors or supervisors who have influenced you
- Events that have shaped you
- Obstacles to your professional goal that you've overcome (rarely used, but possible if relevant)

These provide potential material for the general personal statement and are also often relevant for responses to specific essay questions.

It's also important to examine your future goals. For example, why are you pursuing graduate study and why this particular degree? When you have completed a thorough assessment of where you've been and where you want to go, it's time to begin the actual writing.

## YOUR OPENING PARAGRAPH

**Skip this for now!** Go to "THE MAIN PART" on the next page...

Skip this for now, really. This paragraph and the conclusion are usually the most difficult, so it will likely be easier to start with the main portion of your essay/statement. This opening paragraph will usually naturally emerge from the main part, so be patient.

## THE MAIN PART OF YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

Tell a story about the development of your professional interest that will make sense to the admission committee. Be specific as you identify events and experiences that demonstrate your professional interest and motivation. Share the experiences that have reinforced your interest. Discuss your plans for the future as they relate to this advanced degree. If your background includes relevant internships or work experience, make sure that you emphasize their relevance, or how they affected your decision to pursue an advanced degree. Life experience is valued.

Most students use a **Past-Present-Future** approach, which typically begins (**Past**) with an experience that got you interested initially in the field you are pursuing. Or maybe you changed your mind during college, so you could begin by writing about the major you started with. Then (**Present**) you will continue writing about the experiences and activities (typically during college) that have reinforced that initial interest (*making sure that your stories about these internships, work experiences, and research projects reflect your continued desire to pursue this area in graduate study*). Finally (**Future**) you write about your long-term interests and how this degree program will prepare you for those interests.

If you are beginning your statement using a specific event (likely from your years in college), you can continue by describing how you first became interested/engaged in this field, and then discuss your career-related activities and how they have affected your career path.

## OKAY, NOW WORK ON YOUR OPENING PARAGRAPH

Since you are trying to capture committee members' attention, the opening paragraph is very important. Be creative and relevant; try to find an angle that portrays you in an interesting way. In addition to being professionally relevant, your story's beginning should make people want to keep reading; you need to make a lasting impression, too.

You might choose to open by describing an event (like a particular interaction during a service project or research experience) that affected you and your decision to pursue your chosen field. The experience might have helped to clarify your direction, or solidify your inclination.

### EXAMPLE:

*One morning during my sophomore year, I was teaching a social studies lesson in a tenth-grade classroom. During that lesson, I realized that the most meaningful part of my day was not relating facts about George Washington, but rather the discussion I had with a student whose father did not return home the previous night. She was devastated and was willing to confide in me. As I reflected on this experience, I began to realize that my true passion did not lie in the teaching of social studies but rather in my desire to assist people in overcoming obstacles and discovering light in otherwise dark areas.*

Instead, you might choose to open by describing *the culmination of many events* (like your long-term experiences with a specific profession) that have had a profound impact on you and your decision to pursue your chosen field.

### EXAMPLE:

*My passion for research first became clear when I began working on an independent research project at Capital University concerning the presence of Genetic Modification within commercial corn products. The excitement of investigation had me hooked. I later worked on a research project during a service learning experience in Panama; additionally, I studied at a Research Experience for Undergraduates at Iowa State University in Biotechnology and Genomics, and this January I will conduct research on the coral reefs of Cozumel, Mexico. My various active research experiences have inspired me to obtain my Ph.D. in Genetics from the University of Agora, and later to work as a Principal Investigating Scientist.*

If you choose to take a developmental angle (like the **Past-Present-Future** approach), start by showing how events throughout your life have shaped your interest in this graduate or professional school program. For example, you can initially look at your past experiences and write specifically about how they led you to an interest in your field (*making sure that your story will make sense to the admission committee*). This opening would look like the first example above, but it might be an example from earlier in your life. Parts of this paragraph may make more sense to move into “The Main Part of Your Personal Statement” to help clarify your past-present-future approach.

## **YOUR CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH**

Ideally, you should conclude with some details about your “fit” with the specific program to which you’re applying and your interest in working with specific faculty (exceptions to this include medical schools, which use one generic statement for the first application process). This should be written in a way that demonstrates your understanding of specific aspects of the program (*without sounding like you’re just “reporting” on those aspects, or complimenting the school on their high quality*).

If the program is very research-oriented, make sure your conclusion summarizes your research experiences and interests. Also, it helps if your research interests coincide with the interests of at least one faculty member, and this will require you to investigate the program in great detail.

If the program is more “hands-on,” you’ll probably want to summarize your internships or field experiences. You should also demonstrate your familiarity with any similar experiences that are available through the program. Just as in the example above, this strategy requires that you know what the program emphasizes and will require you to investigate the program in great detail. This hard work will make a difference.

Finally, describe what you think you’ll do with your completed degree from this program.

### **EXAMPLE:**

*Attending Agora University would provide an unparalleled opportunity to develop my career as a scientist, to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field of genetics, and to grow as a person. Having previously researched the genetics of primary open angle glaucoma, I plan on continuing to focus my research in the field of genetics. During correspondence with Dr. Jane Smith, it has become clear that Agora University and her laboratory would provide myriad opportunities to conduct novel genetic research. I am also very interested in the research of Dr. John Jones and Dr. Janet Williamson. Understanding genetics provides a basis for many biological studies and I plan on exploring those areas. My ultimate goal in life is to become a distinguished and respected member of the worldwide scientific community whose research would benefit humanity while inspiring and mentoring the next generation of scientists. The Integrated Biomedical Science Graduate Program at the Agora University can provide the best education, mentors, and support for me to reach these goals.*

## **WHAT TO AVOID**

### **Clichés**

Statements like “I want to be a doctor (lawyer, psychologist, social worker) because I’ve always enjoyed helping people”, or “I’ve always wanted to be a \_\_\_\_\_” are overused, and aren’t unique to you. For instance, if helping others is truly your motivation, give examples of people you’ve helped and their impact on you, and open the essay with a compelling story about a person you’ve helped.

### **Controversial topics**

Chances are that someone on the committee will hold the opposing viewpoint.

### **Bragging**

It's difficult to write about how amazing you are without sounding like you're bragging, but there are two main ways to do it. You can focus on your deep interest, curiosity, or passion regarding interests and experiences. You can also write about how much you've learned, or how far you've come [since you first became interested], which can then illustrate your current level of skill or accomplishment. For example, rather than write about winning a research award, you would focus on the actual research experience, your curiosity about the topic, and the insights that you gained.

### **High school accomplishments**

You would never mention National Honor Society or other academic accomplishments/activities in a graduate school admissions essay, for example, but you might write about volunteering for a suicide hotline if it shaped the beginnings of your interest in the mental health field.

## **USING YOUR STATEMENT TO EXPLAIN APPLICATION ISSUES**

Students often ask if they should address points from their application that may reflect poorly on them (low GPA or test scores, for example). If this fits in with your story, you can probably include it. For example, if your grades improved markedly during your later college years (but your first year is still affecting your overall GPA), you might choose to construct your story around a career-related event or experience that motivated you to perform better.

When deciding if there's a shortcoming from the application that you'd like to include in your personal statement, ask yourself if it seems as though you are making excuses (like stating that you were tired on the day of the GRE, or that you never do well on standardized tests). It's important to keep the tone of the personal statement positive, so if you can't put a positive spin on it, don't include it. A better approach would be to talk with people who are writing your recommendations and ask if they are willing to address the issue. A letter from a professor stating that your test scores aren't a good reflection of your scholastic ability is more convincing than your stating it yourself.

## **THE HEADING FOR YOUR STATEMENT**

In the absence of any guidelines provided by the graduate school, your heading should include the name of the document you are submitting (e.g., "Personal Statement"), the school and department for whom you are writing it (e.g., "Ohio University College of Education"), and your name. These can be centered, left-justified, or arranged in any format that looks professional.

## **OTHER RESOURCES for PERSONAL STATEMENTS**

These recommendations pertain to personal statements in general. There are many internet sites that offer tips for writing personal statements for particular fields of study, and many provide some sample statements. Simply type "personal statement" into a search engine. Look for ".edu" domains.

**Purdue University has excellent resources on this web site:**

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/>

(Just type "personal statement" into their search function)