

## The Personal Statement

Most graduate schools require a personal statement as part of your application. This statement is centered around your interest in psychology, your personal background, the reasons you are applying to that particular graduate program, and your career and personal objectives. Although a well-written statement will not overcome poor grades or low GRE scores, a poor one will surely hurt your chances of acceptance. Fretz and Stang (1988, p. 45) cite the following example.

Take the case of the student with a competitive grade point average and good references who was not accepted to any of the 11 programs he applied for. One cannot be sure, but the biographical statement included with his applications is the suspected reason. First, it was poorly typed, with many smears and crossed-out words. The spelling and grammar were both appalling. Finally, the content left much to be desired. It was far too long—about 15 pages—and went into detail about his philosophy of life (which was far from the establishment viewpoint). It also stressed emotional agonies and turning points in his life. Hoping to cure the world of all its evils, this person tried to indicate how a Ph.D. in psychology was necessary to fulfill that end. In short, it was an overstated, ill-conceived essay that may have been received so badly that it overshadowed his other attributes and data.

Plan and produce your personal statement as carefully as you would a crucial term paper. The six following tips (including quotes taken from Fretz & Stang, 1988, pp. 45–46) will help you produce a personal statement as impressive and effective as the sample on the following page from one of my students who was applying to a doctoral program in clinical psychology.

1. Before you begin your statement for each school, read as much about their program as possible so you can tailor your statement to the program and convince the admissions committee that you will fit their program like a glove. “Each year many applicants will write, for example, that they want to attend the counseling psychology program at University X because they want to learn how to counsel emotionally handicapped children, even though the program specifies in its brochure that it does not provide training for work with young children. The selection committee immediately rejects those candidates.”
2. Prepare an outline of the topics you want to cover (e.g., professional objectives and personal background) and list supporting material under each main topic. Write a rough draft in which you transform your outline into prose. Set it aside and read it a week later. If it still sounds good, go to the next stage. If not, rewrite it until it sounds right.
3. Check your spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization carefully. Nothing detracts from the contents of a statement more than these types of errors. Avoid slang words that make you sound uneducated, and overly elaborate words or stilted language that will make you appear pompous or pretentious.
4. Ask two of your teachers to read your first rough draft and make suggestions. Incorporate these suggestions into your second rough draft. Ask for another reading and set of suggestions, and then prepare your final statement.
5. Your final statement should be as brief as possible; two double-spaced pages are sufficient. Stick to the points requested by each program, and avoid lengthy personal or philosophical discussions. If your statement sounds egocentric or boring, those who read it will assume you are egocentric or boring.

6. Do not feel bad if you do not have a great deal of experience in psychology to write about; no one who is about to graduate from college does. Do explain your relevant experiences (e.g., internships or research projects), but do not try to turn them into events of cosmic proportion. “Be honest, sincere, and objective. That is the only way to impress the evaluators that you are a person who is already taking a mature approach to life.”

The applicant whose personal statement you are about to read successfully completed the doctoral program in clinical psychology from Purdue University. Note how he stresses the reasons for his interest in clinical psychology, his research experience, and how clearly and honestly he describes his accomplishments and future goals without assuming a tone of egotistic superiority or false modesty.

### **A Sample Personal Statement**

(This statement was written by a student applying to a clinical psychology doctoral program.)

I became initially interested in psychology when I was helping a friend who was having problems at home and was considering suicide. I felt so helpless trying to deal with his problems that I decided to learn more about human behavior and how to help those in need. This experience led me to enroll in an introductory psychology class in order to understand more about what motivates people. I have become more and more interested in the field of clinical psychology during my four years as an undergraduate psychology major.

In addition to my educational experience, I actively pursued work experience in psychology-related fields. I worked as a resident assistant in one of the dormitories during my junior year. In this role, I encountered students who had problems relating to their family, depression, suicide, alcohol, and drugs. I attained an internship position during my senior year as a residential supervisor at the Indianapolis Center for Neuropsychological Rehabilitation, a facility dedicated to teaching brain-injured individuals not only to deal with their handicaps, but to overcome them. I witnessed counseling of both clients and their families, and I learned to administer and score several psychological tests used in clinical assessment (e.g., the Wechsler Memory Scale and the MMPI). My work experience has proven to me how much more I need to learn before I can attain my goal of becoming an accomplished researcher and teacher.

I became interested in research as a sophomore when I enrolled in a senior level research class. By the time I graduate, I will have presented a total of five papers on a variety of topics at undergraduate research conferences. My experience with the first study, an examination of mood effects on time perception, led to other research endeavors on topics including student evaluation of faculty, academic integrity, and comparisons of personality profiles of brain-injured individuals. The relevance of two of these projects, academic honesty and student evaluation of faculty, led the President of my college, to invite me to present my results at two Open College Forums. This is the first time a student has presented at an Open College Forum. At Purdue University, I am specifically interested in the research efforts of Harvey Ashland (schizophrenia), Nancy Bennett (child adolescent psychotherapy outcomes), and Thomas Ginsburg (clinical, personality, and community assessment). As an undergraduate, I have learned the importance of working closely with members of the faculty. A great deal can be accomplished by working with someone who is already an expert in the field.

I have become firmly committed to the beliefs that the most appropriate way to answer “real world” questions is through basic research and that these answers should be communicated in a professional manner to those audiences who can benefit most from them. My undergraduate experiences have inspired me to continue my education in graduate school so I can further my research and make meaningful contributions to psychology.

## Reference

Fretz, B. R., & Stang, D. J. (1988). *Preparing for graduate study in psychology: Not for seniors only!* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.