



PERSONAL STATEMENTS  
VS.  
STATEMENTS OF PURPOSE

FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATIONS

Hanson Center for Technical Communication

# WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

## Statement of Purpose

Basic question: Why is this program a good fit for you?

## Personal Statement

Basic question: Who are you?

**BOTH:** “Don't be tempted to use the same statement for all applications.... In every case, be sure your answer fits the question being asked.” (Doran and Brizee, 2012)

# STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:

**Less personal, more business.**

- Focus on your plans and how you will achieve your goals in graduate school.
- Maintain continuity among your ideas.
- Select your details carefully and do not include irrelevant personal information.
- Indicate your ability to work with a diverse group of peers or colleagues.
- Include any experiences that illustrate that you could teach a course, design a syllabus, or lead a discussion.
- Demonstrate your qualities and skills by using specific, concrete examples.

# ORGANIZING YOUR STATEMENT:

## 1. Introduce yourself, interests, and motivations.

- Where desire for graduate studies began
- Personal, but not too detailed

## 2. Summarize your undergraduate work.

- Research conducted
- Paper or projects completed
- Work experience

## 3. Discuss your recent activities.

- Post-undergraduate work
- Volunteer work or hobbies
- Relevance to future graduate studies

## 4. Elaborate on your academic interests.

- Detailed description of desired field of study
- Professors with whom you would like to work
- Readiness to embark on graduate school challenges

# FIVE QUESTIONS TO ANSWER:

1. What do you want to study?
2. Why do you want to study it?
3. What experience do you have in this field?
4. What do you plan to do with your degree?
5. Why is this program a good fit?

**First and foremost: always answer the questions asked in the prompt.**

# PERSONAL STATEMENT:

**Less business, more personal.**

- Impart a sense of yourself in a way that compels the reader (your admissions committee) to see you as a valuable future member of their department.
- Indicate what experiences in your life have shaped your personality and your ambition.
- Illustrate obstacles or difficulties through which you have been able to persevere and thrive.
- Explain any less-than-ideal circumstances that may have affected your academic record.
- Give the committee the most compelling possible reasons for admitting you.

# HOW TO APPROACH IT:

- Answer all questions asked.
- Take into account that the committee is reading many applications.
- Grab the attention of your reader.
- Create a narrative, and have an angle.
- Research the program to which you are applying.
- Find ways to incorporate the program's strengths in the field. Otherwise, why would they specifically accept you?
- Avoid clichés, generalities, and controversial topics.
- Give evidence for your statements about yourself. Show what you know.

# QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. What's unique about you?
2. Who or what has influenced you?
3. What experiences have shaped you?
4. When and how did you become interested in this field?
5. How have you overcome adversity?
6. What are your life goals?
7. Why did you choose this career path?



# SAMPLE STATEMENT:

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)

# ADVICE FOR BOTH STATEMENTS:

**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. . . . They underestimate the kind of attentions that is paid to these essays.”

**Beth O'Neil**  
Director of Admissions and Financial Aid  
University of California at Berkeley School of Law (Boalt Hall)

“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. . . . 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.”

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

“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.”

**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). . . .

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.”

**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. . . . The way the applicant devises the answer, determines the length, develops the response, is all part of the answer.”

**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. . . .

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.”

# REFERENCES

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