Campus Academic Resource Program
Personal Statements and Statements of Purpose for
Graduate School Applications in the Humanities and Social Sciences

This handout will:
- Explain the difference between personal statements and statements of purpose.
- Explain how to establish your fit with a given program.
- Discuss the expectations of the content of your personal statement or statement of purpose.
- Discuss expectations of writing style.
- Address common mistakes.

Personal Statements vs. Statements of Purpose:
Often the definitions of personal statements and statements of purpose vary from program to program. Some use the two terms interchangeably. Others only require one. Programs that require both (such as most programs in the UC system) typically make the following distinction.
- A *statement of purpose* describes your research interests, what your professional goals are, how you aim to achieve them, and why a specific program is best suited to your interests and goals.
- A *personal statement/personal history statement* describes how your character and experience—especially as evident through social, educational, cultural, and economic obstacles overcome—have shaped you in to someone who will contribute positively to the department culture and the discipline as a whole. It is also an opportunity to highlight what is unique about you and how you will advance diversity within the university.
- If a program asks for a personal statement, but not a statement of purpose, chances are the admissions committee is looking for an essay more along the lines of the definition of statement of purpose provided above. As such, this handout focuses more on the statement of purpose.

Read the prompts of each specific program you apply to—the definitions provided above are broad, and the admissions committee might be looking for specific information in which other departments are less interested.

Establishing "Fit":
More than your GPA or GRE scores, the admissions committee is concerned with how much your research interests match those of specific faculty members. This is why writing a strong statement of purpose is so important—of all the components of your application materials, it offers you the most space to prove your fit.
- Writing a new essay from scratch for each program is unnecessary, but nor should each essay be identical to the other aside from the name of the institution and the prospective advisor(s).
- Instead, include a "fit" paragraph for each application essay, which is tailored to the department and the professor(s) you want to work with.

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The main way to present yourself as a good fit is to show that you are familiar with the research of one or two faculty members. While you don't need to depict yourself as the intellectual clone of your prospective advisor(s), you should make sure that their work is genuinely interesting to you and that their areas of expertise correspond to your research interests.

- Professors' research interests and recent publications are often listed on the department's website. Try to read an article or book chapter (or at least an abstract) written by a given professor so that you have a better sense of what their work entails.
- Connect your research interests with that of the faculty in the essay.
- Showing familiarity with special collections at the university's library, research centers, or the department's course offerings are other ways to demonstrate both your fit as well as the amount of time you were willing to put into researching the program before applying.

Common mistakes in establishing your fit:

- *Mentioning or listing professors' names without understanding what exactly their research agenda consists of is a common mistake.* Familiarize yourself with some of the faculty's work so that you come across as informed, analytical, and genuine in this section of your essay.
- *Choosing an overly famous professor is another common mistake.* Some professors who are especially prominent teach one graduate seminar a year, if that. They will likely not be sitting on an admissions committee or mentoring first year graduate students.
    - Look at the department's recent course offerings on their website. If the professor does not do very much teaching, you probably should not spend a paragraph discussing how much you love their work.
    - Similarly, if a professor of interest is on leave, they may not be on campus during your first year of graduate school; they could even be transitioning to a new job or retirement.

Consider emailing the professors you are interested in working with before you begin your application in earnest. Discuss your studies briefly along with why you are interested in their work, and ask them if they will be accepting students during the upcoming applications cycle.

Don't pester professors. Questions regarding the minutiae of admissions protocol are better left to department staff (whom you should also do your best not to pester).

Content:

The statement of purpose is not an opportunity to regurgitate your CV, GPA, and GRE scores. Instead, provide details about your preparation for graduate study which are not easily communicated in the other parts of your application. These details should include:

- *Your research agenda.* You don't need to have your entire career planned out already, but you should have some idea of the topics and themes that interest you. These topics and themes

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should form a coherent research agenda—if your interests are all over the place, you will not appear ready for graduate study.

- *Relevant work and extracurricular experience.* This is not an undergraduate admissions committee concerned with how well-rounded you are. Only discuss jobs, internships, and volunteer experience if they pertain to your field of study, or at least demonstrate your experience writing and doing research.
- *Research experiences*, including professors who supervised you, publications in student journals, and perhaps a memorable seminar experience.
- *Professional goals* which you need the degree in order to achieve.
- *Explanations for weaker points in the application.* Do not dwell on why you aren't qualified, but if there is a reasonable explanation for weak GPA or GRE scores, make your case.
- *Conferences attended.*

Your essay should be concise and clearly structured.
- *Most programs will set the page limit at two single-spaced pages.* Others might allow for as many as four, but don't fill up every page unless you can do so without wasting space. Even if the prompt asks for 3-4 pages, your audience will likely prefer a concise 2 page paper to a rambling 4 page one.
- *Open with a hook*—a statement or idea which grabs the readers' attention from the beginning. A generic and uninteresting opening section could lead to your application being set aside before you get the chance to make the case for yourself.
- *A personal statement doesn't necessarily need a thesis statement*, but it does require a logical flow of ideas guided by a clear purpose (i.e., to prove how capable and qualified you are).
- *A possible structure might look like*: 1. Introduction with hook 2. Research experience 3. Research interests and fit with the program 4. Professional goals 5. Conclusion
  - Don't impose a five paragraph structure onto your essay. It may well make sense structurally to use more or fewer paragraphs, even with the same main points as outlined above.

Writing Style:
Your prospective field of study centers on writing, so approach the statement of purpose as an opportunity to show that you are a strong writer. Write with clarity, include a clear structure, avoid typos by proofreading relentlessly, adjust awkwardly phrased sentences, and generally try to make the essay as flawless as possible.

Ask a professor you are on friendly terms with (likely someone writing a letter of recommendation for you) to review your essay.
- *Do everything you can to stand out.* Avoid clichés, and don't write sentences anyone else could have written about themselves.

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- o Avoid writing about how you've always loved reading and your chosen field of study or how you've always wanted to be a professor. If you find yourself writing about your childhood in a statement of purpose, you're likely making a mistake; the point of the essay is to prove how you are prepared to engage in serious academic study.
- *The tone of your paper should be professional and academic.* Even in personal statement essays which explicitly ask you to describe your character and personal history, you should write dispassionately of personal obstacles overcome with an emphasis on how you achieved your objectives.
- *General writing style advice:*
  - o Avoid the passive voice.
  - o Use colorful verbs and adjectives to make your prose more interesting. At the same time, avoid overly poetic writing.
  - o Vary the structure and length of your sentences to avoid monotony.
  - o Use topic sentences.

Common Mistakes:

- *Saying you love your major or love reading.* Everyone applying feels the same way.
- *Including overly grandiose goals* (reviving a school of thought, becoming a tenured Ivy League professor, etc.) These often make applicants look ignorant rather than ambitious.
- *Alluding negatively to a field of study, discipline, scholar, department, or university.* Academia is a small world and you do not want to offend your audience.
- *Being overly positive.* For example, don't claim that you want to go to Nowhere State University's M.A. program because you think they have the very best graduate program in the country. Instead, demonstrate that NSU has an excellent program for your intended research agenda, and that you anticipate that the degree will help you achieve your professional goals.
- *Not including well-formulated professional and academic goals.* You do not want to seem like graduate school is your choice because of fear of finding a "real job." If you don't communicate a clear idea of what you want from your degree, you stand the risk of looking ill-prepared.
- *Boasting.* The point is to prove your qualifications, not to come across as arrogant or self-absorbed. Find the right balance so that you seem confident, but not egotistical.
- *Humor.* Humor can easily backfire, to the point where the risk far outweighs the reward.
- *Sob stories.* No one will let you into their program out of pity. Show professionalism. If illustrating how you resolved a crisis in your personal life is the best way to answer a prompt (especially in a personal history statement), then emphasize how you overcame your crisis, and describe that process dispassionately.

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- *Going over page count.* Part of what admissions committees look for is the ability to communicate succinctly, and on top of that they could well be looking at hundreds of essays. Don't give them a reason to toss your application aside to save time.
- *Typos/grammatical mistakes.* These are interpreted as showing you lack care when revising and editing your essays. They make for unprofessional writing.
- *Writing fluff.* Avoid verbosity which self-consciously inflates your word count and shows off how many GRE words you memorized.
- *Expressing preference for the school's location.* Location should absolutely factor into your decision-making process for graduate school, but the importance of location should not at all factor into your essay. Graduating humanities PhD's generally need to be flexible when it comes to where they will find work, so making the beach and proximity to friends and family sound more important to you than your work can cast an unfavorable light on your suitability to the profession for at least some admissions committee members.
- *Leading with a quote.* An eloquent, philosophical, but general, quote from a famous novelist or intellectual on the value of knowledge, education, reading, literature, politics, or history does nothing to fulfill the purpose of the paper: namely, to show you are ready to enter a graduate program and be trained as a specialized scholar.
    - However, quotes that correspond to your research interests are effective in certain circumstances (see the link from Berkeley for a sample statement of purpose which does this very effectively).

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