Personal Statements (PS), Statement of Purpose (SP) or Letter of Intent

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“The Package” normally sent in...

- Transcripts
- CV
- **Personal Statement**
- Letters of Recommendation
- Application forms
The stuff behind the scenes...

- Do a faculty search, look up papers and read them.
- Email or call the professor, see whether or not they are interested in you.
- Make a visit, talk to students in lab in addition to professor...
- If you are happy with possibilities, then apply.
• Personal Statement (PS)

“One way to think about PS is that, in general, undergraduate programs are interested in you as a person and what you may offer to enrich their overall university community.” - (UCLA)

“...(the PS) provides additional evidence of your intellectual and creative achievement. The essay is also the only opportunity for the readers of your application to get a feel for you as a person as well as for you as a student. The essay is also the place where you can put your academic record into the context of your opportunities and obstacles. “ -(Berkeley)

“The personal statement should be a comprehensive narrative essay outlining significant aspects of your academic and personal history, particularly those that provide context for your academic achievements and educational choices. Quality of writing and depth of content both contribute toward a meaningful and relevant personal statement.” - (U of W)

“...Things to include would be personal successes you've had, obstacles you've overcome, volunteer positions you've had - and stuff that's not necessarily related to your field of study...” (http://www.physicsforums.com)
• **Statement of Purpose (SP)**

“SP describes your “brain,” the scientist you have become and will grow to be. You are now the scientist and any personal information should be related to your scientific approach and how you will enrich the scientific world.” –(UCLA)

“...they're likely looking for you to demonstrate that you've given some thought to what you want to do in the graduate degree and with your future. It's fine if you don't know. No one is going to hold you to what you state. But here they want to know that you've done some research into what you're getting yourself into and what your motivations are for pursuing the degree.” – (www.physicsforums.com)

Bottom line... find out what they want (call or email), if they don’t make it clear on their webpage.
University of California : Berkeley Advice

DO

• Be objective, yet self-revelatory. Write directly and in a straightforward manner that tells about your experience and what it means to you. Do not use "academese." **
• Form conclusions that explain the value and meaning of your experience, such as what you learned about yourself and your field and your future goals. Draw your conclusions from the evidence your life provides.
• Be specific. Document your conclusions with specific instances. See a list later of general words and phrases to avoid using without explanation.
• Get to the point early on and catch the attention of the reader.
• Limit its length to two pages or less. In some instances it may be longer, depending on the school's instructions.

DON'T

• Use the "what I did with my life" approach.
• Use the "I've always wanted to be a _____" approach.
• Use a catalog of achievements. This is only a list of what you have done, and tells nothing about you as a person.
• Lecture the reader. For example, you should not write a statement such as "Communication skills are important in this field." Any graduate admissions committee member knows that.

(** A formal or artificial form of communicating prevalent in institutes of higher education.) -(WIKI)

https://career.berkeley.edu/grad/gradstatement.stm
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Berkeley’s “words/phrases to avoid” without explanation</th>
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<tr>
<td>significant</td>
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<td>invaluable</td>
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<td>exciting/excited</td>
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https://career.berkeley.edu/grad/gradstatement.stm
The Don’ts:

...don’t write about your child science inspiration. A letter that starts out "when I was young..." immediately makes me want to stab my eyes out.

...don’t use personal experience as a motivation to stamp out disease. We get it, lot's of people have diseases.

... Don't think that length = impressive. Usually it = boring as hell and only partially read.

... Don't describe a detailed research plan for what you think you want to do.
University of Washington

• Academic History
• Your Major and/or Career Goals
• Are you prepared to enter your intended major at this time?
• How will the UW help you attain your academic, career, and/or personal goals?
• Cultural Understanding
• Educational Challenges / Personal Hardships (if applicable) **
• Community, Military, or Volunteer Service (if applicable)
• Experiential Learning (if applicable)

** Some places don’t want to know this....
“Your Research Is Your Purpose”

“Who Should Proofread Your Application?”

- Advisors and Professors
- Faculty letter writers
- People from different disciplines
- Each other:
  The stronger they are,
  the stronger you are.

“You must think of yourself as a scientist”
Every paragraph should somehow be related to your research area, interest, experience, and future.

“Avoid Excuses”
I had to work two jobs to support my family because my father was injured. My grades suffered.

http://www.gdnet.ucla.edu/asis/agep/advsopstem.pdf
UCLA GRADUATE DIVISION

• What is the purpose of your graduate study?

• Specialized areas of interest?

• Who did you work with, what did you do: internships, projects, employment, research and publications?

• What skills do you have: using, testing, designing or researching equipment?

• Future goals?

• Tailor to Dept: What makes you uniquely suited for this particular department, this specific institution?
Avoid...

- **Platitudes & Clichés**
  
  I want to cure cancer. Knowledge is power.

- **Quotes & Passages**
  
  Social sciences and humanities applicants overuse this strategy (i.e., passages from Shakespeare and the Bible).

- **Contractions**
  
  Avoid in informal writing: don’t, can’t, won’t

- **Colloquialisms & Email Speak**
  
  The kids in my family. Like, you know....LOL.

http://www.gdnet.ucla.edu/asis/agep/adv sopstem.pdf
This is the message you get after reading the statement of purpose for graduate school of three similar candidates:

**Candidate 1:** I want to do research in your lab because it is in New York and I always wanted to live in New York.

**Candidate 2:** I want to do research on disease ### because a good friend of mine died of disease ###.

**Candidate 3:** I want to do research with you on topic %%% because I did an internship in %%%, I liked it, I am good at it and my learning curve won’t be so steep.

*Which one of these candidates sounds more qualified for doing a good job? This is what your future boss wants to read in the statement of purpose.*

A statement of purpose for graduate school shows why you are ready to do the research, why there is little risk in hiring you.
The personal statement, your opportunity to sell yourself in the application process, generally falls into one of two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement:
This allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write and is the type of statement often prepared for standard medical or law school application forms.

2. The response to very specific questions:
Often, business and graduate school applications ask specific questions, and your statement should respond specifically to the question being asked. Some business school applications favor multiple essays, typically asking for responses to three or more questions.

Taken directly from
https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/
Contributors: Jo Doran, Allen Brizée
Questions to ask yourself before you write:

What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?

What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?

When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?

How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?

If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?

What are your career goals?

Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?

Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?

What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, and/or persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?

What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?

Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?

What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/
Answer the questions that are asked
If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar. Don't be tempted to use the same statement for all applications. It is important to answer each question being asked, and if slightly different answers are needed, you should write separate statements. In every case, be sure your answer fits the question being asked.

Tell a story
Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do is to bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you'll be putting yourself ahead of the pack. If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable.

Be specific
Don't, for example, state that you would make an excellent doctor unless you can back it up with specific reasons. Your desire to become a lawyer, engineer, or whatever should be logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.

Find an angle
If you're like most people, your life story lacks drama, so figuring out a way to make it interesting becomes the big challenge. Finding an angle or a "hook" is vital.

Concentrate on your opening paragraph
The lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab the reader's attention or lose it. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.

Tell what you know
The middle section of your essay might detail your interest and experience in your particular field, as well as some of your knowledge of the field. Too many people graduate with little or no knowledge of the nuts and bolts of the profession or field they hope to enter. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field and use the language professionals use in conveying this information. Refer to experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other source of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it. Since you will have to select what you include in your statement, the choices you make are often an indication of your judgment.

https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/
Don't include some subjects
There are certain things best left out of personal statements. For example, references to experiences or accomplishments in high school or earlier are generally not a good idea. Don't mention potentially controversial subjects (for example, controversial religious or political issues).

Do some research, if needed
If a school wants to know why you're applying to it rather than another school, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. If the school setting would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention.

Write well and correctly
Be meticulous. Type and proofread your essay very carefully. Many admissions officers say that good written skills and command of correct use of language are important to them as they read these statements. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Adhere to stated word limits.

Avoid clichés
A medical school applicant who writes that he is good at science and wants to help other people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from often-repeated or tired statements.
Biology personal statement
“I have always had an interest in science-based subjects, especially those relating to biology. Whilst undertaking my A-level Biology course, the module energy and ecosystems was of particular interest to me. My interest in the natural world, and study of science encouraged me to further my understanding in this area by applying to study environmental biology at degree level. I wish to take this course to enable me to develop scientific skills that will provide me with a greater understanding of the environment and factors that affect it. I am also studying Chemistry and Maths at A-level. The practical element of my chemistry course involves an understanding of procedures and precautions necessary throughout all science-based experiments...."
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)

https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/02/
Useful Sites for Examples

http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu/students/careers/medicine/applicationprocess/personal_statement.pdf

http://www.gdnet.ucla.edu/asis/agep/advopstem.pdf

https://web.duke.edu/steps/form_8.1.doc
Mistakes Made

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 despite the fact that there are critical differences between the kinds of schools they may be applying to. They don't take the time. They underestimate the kind of attentions that is paid to these essays. Take a look at what the essay asks and deal with those issues articulately and honestly.

At least 2, and sometimes 3, people read each essay. I read them to make the final decision. Our process works so that each person who reads the application does a written evaluation of what he or she has read and the written evaluations are not seen by the other reader.

(adapted from Stelzer, p. 49)

https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/642/

Mistakes Made

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. You look for something different, something that will pique your interest and provide some very unique insight that will make you pay some notice to this person who is among so many other qualified applicants. If you're screening 5,500 applications over a four- or six-month period, you want to see something that's really interesting. 

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. Really show your personality. Tell us why you are unique, why we should admit you. The premise is that 9 out of 10 people who apply to medical school are very qualified. Don't under any circumstances insert handwritten work or an unfinished piece of writing. Do a professional job. I would consider it a mistake to attempt to cram in too much information, too many words. Use the space as judiciously as possible. Don't submit additional pages or use only 1/20th of the space provided. 

(Stelzer, p.81)

https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/642/
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. We see a variety and that's fine. Our approach is very individualized. The way the applicant devises the answer, determines the length, develops the response, is all part of the answer. The level of effort applicants put into essays varies considerably, which sends messages to the admissions committee as well. Over-involved, elaborate essays send one message, while very brief and superficial essays send another message.

Trying to second-guess what we are looking for is a common mistake—which we can sense.

We can tell when applicants use answers to other schools' questions for our essays; we're sensitive to this. Poorly written essays are a bad reflection on the applicant. Don't over-elaborate; we're reading a lot of these kinds of essays. Also, don't be too brief or superficial. We like to have major ideas presented well.

(adapted from Stelzer, p. 55)

https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/03/
Writing the Personal Statement: Top 10 Rules

1. Strive for depth rather than breadth. Narrow focus to one or two key themes, ideas or experiences
2. Try to tell the reader something that no other applicant will be able to say
3. Provide the reader with insight into what drives you
4. Be yourself, not the 'ideal' applicant
5. Get creative and imaginative in the opening remarks, but make sure it's something that no one else could write
6. Address the school's unique features that interest you
7. Focus on the affirmative in the personal statement; consider an addendum to explain deficiencies or blemishes
8. Evaluate experiences, rather than describe them
9. Proofread carefully for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage, and style
10. Use readable fonts, typeface, and conventional spacing and margins

https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/04/
Writing the Personal Statement: Top 11 Pitfalls

1. Do not submit an expository resume; avoid repeating information found elsewhere on the application
2. Do not complain or whine about the "system" or circumstances in your life
3. Do not preach to your reader. You can express opinions, but do not come across as fanatical or extreme
4. Do not talk about money as a motivator
5. Do not discuss your minority status or disadvantaged background unless you have a compelling and unique story that relates to it
6. Do not remind the school of its rankings or tell them how good they are
7. Do not use boring clichéd intros or conclusions
   "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is..."
   "This question asks me to discuss..."
   "I would like to thank the admissions committee for considering my application."
   "It is my sincere hope that you will grant me the opportunity to attend your fine school."
   "In sum, there are three reasons why you should admit me..."
8. Do not use unconventional and gimmicky formats and packages
9. Do not submit supplemental materials unless they are requested
10. Do not get the name of the school wrong
11. Do not incorporate technical language or very uncommon words

https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/04/

Interesting page, but be careful....

http://www.essayedge.com

**EssayEdge is not an essay mill.** We do not write essays for clients. Rather, we are a team of experienced, knowledgeable professionals dedicated to helping you create the best possible essay for your application. You are the author of your essay.

**The ideas are yours, not ours.** Your finished product will remain your own, since our editors do not add content, change ideas, reorganize work, or make other broad modifications that could take away from your individual voice. Instead, we give you the best possible guidance for how to make your essay shine in front of an admissions committee.

**Constructive criticism and honest, professional advice are vital.** Most EssayEdge orders include a personalized critique that is tailored to your individual essay. Your editor considers your background, application type, and all other information you provide to craft recommendations that match your unique needs.

Remember, your statement must be your own, it must be **authentic**...
Thank you for listening.