



# APPLY YOURSELF: WRITING THE GRADUATE SCHOOL PERSONAL STATEMENT

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# WHY THIS WORKSHOP?

## Career Perspective

- what does the personal statement need to accomplish?

## Writing Perspective

- how do we, as writers, accomplish this?

# GOALS OF THE WORKSHOP

- What is a Personal Statement?
- Purpose of the Statement
- Preparing to Write
- The Importance of Language, Grammar, and Style
- The Revision Process
- Getting Feedback



WHAT IS A PERSONAL STATEMENT?



# PERSONAL STATEMENTS

## Also known as:

- Statement of intent/ purpose/interest
- Plan of study
- Personal essay
- Autobiographical essay
- Profile of experience

## Format:

- Unique to each school
- Usually 1- 2 pages
- Usually between 500 – 2000 words
- May be open-ended, or may be a series of specific questions

# IMPORTANT:

Pay attention to the guidelines of each school/program to which you are applying and the cues they give you for writing your statement

# PURPOSE OF THE STATEMENT

*Why are you applying to this program?  
What do you want to accomplish in the program?*


- demonstrate to the admissions committee why you are a good candidate and will be successful
- explain why you have chosen this program, department, and university
- show how your interests align with their focus
- see you beyond your transcripts and references
- show the quality of your writing

# HOW DO YOU SHOW YOU ARE A GOOD CANDIDATE?

## **Highlight:**

- your goals for the program
- your motivation, interest, focus and commitment
- your knowledge of relevant theory, research
- your most relevant skills and experience
- your “fit” with this program
- what makes you and your application unique
- your writing skills
- opportunity to discuss challenges you have faced



- 
- often interested in your experiences and your relevant professional skills
  - usually want to see your knowledge of the profession and your suitability for it
  - relevant to discuss your career goals

PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS

# RESEARCH PROGRAMS

- more focussed on your research interests
- for a thesis program, you will usually describe your plan of study, potential thesis or research topic
- often you will have reached out to a supervisor already and can mention it here

- It is a worthy project (and why)
- Your project has a wider social, cultural, historical, political, community relevance
- If it builds on earlier work you have done
- Ground it in a theoretical context
- Show you are familiar with academic literature on the topic
- Explain how you are going to do your research – your plan
- Show it is feasible

A FACULTY PERSPECTIVE

“What I Want to Know” (Julia Harrison)



# PREPARING TO WRITE

BATTLING THE BLANK SHEET



## PREPARING TO WRITE – RESEARCH

- Specific personal statement guidelines from school's application
- The program, department, institution: info sessions?
- The career, profession or discipline

# PREPARING TO WRITE – ASSESS YOURSELF

## Knowledge

- discipline or profession-specific knowledge

## Skills/Interests

- writing/research skills
- technical skills: lab, data analysis
- analytical skills/problem solving
- communication
- teaching, mentoring
- organizational/ time management

## Personal Qualities

- ethical
- leadership
- perseverance
- creativity
- self-directedness
- initiative
- independence
- compassion
- integrity
- work ethic

# PREPARING TO WRITE – ASSESS YOURSELF

## Experience – examples\*

- relevant courses, seminars, readings
- thesis, major papers or projects
- field work, placement, community-based research, reading courses
- conferences, presentations
- work experience
- extra-curricular, campus activities
- community volunteer experience
- life experience

\*select the most relevant to the program



# GETTING STARTED AS A WRITER

FILLING THE BLANK PAGE





# HOW DO YOU DO THIS? TECHNIQUES FOR BRAINSTORMING

- Free writing

- Mind mapping

# My UCAS personal statement

## What to include

- Future plans of how I want to use the knowledge and experience that I'll gain
- Why I want to go to university or college
- What I want from the future
- Evidence
  - Give evidence of the skills I have that are required to study my subject or to get the occupation I want
  - Evidence of my academic insight and enthusiasm
  - Evidence showing my understanding of what is required to study the course
- Special attributes
  - Attributes that make me interesting, special and unique
  - Positions of responsibility that I've held both in and out of school
  - How would I be an asset to the university or college?
- Achievements I'm proud of
  - Hobbies, interests that demonstrate my skills and abilities
  - Non-accredited skills and achievements
- About the subject and course
  - Why I've chosen the course
  - Why the subject interests me
  - My suitability for the course
  - How my current or previous studies relate to the course(s) I've chosen
  - Experience and understanding of the subject
  - Any activities that demonstrate my interest in the course

## If I'm a mature student

- Say what I've done since leaving school
- If I've had a variety of jobs and experiences that are relevant, consider sending a detailed CV direct to my university and college choice(s)
- Demonstrate how I will cope with the academic work
- Critically evaluate my experiences, matching them to my chosen course requirements

## If I'm an international student

- Say why I want to study in the UK
- Give evidence on how I could successfully complete a higher education course in English; say if any of my studies have been assessed in English
- Give examples of using my communication skills

## Technicalities

Length: Up to 4,000 characters or 47 lines of text (including spaces or blank lines) (approximately 600 words)

Remember, there is only one personal statement, regardless of whether I apply for one or five courses

The personal statement must be my own work and not copied from another source.

## Presentation and style

- Show my enthusiasm and commitment
- Make it interesting
- Check my spelling and grammar

## Preparation

- Check uni and college websites and Course Search for the criteria and qualities they want me to have
- Create a list of ideas
- Start drafting it early
- Ask people for their feedback

- Details of jobs, placements, work experience, voluntary work
- Concentrate on aspects relevant to my chosen course
- Explain why an experience or activity makes me an excellent candidate for the course

## Work

- Why I've chosen the course
- Why the subject interests me
- My suitability for the course
- How my current or previous studies relate to the course(s) I've chosen
- Experience and understanding of the subject
- Any activities that demonstrate my interest in the course

# WORKING TOWARD A PERSONAL THESIS

- **What is a thesis?**

- How does a thesis apply to a personal statement?
  - You need to give your reader a clear overview, toward the beginning of your paper, of your accomplishments, your goals, and how this program will enable you to pursue them.

## FOR EXAMPLE

- “Through my experiences, both in my university coursework and my fieldwork in Algonquin Park, I have developed a deep interest in researching wetland ecosystems, an interest that Trent’s PhD program in Watershed Ecosystems would allow me to further pursue.”

## FIND A SYSTEM OF ORGANIZATION

- In writing the body of your proposal, you will need some system of organization. For example, your paragraphs could move
  - **Chronologically** – throughout your life or university career.
  - **Thematically** – considering how a certain theme or issue has presented itself for you.

## CREATE AN OUTLINE

- An outline can help you to avoid the terror of the blank page by taking a big task and breaking it up into smaller tasks.
- Your proposal is not a list of information. It is organized around a central purpose, or thesis. An outline helps you to visualize, and stick to this purpose.
- Outlines help you to identify gaps in your reasoning or logic.



# AS YOU WRITE

REMEMBER ...



- 
- Hook - a short description of a problem, issue, or event that draws the reader in.
  - General introduction to you and your academic background.
  - Personal thesis – what have you done, what do you want to do, and why is this program the ideal place to do it?

## INTRODUCTION

This is where you get their attention



## SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

“The rapidly growing elderly population is becoming a serious social problem in many countries. Some countries have been successful at finding solutions for this problem but others have not. Japan is one of the latter countries. Although Japan has one of the highest life expectancy rates and a reputation for good quality of life for its elderly population, it has been unsuccessful at addressing this problem. Compared to other industrialized countries, Japan lags behind in programs for elders who are physically disabled, bedridden or in need of long term care. The current economic crisis is exacerbating this situation as the government is cutting funding for elder programs. This problem resonates deeply with me, and I hope to someday work on finding a solution. It is for this reason that I am applying to the graduate program in social work at Boston University: I seek the skills and knowledge I need to return to Japan and work for a social work service.”

Source: Kansas Wesleyan University, <http://www.kwu.edu/current-students/student-development/career-services/graduate-school-preparation>

## SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

“Work environments are laden with affect: one might feel elated at the prospect of a promotion, frustrated when encountering task disturbances, angry during an argument with a co-worker, and proud after accomplishing an important task. I am fascinated by how affect can either facilitate or impede work outcomes through its interaction with other factors. As a graduate student, I would like to study the precise mechanisms through which affect influences the performance of individuals, groups, and organizations.”

## BODY PARAGRAPHS

- In your body paragraphs you will develop your qualifications and explain your academic interests.
- Avoid clichés and vague generalizations!
- Instead, be specific and include examples.
- Vary your sentence structure. Try not to begin every sentence with “I.”

## SAMPLE QUALIFICATIONS

“I believe I am well prepared for graduate work. During my undergraduate study, I acquired the necessary background knowledge by taking advanced courses in the areas of psychology and sociology, including sociological research methods, social theory, statistics, psychological research, and psychotherapy. Along with these courses, I had an internship at the Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence, a non-profit organization. I also volunteered at Sawayaka-en, a nursing service, and Asunaro Children's Mental Hospital in Japan. From this internship and my volunteer work, I have gained practical experience which I feel will contribute to my academic and professional success.”

## SAMPLE QUALIFICATIONS/MOTIVATIONS

“My experience with these projects has strengthened my resolve to undertake a doctoral education. Although balancing four projects has been challenging at times, I am intellectually engaged and energized by the process of designing studies, finding patterns in data, interpreting those patterns, and communicating them to others. As much as I love being a student learning new ideas, concepts, and skills from lectures and readings, I also have a desire to investigate problems that have never been solved. Thus, research seems to fit my intellectual interests perfectly. Moreover, I have come to realize that even with a passion for research, conducting studies still requires a great deal of self-discipline. Undertaking four projects has taught me to set short- and long-term goals for myself and work towards them consistently. I have also learned to effectively cope with the anxiety and self-doubt arising from temporary setbacks. Therefore, my research experience has not only instilled in me a love of research, but also enhanced my productivity, confidence, and resilience.”

## SAMPLE GOALS

“In my course of study, I would like to explore the ways that digital texts in the humanities can be both illuminated and limited by inclusion of contextualizing material and explore whether or not these texts can be made into effective teaching tools....The end goal would be the creation of hypertexts using existing works of literature in the public realm.”

## SHOW OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE FIELD

“My interest in the link between the intensity of affect and work motivation began with my reading of Russell’s circumplex model of affect (1980) and Carver’s works on emotion and approach/avoidance behaviors (Carver, 2003, 2004). I would like to explore the impact of negative high-activation emotions (e.g., anger) and positive high-activation emotions (e.g., enthusiasm) on motivation and work performance under different conditions. For example, the effect of anger on performance may differ between repetitive and creative work or between independent and collaborative work, while the effect of enthusiasm may not. Another topic that interests me is how certain individual and organizational factors affect employee affective experience and work motivation. I especially would like to examine if emotional intelligence, defined as the abilities to perceive, use, understand, and regulate emotion (Mayer and Salovey, 1997), is associated with the intrinsic motivation to accomplish work goals. I am also interested in how affect at the group and organization level can influence emotion, motivation, and performance at the individual level.”

## AND EXPLAIN THE SIGNIFICANCE OF YOUR WORK

“The difficulty with contextualizing a text on the page, then, may lie in the necessity of inclusion to the point of burying the text under a mountain of scholarship. One aim of this course of study would be to change the aims of hyperlinking a text. Instead of using a wealth of criticism to illuminate a particular narrative, I would like to look at the ways the narrative can be turned and used to explore areas of criticism.”



## SAMPLE INTEREST/FIT WITH PROGRAM

“The PhD program in \_\_\_\_\_ is an excellent fit for my research interests and career goals, which makes it my top choice among graduate programs. Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ works on the role of affect in organizational task-related networks and professional networking have left a strong impression on me. I am also intrigued by Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ research on the impact of emotional intelligence on decision-making, leadership emergence, and income level. Since their research interests align with my own, I would relish the opportunity to work with either of them during my graduate studies. In addition, \_\_\_\_\_ rich course offerings will enhance my understanding of the key topics and research methods in organizational sciences. I am especially excited about the \_\_\_\_\_, since knowledge of multilevel theory and statistical techniques would be of particular importance for my study of affect at the individual, group, and organization levels. Through the PhD program at \_\_\_\_\_ I would be able to conduct research that advances our understanding of emotion within organizational settings and contribute to the development of evidence-based practices that improve work outcomes.”

## SAMPLE FIT WITH PROGRAM

“I’m positive that Trent University’s Public Texts program would be an ideal place to pursue this project. \_\_\_\_\_ has offered to act in a supervisory role, and I will be meeting with \_\_\_\_\_ in February to discuss the possibility of his co-supervision. Further, Trent’s association with Broadview Press would be of substantial benefit as Broadview has done so much in terms of contextualizing works in the humanities.....”

# CONCLUSION

- Be brief.
- Do not list everything that you have accomplished.
- Focus on specifically developing why this program would be an ideal place to continue your studies.

## USE SIMPLE, CLEAR LANGUAGE

- Which is the best sentence and why?
- *The Brobdignagian missive was ostensibly superlative, yet it was problematic and created cognitive dissonance.*
- *The long letter was supposedly excellent, but it was confusing.*

# ACTIVE VOICE

- In active voice, the subject is the doer of the action expressed in the verb:

**From my interactions with grade 6 students, I have learned patience and understanding.**

## PASSIVE VOICE

- In passive voice, the subject of the sentence is not the doer of the action. The doer of the action does not have to be mentioned:

**Through experience with grade six students, patience and understanding were learned.**

(The person gaining the understanding is not mentioned.)

# USE THE ACTIVE VOICE, AT LEAST MOST OF THE TIME

- Generally, the active voice is considered to be more direct and therefore stronger than the passive voice. In most writing, the active should be used and the passive kept for situations where there is good reason to use it, for example, when the doer of an action is not important or is understood :

**The active voice *is considered to be more direct.***

(The doers of the action “consider” are writing experts or teachers or editors or those who consider such things)



# AFTER YOU WRITE





## THE IMPORTANCE OF REVISION

- Do everything in your power NOT to send off a first draft.
- Try to take a break between drafting and revision. This will help you to gain perspective.
- If you are feeling frustrated and stuck, involve someone else in your revision process.

## REVISE FOR

- Substance
- Structure
- Style

# COMMON GRAMMATICAL ERRORS

- Run-on Sentences
- Sentence Fragments
- Commonly Confused Words
- Passive Voice

## STRATEGIES FOR PROOFREADING

- Read from a hard copy and do not put all of your trust in spelling/grammar check.
- Read your work aloud. Or, have someone read it to you.
- Read backwards, starting from the last sentence and working toward the first.

# FEEDBACK

- Professors / teaching assistants
- Grad students
- Professionals



# RESOURCES



## NEED GRAMMAR HELP?

- Academic Skills Centre's Grammar and Clear Writing Guide: <https://www.trentu.ca/academicskills/how-guides/how-edit-your-writing>
- OWL – Purdue Online Writing Lab <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>
- *Easy Writer*, Bedford St. Martins <http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/easywriter3e/20errors/default.asp>.
- Academic Skills Appointment: [www.trentu.ca/sep](http://www.trentu.ca/sep)

# STATEMENT RESOURCES

- Careerspace:
  - appointments to review your statement
  - assistance with grad school application process
- Academic Skills
  - appointments to review your statement

You can book appointments at [www.trentu.ca/sep](http://www.trentu.ca/sep)