

Writing Personal Statements for Applications

Graduate Writing Center of the Center for Excellence in Writing

Overview: This workshop will cover strategies for writing effective personal statements for applications for further graduate study, funding, and professional positions. It will address overall rhetorical strategies as well as grammatical and mechanical points.

Goals

1. To help you analyze application materials for “between-the-lines” requirements.
2. To help you write a narrative of your experiences that addresses the rhetorical situation presented by an application.

A Note About This Workshop and the Graduate Writing Center

Please note that these workshops are designed to address general writing principles. As a result, you may not find information in this packet or during the workshop that is directly relevant to your field or your current study. The best way to view these workshops is as opportunities to be exposed to general skills that should transfer across disciplines. That means attending these workshops is **not a substitute** for reading extensively in your field and asking questions of advisors and peers.

The Graduate Writing Center, located in 111-L Kern Building, provides free, one-on-one consultations for graduate students working on any kind of writing project—from seminar papers to presentations to articles to dissertations. Scheduling an appointment with the Graduate Writing Center is an excellent way to follow up on the practical information you receive during the workshops.

To learn more about the Graduate Writing Center or to sign up for an appointment using our online schedule, visit the Center’s website at <http://www.psu.edu/dept/cew/grad/gwc.htm>, or you can schedule directly at <https://secure.gradsch.psu.edu/wccal/studentview.cfm>. Please note that the appointment schedule is posted one week in advance and appointment times book quickly.

Personal Statements: An Overview

In general, the personal statement represents an opportunity for you to **humanize** your application—to convert the long lists of qualifications you have listed elsewhere into a narrative that essentially argues for why you are a good fit for the program or fellowship or position and why it is a good fit for you.

Of course, a résumé or c. v. is **never** just a list of qualifications; it is always an argument that includes a selection of the most relevant qualifications. The selection implies selection criteria—choices about what is and is not important. Personal statements “flesh out” those selections and selection criteria and apply the reasoning behind them to the particular situation.

Exercise 1: “Between the Lines”

No matter how explicit the instructions for a personal statement are, there are always requirements or preferences left unexpressed. One of your main tasks is to determine what those “between-the-lines” requirements are.

Read the following information about a National Science Foundation postdoctoral fellowship in polar regions research (Part I) and instructions for the personal statement (Part II). Working in groups of 3, answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the key words/concepts in each part of this fellowship description?
- 2) What can we learn from these materials about our readers’ values, interests, and concerns?
- 3) Given this understanding of our readers, what strategies could a writer use to tailor a statement to the readers’ values, interests, and concerns?

Part I. Postdoctoral Fellowships in Polar Regions Research, offered by the Office of Polar Programs (OPP), to support training and research on any aspect of scientific study of the Antarctic and/or the Arctic.

The Office of Polar Programs (OPP) offers Postdoctoral Fellowships in Polar Regions Research to highly qualified individuals in U.S. host organizations to support training and research on any aspect of scientific study of the Antarctic and/or the Arctic. The fellowship program develops and trains new investigators in polar regions research with concomitant goals to:

- Support innovative research in emerging areas;
- Encourage interdisciplinary research;
- Foster activities that create broader impacts for science and society; and
- Increase the participation of underrepresented groups in polar regions research.

Fellowships promote human resource development in conjunction with advancing scientific knowledge and understanding and attracting new technologies and expertise to polar regions research. In collaboration with sponsoring scientists, fellowship candidates are encouraged to propose research and training plans that outline opportunities relevant to their career goals, such as developing novel conceptual approaches, enhancing technical skills, gaining field or teaching experience, participating in education and outreach activities, or forming industry partnerships. It is not expected that each fellowship candidate will propose a research and training plan that meets all of the fellowship program goals; rather, candidates should identify activities that contribute their knowledge and skills to the scientific study of polar regions, that foster their research interests and talents, that promote the development of skills and

competencies appropriate to their career goals, and that address the merit review criteria identified in this solicitation.

Each candidate must identify the support and commitment of a sponsoring scientist and a U.S. host organization before preparing a fellowship proposal. Co-sponsors and multiple research/training sites are permitted and may be particularly appropriate to pursue collaborative opportunities such as interdisciplinary research, industry partnerships, teaching experiences, or outreach activities. Regardless of the number of sponsoring scientists and research/training sites proposed, a lead sponsor should be identified and a primary host organization must be declared to receive the institutional allowance. The candidate is responsible for making all prior arrangements with the sponsoring scientist(s) and host organization(s).

Part II. A complete postdoctoral fellowship proposal consists of:

Project Description, not to exceed 10 single-spaced pages, which must include the following components of the candidate's research and training plan:

- research objectives, methods, and significance;
- training objectives and a personal statement of career goals;
- relation of the proposed research and training plan to the candidate's doctoral thesis and training;
- an explanation of how the described fellowship activities will enhance the candidate's skill development and achievement of career goals;
- justification for the proposed duration of the fellowship, including a timeline of research and other activities that demonstrates the candidate's ability to conclude the project during the fellowship tenure; and
- justification for the choice of sponsoring scientist(s) and host organization(s), including identification of collaborating scientist(s) and mentors, the relation of the proposed work to current research and activities at the host organization(s), and a description of available facilities and resources.
- If the plan includes components such as fieldwork, teaching, undergraduate mentoring, industry collaborations, or outreach, the proposal must state how these activities will be performed during the tenure of the fellowship. Also, proposals with multiple sponsoring scientists and/or research/training sites should identify a lead sponsor and must declare a primary host organization to receive the institutional allowance.

In addition to the information excerpted from the NSF website, how else might applicants get “between-the-lines” information?

Drafting Considerations

Suppose you were meeting face-to-face with a selection committee for the grant, for the faculty position, or the doctoral program to which you are applying. This committee asks you, “What is the most important thing for us to know about you?” You must make a case for yourself and hold the reader’s interest. What would you say?

Determining what you would say is challenging, but it is also critical to your success in preparing an interesting, insightful personal statement. Admissions, selection, and hiring committees will want to see evidence that you underwent a careful self-examination as you wrote your personal statement. An effective statement is going to be both *personal* and *analytical*.

Generating Material

(Adapted from Richard J. Stelzer’s *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School*)

1. What is special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story? Try to think about this in relation to other candidates in your field.
2. What details of your life (personal or family 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?
3. 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 reinforce your conviction that you are well suited to your field?
4. How have you learned about this field? Through classes, readings, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field etc.?
5. If you have worked during your grad school years, what have you learned (leadership, technical, or managerial skills, for instance) and how has that work contributed to your growth?
6. What are your career goals?
7. Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships in your life?
8. What personal characteristics do you possess (i.e. integrity, compassion, persistence) that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate that you have these characteristics?
9. Why might you be a stronger candidate for the fellowship, job, or school program—and more successful and effective in the profession or field—than other applicants?
10. What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the selection committee to be interested in you?

Considering Arrangement

First, you should decide on an overall arrangement that tracks the criteria suggested in the application materials. For example, if the prompt for a personal statement reads that you should discuss personal motivation and career goals, then do so in roughly that order. In the absence of such directions (if you simply have a prompt that directs you to “provide a personal statement”), re-read other parts of the application for ideas about what the readers are looking for “between the lines,” and structure your statement on that basis.

If that is still unhelpful, consider using the following arrangement:

- Articulate your personal/professional inspiration.
- Discuss your relevant experiences and skills.
- Articulate a research focus and plan.
- Describe long-term objectives.
- Refer to specifics of the program that will help you achieve your objectives.

Sample Paragraphs for Key Sections of Your Statement

Introduction:

Find an angle from which to approach your personal statement or an interesting way to “hook” your reader.

We've beaten the odds, dear reader: we can both read and understand the passage before us. According to the National Adult Literacy Survey though, one of us—representing roughly one of every two American adults—should lack the basic literacy skills needed to function successfully in society. Without these skills, one of us should be at far greater risk to be unemployed, impoverished, and incarcerated. Tragically, that same one of us should have children likely to bear similar hardships.

Create a thesis statement in the introductory paragraph (or early in the essay). Each body paragraph should then build on one specific aspect of this thesis statement.

As a Knauss Fellow and in my professional career, I see myself as a science communicator, focusing on estuary research and policy. I want to help create a common language between the authorities of environmental management—a language that can be used as a strong mediation and solution-finding tool. To become such an individual, I have set educational goals that will hone my skills as both a communicator and a scientist.

Body Paragraphs:

Each body paragraph can build on one specific aspect of your thesis statement. If you have several different skills or experiences to discuss, stick to one topic per paragraph.

The topic sentence of each paragraph should introduce readers to your major idea for that paragraph, whether it is a specific skill, experience, or interest of yours. The sentences that follow in the paragraph should describe *how* you learned that skill or *how* you have applied your abilities or pursued your interests.

As a communicator, my experience centers on writing and teaching. Through the Penn State University Liberal Arts Program, I completed the requirements for a technical writing certificate, which included courses in nonfiction, persuasive rhetoric, and article writing. One of the most rewarding results of this program was the opportunity to write, film, and edit a fifteen-minute documentary for local television as an independent studies extension of a technical writing class.

The documentary examined a local natural spring and the then current research surrounding its origin and future in the face of increasing regional development. It was aired last spring to gain public support for protection of the resource.

Conclusion:

Here is where you can draw on the research you have done on your target program. Use the final paragraph to stress how you will contribute to the program, or how the specific opportunities available to you through the program will help you to achieve your professional goals.

The University of Alberta is an ideal location for my doctoral study because it allows me to integrate my facility for computer science with my chosen application area—geology. My academic advisors and my own research into your programs have confirmed your strengths in computer science and glaciology, and the recent application of these areas to field research at Ellesmere Island in Nunavut, Canada is especially appealing to me. With my deep-rooted interest in Canadian geology and recognition of the quality of your university programs, I hope you will give my application every consideration.

General Advice

- Read the question carefully—determine how “personal” your response should be.
- Take the “personal” part seriously, but connect the personal with your academic/professional interest.
- Connect academic/professional interests with work, other experiences.
- Use as engaging an opening as possible—short narrative? Anecdote?
- Articulate a focus.
- Articulate long-term objectives.
- Be honest about possible liabilities (GPA, test scores, lack of publications, lack of directly relevant experience).
 - Cast as learning experiences.
 - Stress other strengths.
- Discuss specifics about the program or school.
 - Reputation.
 - Faculty.
 - Read faculty or fellow publications and consider establishing contact.
 - Special centers, projects, etc.
- Address what you can do for them and what they can do for you.
- Use language provided by the question.
 - Anchor topic sentences in criteria.
- Consider adapting language from résumé/c. v.—action-oriented.
- Use discipline-specific language with care.
- Revise “from the top down”: focus on large-scale organizational issues, then paragraphs, then sentences, then spelling, punctuation, etc. Ask peers and faculty mentors to read your statement critically and, if possible, through at least a couple of revisions.

Revision Considerations

Revision occurs when you shift from writing for yourself or writing to get ideas down on paper to writing that anticipates an audience. For applications for fellowships, postdoctoral positions, etc., your readers will often read through several hundred (or more) applications in several stages and will become increasingly tired. That means you do not want to make them work hard to understand your writing.

In most cases (and especially in the US, Canada, and predominately English-speaking European countries), making your personal statement easy to read means several things.

Paragraph Patterns

Once you've decided on an arrangement, try to make each paragraph follow a **deductive** pattern. This means that each paragraph should ideally begin with a topic sentence that makes a specific assertion. Then, the paragraph should develop through a series of sentences that provide evidence supporting that assertion. For example, a paragraph about your relevant experiences could begin with a sentence that mentions your extensive work on a relevant project with a well-known faculty member, and then it could proceed with several sentences that discuss specific work in a lab and/or discrete stages in the project. Concentrating on providing strong topic sentences will improve the **skimmability** of your statement; in other words, it will give readers who are reading through a lot of applications quickly (looking to cut some of them!) an overview of important information about you.

Example:

While I will be directly involved with this urban environmental education project in Madagascar for nine months, my goal is to create a sustainable program. In this endeavor, a group of students at the university will be integral to the day-to-day running of the program. This involvement is in fact necessary to the success of the project. Teaching experiential environmental education and natural history requires months, if not years, of independent observation of the natural environment. I do not have a knowledge of the biological environment of Antananarivo and as such I would not be able to identify a large number of the species found in this area. Therefore, with the help of my contacts, I will recruit students of biology from the local university to aid me with this aspect of the program. We will work together—each of us using our specific biological or pedagogical skills. Over the course of my nine months in Antananarivo, these university students will assume director's roles and the program will thus expand to include more interested children. Upon my departure, these directors will completely take over and urban environmental education in Antananarivo will continue

Increasing Coherence

Remember that, to ensure readability, you should concentrate on making your paragraphs **coherent**—that is, they should “flow” well. Coherence results from

- The use of “**stock**” **transitional phrases** (“however,” “therefore,” “in addition,” “on the other hand”) that signal to readers a shift in topic or emphasis.

- The use of **pronouns** to refer back to previously introduced information and/or the use of **recycling**, or the repetition of key words or phrases.

These coherence devices help writers honor the implicit contract they make with their readers not to provide new information that does not connect with previous (“given”) information.

Example:

Without coherence devices:

Medical science has succeeded in identifying the hundreds of viruses that can cause the common cold. Science has discovered the most effective means of protection. One person transmits the cold viruses to another most often by hand. An infected person covers his mouth to cough. The person picks up a telephone. Half an hour later, the daughter picks up the same telephone. She rubs her eyes. Within a few days the daughter has a cold. And the cold spreads. To avoid colds, people should wash their hands often and keep their hands away from their faces.

With coherence devices:

Medical science has thus succeeded in identifying the hundreds of viruses that can cause the common cold. **It** has also discovered the most effective means of protection. One person transmits the cold viruses to another most often by hand. For instance, an infected person covers his mouth to cough. **He** then picks up a telephone. Half an hour later, **his** daughter picks up the same telephone. Immediately afterward, **she** rubs her eyes. Within a few days, **she**, too, has a cold. And thus it spreads. To avoid colds, therefore, people should wash their hands often and keep their hands away from their faces.

Improving Word Choice and Conciseness

Often, relatively “empty “ words creep into academic writing. Writers usually include them because they have seen them so often in other writing or because they have heard them used in conversations. Because space is often at a premium in personal statements, it’s a good idea to review your writing for instances of these empty constructions.

Avoid Empty Words

all things considered	case
as far as I’m concerned	element
for all intents and purposes	factor
for the most part	field
in a manner of speaking	kind
in my opinion	manner
last, but not least	nature
more or less	situation
area	thing
aspect	type

Avoid Unnecessary Repetition

circle around	basic essentials
consensus of opinion	puzzling in nature
continue on	repeat again
cooperate together	end result
final competition	revert back
frank and honest exchange	square in shape
the future to come	surrounding circumstances

Use Precise, Action Verbs

Forms of the verb “to be” can rob sentences of concise action. Whenever you see subject-verb phrases such as “I am,” “we are,” “it is,” and “they are,” circle these verbs and then select a more concrete verb that describes the action performed in the sentence. Revise the sentence to emphasize the more concrete verbs, as in the following example:

Example: My current research is on the textbook created by the Brooklyn College research group.

Revised: In my current research, I recover and analyze the significance of the textbook created by the Brooklyn College research group.

The Rhetorical Situation for Your Personal Statement

- What do you need to write a personal statement for? A job, fellowship, doctoral program, candidacy review?
- What other documents must you submit for your application? What information will these materials give your readers? How will the personal statement fit into this overall application package?
- Who will be reading your personal statement? Under what conditions will they be reading your personal statement? What will they want to learn from it?
- What do you know about the program, department, or employer to which you are applying? What are its goals, interests, and values?
- What types of research interests, personal skills, or career goals will they look upon favorably? What types of research, teaching, working, or service experiences have you had that have helped you to develop these interests, skills or goals?

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Online

<http://www.accepted.com>. A resource especially for graduate and professional program applicants, which includes sample essays and online feedback.

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_perstate.html. An overview of personal statement writing from Purdue University's excellent Online Writing Lab.

http://www.ssrc.org/fellowships/art_of_writing_proposals.page. An article provided by the Social Science Research Council on the "art" of writing proposals. Directly relates to proposals for research work, but much of the information is applicable to personal statement writing.