

Writing a Statement of Purpose Letter for Graduate School Applications

A Statement of Purpose letter should mention: “1) your interests in psychology and how you came to have those interests, 2) your goals and ambitions in the field of psychology, and 3) how the program to which you are applying can help you to achieve those goals”, as stated by Dr. Karen Kemtes (a whole PowerPoint presentation on applying to graduate school can be found on the Cluster Server in the “Lab Meetings and Presentations” folder). A Statement of Purpose letter does NOT tell your whole life story. Thus, do not to begin your statement with “I was born in...”, doing so will make you look “unsophisticated and naïve.” When talking about your interests in psychology, avoid generic phrases such as “I want to practice psychology so I can help people”. This statement is overly used and does not add much to the letter. Would anyone want to practice psychology to hurt people? Possibly try to think about a human problem that evokes your desire to practice psychology. – Linda J. Hayes and Steven C. Hayes from UNR (www.unr.edu/psych/advising/howto.html)

When describing how you came to have those interests in psychology, focus on education and occupational experiences instead of personal ones. Personal experiences are difficult to put in a short written statement “without either trivializing them or needlessly confining your intellectual interests to emotional motivation.” - Hayes (UNR)

When discussing your goals and ambitions, try to be as specific as possible. Do NOT say that you are open-minded, just want to learn, and are going to decide on a career after graduation. Doing so will make it look like you’re uncertain about graduate school and the future. They are looking for people who are motivated and who know what they want to study. Do show openness in the program though and willingness to learn new things and possibly even different career choices. – Hayes (UNR)

Your letter CANNOT be generic. Having a generic letter will hurt your chances of getting accepted because the people who are reading it will think that you are not serious. Each letter must be tailored to that specific school/program. Tell them why you are applying to THEIR school and WHAT in their program interests you. Definitely do your homework!

In terms of the actual letter, think of it more as an essay. It has 3 main parts, an introduction (which gives a brief synopsis of the letter), a body (which will describe your goals, why you chose the program, a few faculty members who you would want to work with, and other accomplishments or assets that you have), and a conclusion (which should state that you are competent, motivated, and open for an interview, etc).

Writing a Winning Statement of Purpose

Source: <http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/gcallaghan/graduate/winningstatement.htm>

Determine your purpose in writing the statement

Usually the purpose is to persuade the admissions committee that you are an applicant they should choose. You may want to show that you have the ability and motivation to succeed in your field, or you may want to show the committee that, on the basis of your experience, you are

the kind of candidate who will do well in the field. Whatever the purpose, it must be explicit to give coherence to the whole statement.

1. Pay attention to the purpose throughout the statement so that extraneous material is left out.
2. Pay attention to the audience (committee) throughout the statement. Remember, your audience is made up of faculty members who are experts in their field. They want to know *that* you can think as much as *what* you think.

Determine the content of your statement

Be sure to answer any direct questions fully. Analyze the questions or guidance statements for the essay completely and answer all parts. For example: "What are the strengths and weaknesses in setting and achieving goals and working through people?" In this question there are actually six parts to be answered 1) strengths in setting goals, 2) strengths in achieving goals, 3) strengths in working through people, 4) weaknesses in setting goals, 5) weaknesses in achieving goals and 6) weaknesses in working through people. Pay attention to small words. Notice: This example question says through people not with people, if it says *with* people, answer that way.

Usually graduate and professional schools are interested in the following:

1. *Your purpose in graduate study.* This means you must have thought this through before you try to answer the question.
2. *The area of study in which you wish to specialize.* This requires that you know the field well enough to make such decision.
3. *Your future use of your graduate study.* This will include your career goals and plans for your future.
4. *Your special preparation and fitness for study in the field.* This is the opportunity to relate your academic background with your extracurricular experience to show how they unite to make you a special candidate.
5. *Any problems or inconsistencies in your records or scores* such as a bad semester. Be sure to explain in a positive manner and justify the explanation. Since this is a rebuttal argument, it should be followed by a positive statement of your abilities.
6. *Any special conditions that are not revealed elsewhere* in the application such as a large (35 hour a week) work load outside of school. This too should be followed with a positive statement about yourself and your future.
7. You may be asked, "Why do you wish to attend this school?" This requires that you have done your research about the school and know what its special appeal is to you.
8. Above all this, the statement is to contain information about you as a person. They know nothing about you that you don't tell them. *You* are the subject of the statement.

Determine your approach and the style of the statement

There is no such thing as "the perfect way to write a statement." There is only the one that is best for you and fits your circumstances.

1. There are some things the statement should not be:

- a. Avoid the "what I did with my life" approach. This was fine for grade school essays on "what I did last summer." It is not good for a personal statement.
- b. Equally elementary is the approach "I've always wanted to be a _____." This is only appropriate if it also reflects your current career goals.
- c. Also avoid a statement that indicates your interest in psychology is because of your own personal psychotherapy or a family member's psychological disturbance. While this may have motivated many of us to go on to graduate study in psychology, this is not what your audience is necessarily looking for in your statement.
- d. These are some things the statement should do:
 - a. It should 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 "academes" or jargon.
 - b. It should form conclusions that explain the value and meaning of your experiences such as: (1) what you learned about yourself; (2) about your field; (3) about your future goals; and (4) about your career concerns.
 - c. It should be specific. Document your conclusions with specific instances or draw your conclusions as the result of individual experience. See the list of general Words to Avoid Using without Explanation listed below.
 - d. It should be an example of careful persuasive writing.

CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT FORM:

- a. Keep to the Page Limit Number!!! Reviewers have to read hundreds of these applications; don't overburden them with extra pages.
- b. Do not leave in typographical errors. You don't want to be taken less seriously due to a typo, rite? (laugh)

WORDS TO AVOID USING WITHOUT EXPLANATION

| | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| significant | invaluable | appealing to me |
| interesting | exciting, excited | appealing aspect |
| challenging | enjoyable, enjoy | I like it |
| satisfying, satisfaction | I can contribute | it's important |
| rewarding | valuable | fascinating |
| gratifying | helpful | appreciate |
| meaningful | useful | helping people |
| meant a lot to me | feel good | I like to help |
| stimulating | remarkable | people |
| incredible | | |

GETTING STARTED

EXERCISES:

A. Recalling and analyzing experience - write short paragraphs on the following:

1. Pick a memorable accomplishment in your life. What did you do? How did you accomplish it?
2. What sort of important activities have you engaged in? With whom? what role did you play?
3. What work experiences have you had? What was your job? responsibility? How did you carry it out?
 - Now look over your paragraphs. What skills and qualities do you see that you possess? For example, consider working with others. Were you a leader? important "team" player?
 - Looking at what you have found, you can now look for skills and qualities that will help you in graduate school. What factors stand out?
 - NOTE: You will undoubtedly have more material than you can use. This is good, but you need to make strategic choices.

B. Your career goals - write two short paragraphs:

1. What career have you chosen? What factors formed this decision?
2. What evidence shows that this is a correct choice? That is, how can you show that this choice is realistic? (Personal experience in the field is a good place to begin.)

General Advice

Source: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_perstate.html

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.

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 good ideas. 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.

An Example of a Successful Statement

Source: "How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School" by Richard Stelzer

Statement #1

Having majored in literary studies (world literature) as an undergraduate, I would now like to concentrate on English and American literature.

I am especially interested in nineteenth-century literature, women's literature, Anglo-Saxon poetry, and folklore and folk literature. My personal literary projects have involved some combination of these subjects. For the oral section of my comprehensive exams, I specialized in nineteenth century novels by and about women. The relationship between "high" and folk literature became the subject for my honors essay, which examined Toni Morrison's use of classical, biblical, African, and Afro-American folk tradition in her novel. I plan to work further on this essay, treating Morrison's other novels and perhaps preparing a paper suitable for publication.

In my studies toward a doctoral degree, I hope to examine more closely the relationship between high and folk literature. My junior year and private studies of Anglo-Saxon language and literature have caused me to consider the question of where the divisions between folklore, folk literature, and high literature lie. Should I attend your school, I would like to resume my studies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with special attention to its folk elements.

Writing poetry also figures prominently in my academic and professional goals. I have just begun submitting to the smaller journals with some success and am gradually building a working manuscript for a collection. The dominant theme of this collection relies on poems that draw from classical, biblical, and folk traditions, as well as everyday experience, in order to celebrate the process of giving and taking life, whether literal or figurative. My poetry draws from and influences my academic studies. Much of what I read and study finds a place in my creative work as subject. At the same time, I study the art of literature by taking part in the creative process, experimenting with the tools used by other authors in the past.

In terms of a career, I see myself teaching literature, writing criticism, and going into editing or publishing poetry. Doctoral studies would be valuable to me in several ways. First, your teaching assistantship program would provide me with the practical teaching experience I am eager to acquire. Further, earning a Ph.D. in English and American literature would advance my other two career goals by adding to my skills, both critical and creative, in working with language. Ultimately, however, I see the Ph.D. as an end in itself, as well as a professional stepping stone; I enjoy studying literature for its own sake and would like to continue my studies on the level demanded by the Ph.D. program.

(Stelzer pp. 40-41)

Some Advice from Admissions Representatives

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. 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)

Beth O'Neil

Director of Admissions and Financial Aid

University of California at Berkeley School of Law (Boalt Hall)

We're trying to gauge the potential for a student's success in law school, and we determine that, principally, on the basis of what the student has done in the past. The personal statement carries the responsibility of presenting the student's life experiences.

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. For example, perhaps they haven't told us that they were ill on the day that they took the LSAT or had an automobile accident on the way. Such things are legitimate reasons for poor performance. 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.

Between 1 and 5 people read each application.

(Stelzer, p. 72)

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). Most applicants use the statement to indicate their motivation for medicine, the duration of that motivation, extracurricular activities, and work experience. So those are some of the general things we are looking for in the Personal Comments section.

We also want applicants to personalize the statement, to tell us something about themselves that they think is worthy of sharing with us, something that makes them unique, different, and the type of medical student and future physician that we're all looking for. 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. Of course, if they start every sentence on a whole page with "I," it gets to be a little bit too much.

(Stelzer, p. 82)

Exercise: Editing a Statement of Purpose

Editing your Statement of Purpose is a substantial step in finalizing your work. While it is helpful to ask two of your instructors to read through your rough drafts, it is important to obtain the skills necessary to edit yourself. Doing so will not only help you now, but will help you for the rest of your academic career. For practice, as a group, use the advice from this workshop to consider any revisions appropriate for the below Statement of Purpose. Begin by individually reading and editing for 10-15 minutes. You should ask yourselves questions such as: "Are there any grammatical errors?", "Are there any clichés?", "Is the information specific or too general?", "Is there any irrelevant personal information?" Finally, follow up by discussing, as a group, any changes or comments group members have made.

Statement

I was raised to have a deep and reverential respect for the natural world around me. From a very young age, I was taught the importance of science – whether to simply understand how the things in my environment worked, or to contribute meaningful research that would affect the lives of the next generation. My father actively fostered a love of science; he would read Stephen Hawking’s “A Brief History of Time” with me during my middle school years, explain the curvature of space while sitting on our family’s trampoline, and even got me a chemistry set when most other girls my age were asking for ponies. My mother supported my endeavors as well, making sure that I knew I could do just as well as the boys in my math and science classes. So it came as no surprise to them when I enjoyed and prospered throughout all of my high school science courses. But something was missing – and while I loved Biology, Chemistry and Physics, I just could not see myself donning a white lab coat and poking Petri dishes or staring at chalkboards full of equations all day. It was not until my first psychology course that I finally realized what I was missing – the human element. Human beings are made up of various compounds, molecules, electrical signals and hormones that somehow coalesce in all the right ways to form a thinking, feeling organism. I am interested in the complexity of the human mind – I am interested in how it works, and fascinated when it sometimes does not. In order to better understand the structure of the brain, I plan to enter into the field of Experimental Psychology with a focus in Neuropsychology.

From the Fall semester of 2004 through the Spring semester of 2007, I actively contributed to the laboratories of both Dr. Mary Brown and Dr. Greg Burns. While working with Dr. Brown, I have garnered an immense amount of practical experimental experience. Under her mentorship, I have spent the past two years developing skills related to study

construction, data collection, data entry, and paper and poster development and presentation. I have co-authored a poster entitled “Computerized Scoring of the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale” that has gone to the Western Psychological Association (WPA) Convention in Spring of 2006. I have also first-authored a poster entitled “Exploring Sex Differences on the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale Using Modified Instructions” that will be presented at the 2007 WPA Convention. During my first two semesters, I helped Dr. Brown with a vast variety of research tasks, and as I became a more experienced member of her lab, the complexity and variety of my assigned tasks increased, such as completing the training and orientation of new lab members. In an effort to continue providing Research Assistants with diverse guidance, I was put in charge of constructing and presenting various workshops to develop both basic and advanced skills on programs such as Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Adobe Photoshop Creative Suite 2. I also created two workshops on skills needed to apply and gain admission to graduate school: choosing a mentor and preparing for the Graduate Record Exams.

During the summer of 2006, I was the first undergraduate ever in Dr. Brown’s lab to be appointed to the position of Lab Manager. My task as manager was to meet with Dr. Brown every week in order to organize weekly meetings with other Lab Assistants. This included drafting agendas, organizing and preparing for workshops and presentations, and discussing overall progress in the lab. I also ran lab meetings to oversee the progress of various research related tasks, and to provide direction for fellow research assistants. I made myself available to answer various questions on numerous topics; those pertaining to the lab itself, as well as general questions about the GREs and applying to graduate school. I also helped with coordinating plans to attend psychological association conferences. Finally, in order to assist with Dr. Brown’s PSY 712 (Standardized Tests and Measurements) class, I learned advanced techniques

with Dreamweaver, and then answered questions on creating a website, linking pages, and how to conduct an online study.

Despite the absolutely wonderful research experience I gained with Dr. Brown, I found my passion with neuropsychology while working with Dr. Greg Burns. In Dr. Burn's lab, I helped develop a study to classically condition Event Related Potentials. I learned how to apply surface electrodes to a volunteer's scalp, and then presented visual and auditory stimuli to the participant. However, we soon found that the equipment and software we were using were out of date; so for the past two semesters, we have been trying to develop a program to correctly present the stimuli at staggered intervals and to record the brain's responses. This required me to collaborate with engineering students, as the program we need must use engineering software to correctly time stimuli and average the incoming brain waves. Our work is ongoing, and this semester we should finally be able to determine whether or not classical conditioning can "trick" the brain into producing lessened, but observable responses without a physical stimulus present. Participating in Dr. Burn's lab has given me valuable hands on experience interacting with participants, developing studies, and working with professionals in other fields to create workable solutions to a psychology-based problem.

During my undergraduate career, I successfully managed my time between work, school, and extracurricular duties. I excelled at my studies, obtaining a 3.99 unweighted GPA. I spent 4-5 hours a week in Dr. Burn's lab working with other assistants. While lab manager, I contributed 8-12 hours a week to the lab, and fielded calls at home if a research assistant needed immediate help with a task. Assistants could also reach me by email when I was not on campus. During the Summer and Fall semesters that I participated as manager, I also worked 25 hours a week as a sales associate at Canyonland, a store specializing in rocks, minerals, and Southwest

Native American trinkets. There, I spent time greeting customers, cashiering, stocking, merchandizing, ordering, receiving, updating the store's computers, and designing and printing signs, informational printouts, and technical information sheets on the various specimens and Native artifacts. I worked diligently at both jobs part time – while still remaining a full time student – and maintaining straight A's for both semesters.

However, the largest part of my undergraduate career was spent fostering a love of experimental psychology through laboratory work. This lab work has allowed me to cultivate a particular research focus – I am interested in basic questions of sensation, perception, and cognition at an almost reductionist level. I am attracted to the idea that an understanding of brain anatomy can lead to a greater understanding of emotion, cognition, and perception. I am fascinated by the physical capabilities and limitations of the brain, and how the development of new technology can depend on neuropsychology. For example, linguistics has always held a special appeal to me, and the advancements of voice recognition and production software rely heavily on understanding the perception of pitch, and how humans produce and understand speech. I believe that neuropsychology can inform the development of technology; from giving paraplegics wirelessly controlled mechanical limbs that receive messages from their motor cortex to developing glasses that transmit information to occipital lobe implants and let the blind see. A background in neuropsychology adds a vital piece towards understanding these technological puzzles.

Overall, I believe that my work and research experience has prepared me for the demands of the graduate program here at UNLV. I have shown that I strive and flourish under the pressures of advanced coursework, and the commitments of both lab and work. It has come to my attention that both Dr. Chris Matthews and Dr. Aaron Adams will be joining UNLV this fall

as faculty with specializations in Neuropsychology. I hope to correspond with both during the application process, to get better acquainted with their research interests. I am excited at the prospect of working with one of the new faculty members in the fall, and look forward to producing quality research that reflects UNLV's high standards. If my undergraduate research experience is any indication, I truly believe that UNLV will help me achieve my goals for higher education as well as prepare me for a career in Neuropsychology.