

Graduate School Personal Statement: Getting Started

Writing your Personal Statement is one of the most important pieces of your graduate school application. As there is a restricted amount of space to describe their past accomplishments, future plans, and interest in a particular graduate program, it can be one of the most challenging components of your application. Here are some tips to help aid you in the writing process.

Section A: Opening Paragraph: 4-6 sentences

- Keep this section short and organized. Your goal is to briefly introduce yourself.
- You have a limited amount of space, so avoid stating ideas that your readers already know (e.g., “I want to get a graduate degree in psychology so that I can continue to learn about why people do the things they do”). Your application to a psychology graduate program is evidence that you enjoy the field of psychology and would like to obtain a graduate degree.
- Consider writing this section last. Once completing the rest of the paper, you can use the introductory paragraph to set the overall attitude of the statement.

Section B: Academic Accomplishments: 5-7 sentences

- Share your accomplishments honestly, but maintain a humble tone. You may be competing against other applicants who have a higher GPA or stronger GRE scores than you.
- Quantify your accomplishments when possible. For example, provide your class rank rather than making vague statements such as “high GPA” or “top student.”
- Share activities not directly related to your field, especially if they reveal positive aspects of who you are.

Section C: Research Experience: 5-8 sentences

- Be specific in the research skills you have acquired.
- Keep in mind that you will be conveying your attitude toward research alongside your research experiences. Be thoughtful about the attitude you want to express (Do you work well independently? Are you a strong team player?).
- Your research experience does not have to directly relate to your field of interest in graduate school, as many research skills are transferable.
- Don’t forget to include research-related activities, such as applying for grants, receiving travel funding for a conference, or being nominated for an award.

Section D: Employment/Volunteer Work/Clinical Experience: 5-8 sentences

- After you have identified the qualities desired by your program, carefully consider how your work, either paid or volunteer, has helped you develop these skills and an awareness of the issues related to your field of interest. Your work may not directly relate to the program you are applying to, so think about how you can apply overall concepts that you gained to your program of interest.
- Avoid using local abbreviations or jargon that will be unfamiliar to your committee. Use the full name of places where you have worked or positions you have held (e.g., The Cahill Career Center vs. Cahill Center, or CSI vs. Center for Student Involvement)
- Look for overall strengths as well as specific skills. If you are involved in a wide range of activities, emphasize the breadth of your experiences. If you have devoted yourself to a particular cause, emphasize depth and commitment.

Section E: Future Plans/Fit: 6-9 sentences

- Avoid writing a generic paragraph and using it for every program to which you apply. The selection committee easily will identify this strategy. If you can’t figure out what is special about the program, then why apply?
- Have plans for your future with defined interests.
- Have realistic plans for your future. For example, it is unlikely that you will open a private practice in clinical psychology immediately following graduation. You do not want the selection committee to perceive you as naïve and/or unprepared.

Section F: Concluding Paragraph: 4-5 sentences

- Stay short and focused. The last paragraph is not the place to insert important, new information.
- Seek feedback from professors, your Cahill Career Advisor, and the Writing Center once your paper is written.
- Revise multiple times. Good writing is a process that takes time.