

## Perspective: Sell Yourself -- Refining the Personal Statement

By [Brian Rybarczyk](#) | Jan. 8, 2010 , 10:00 AM

Over the past few years, I've reviewed and critiqued numerous personal statements from students who were applying to graduate programs, internships, medical school, and other professional degree programs. That experience led me to write a previous article, "[Sell Yourself – Guidance for Developing Your Personal Statement for Graduate School Applications](#)," in which I discussed the importance of a well-crafted personal statement. In this follow-up, I wish to share some common challenges that many students face when writing their personal statements and to make some suggestions on how to overcome those challenges.

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### Address your audience

Without knowing whom you're addressing, your message could be misconstrued or completely lost. So who actually reads your personal statement? Typically, faculty members in the program to which you're applying, and possibly some current graduate students, constitute the review committee and review your application materials. Because a personal statement is a form of persuasive writing, you'll need to convince the committee that you should be accepted. Important elements of persuasive writing include a strong thesis statement (explaining why they should accept you), examples to support the thesis statement (i.e., your skills, knowledge, and experiences), the ability to address your audience professionally, logical organization, and attention to detail (i.e., accuracy and correct spelling and grammar).

## **Address all aspects of the essay prompt**

Most personal-statement prompts are pretty similar. Applicants are prompted to address the same handful of issues, including, for example, their previous research experiences and their motivation for applying to a particular program. But there's at least a possibility that a program you're applying to will ask for something very different from the norm, in which case some of the advice that follows might not apply.

In any case, be sure to address all the points and questions raised in the application directions. These prompts can include generic, open-ended "Submit a statement of purpose" or something more detailed such as "Include a personal statement which describes how your experiences have prepared you for graduate study, your objectives, career goals, initial research interests, and why you think there is a good fit between your objectives and our program." Some prompts may also ask you to list specific members of the faculty whom you see yourself working with, so spend time reading through the program's Web site and identify those members who match your research interests. Investigate their research niche, skim some of their articles, and determine how their research aligns with your research interests.

It follows that the personal statement will be different for each program you apply to. A good approach is to create a core personal statement and tailor it for each of the different programs to which you apply.

## **Describe your research concisely**

A cohesive description of the research you're engaged in, how you contributed to the research project, and the broader impacts and context of the research results are at the core of the personal statement. Iterating these points is crucial for convincing admissions committees that you know how to conduct research and communicate it clearly. Leave out details such as the precise amount of buffer you added to your test tube. Focus instead on the basic research question, the proposed hypothesis, the results, whether the results supported/refuted the hypothesis, and next steps in the research. Show that you understand the "big picture" of your research and how it might translate to graduate study.

## **Show you're ready**

Through the personal statement, you should be able to convince the committee that you are ready for the rigors of graduate school. Describe the skills and knowledge you have acquired that are applicable to graduate study. Skills can include techniques you've learned in your research or more general, translatable skills such as problem-solving and critical thinking. Knowledge is not just the facts that you learned throughout your coursework; rather, think about the range of courses you've taken and what you learned that helped define your area of interest for graduate study. Highlight the advanced courses you completed as an undergraduate, your performance in these courses, and how the experience of going through those courses will help you as a graduate student. Courses that included a research component, a reading of primary literature in your field, and a critical analysis and synthesis of current scientific discoveries will be most advantageous. Don't just write about why a program is best for you but convince the committee that you have something to offer the program in return.

You will have to do some personal soul searching about why you want to go to graduate school. If you cannot convince yourself, then you won't be able to convince the admissions committee in your personal statement. Graduate school is not a default; it is a commitment that you should be willing to make if it is the right next step for you. Taking time off, working in a job that is close to your field to gain experience, or taking an advanced course may help solidify your decision to go to graduate school. These opportunities will also provide even more fodder to include in your personal statement when you are ready to apply.

## Use targeted examples

Ensure that everything you include in your statement is relevant and that all of the ideas are connected and make sense to the reader. If it does not relate to your specific case, don't include it. One pitfall many students can fall into is providing a laundry list of activities or a reiteration of his or her resumé. Others take the "personal" in personal statement too literally and recount, in excruciating detail, how, for example, a family member's cancer diagnosis turned into motivation to pursue a degree in biomedical research. Personal stories can be compelling if they're real and well written. However, this takes skill and careful writing so as not to deter the reader from your main point – to convince the review committee that you're ready for their graduate program. We all have people and experiences that motivate our paths in life, but don't spend half the personal statement focused on these motivations. It is important to highlight and expand on a few specific examples from your experiences rather than recount everything you've done. Be selective and specific. Only write about experiences that directly relate to your pursuit of graduate education or a scientific career.

## Organization and flow

Employ your best writing skills when writing your personal statement. Spelling and grammar, structure, organization, and transitions are all important; you want your personal statement to be intelligible and easy to read. When you ask others to provide feedback on your personal statement, ask them if the organization is logical. Are the transitions between statements and paragraphs executed well? Is there any extraneous information that could be deleted? What information is missing that needs to be added?

There are many "readability" analyses that can be used to evaluate the flow of your essay. These include the Flesch Reading Ease score and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score, among others, and are usually accessible as part of word processing programs. These programs calculate a score or grade level for your writing based on numerous characteristics, including sentence length, complexity of word choice, and so on. However, these algorithms are not the best judge of your writing style and effectiveness. I would suggest visiting a writing center, if your campus has one, to have the essay checked by a skilled writer/editor and employing noncomputerized tools, such as the after-the-fact outline, which students can do themselves. (It's exactly what it sounds like; take what you've written, generate an outline from it, then use that to determine what's not needed, what's missing, what's in the wrong order, and where explicit transitions may be needed.)

Balance your style, word choice, and sentence length to appease a broader range of readers. Include the details from your discipline without excessive jargon. Jargon usually makes a reader work harder than they should. Remember, admissions committees have to read many (sometimes hundreds) other essays besides yours, so make it clear and easy to understand without dumbing down the details.

## Conclusion

This article is not intended to provide a formulaic approach to writing the personal statement but rather provides more detailed expectations for an effective personal statement. Remember that writing is a process. Take time to solidify your ideas, refine, and rewrite ... and rewrite again. Make your personal statement persuasive and professional.