Writing Effective Personal Statements

Purpose: A personal statement, required for most grants and fellowships, is not simply a summary of your background and current professional experiences. Rather, it provides a coherent narrative about who you are as a researcher, persuades reviewers that you are a qualified candidate who fulfills the funding agency’s mission, and briefly outlines your career goals. Personal statements can draw on personal history, family background, and intellectual development as well as your educational, leadership, and cultural experiences to describe the motivations that drive your proposed research project and other professional endeavors.

General Guidelines:

- **Adhere strictly to all application requirements:** Most personal statements are no more than one or two pages and have specific formatting and content guidelines. Read all application materials in very close detail and tailor your materials accordingly.

- **Show, don’t tell:** Concrete examples of your passion, commitment, skills, content knowledge, and experience are the most persuasive evidence of your capability to complete your proposed project. For example, don’t simply say, “I am passionate about the environment.” Instead, demonstrate your passion: “I have spent three years working as a volunteer during Earth Day events. I conduct youth workshops and lead nature walks, introducing children to the ecosystem of a frog pond and the impact their presence has on the natural world.”

- **Avoid apologetic or pitiable stories:** It’s okay to address personal and professional obstacles you’ve overcome, such as a lack of experience in the field, a poor GPA, or a nontraditional route to academia. However, you do not write to evoke pity from reviewers nor emphasize what you perceive as “flaw.” Instead, you want the focus to remain on your ability to overcome obstacles and your enthusiasm to complete your proposed project. For example, if a grandparent’s death greatly influenced your choice to pursue medical research, discuss this event as motivation for your research and professional activities, not primarily as a family tragedy.

- **Craft a coherent story about you and your research:** Your personal statement must be easy for reviewers to follow. Coherence can be achieved in two ways:
  - Do not simply describe events. Instead, explain how those events motivate you. Maybe your science teachers cultivated your curiosity for the natural world, but your “Aha!” moment came when you were working at a small science institute and watched a scientist field questions from visiting elementary school students. You then realized that research and teaching are inseparable, because of the significant people in your life (i.e. teachers) who led you to science.
  - All examples should tie into a larger story of how you formulated your goals and what you’ve done to achieve them. For instance, your examples concerning how you became interested in your field could highlight significant projects you have undertaken, research skills you developed, major insights you attained (both in terms of content knowledge or professional skills), and opportunities you created for yourself and others.

- **Connect your personal narrative to the funding organization’s mission:** All award-granting organizations emphasize their particular priorities in mission statements. Using the language from these statements in your own essay enables reviewers to understand how your
work embodies their goals. For example, if the institution asks you to talk about your work’s “broader impacts,” echo their phrasing when framing your work: “My research on the neurological symptoms of adolescents diagnosed with clinical depression has a broader impact not only for our understanding of brain chemistry as a whole, but for understanding the recent increase in depression- and anxiety-related disorders among young adults. My findings may suggest viable methods to address this issue among pre-teen girls.” Avoid sweeping generalizations (“this project will cure all adolescent depression!”), but do emphasize the impact you foresee for your research.

• **Convey your commitment to the field, your values and priorities for research in your field, and your vision for your future career in that field:** Your evidence of your commitment must be grounded in your experiences: what have you already done and what do you plan to do in the future that demonstrates your commitment to your field? Provide one or two concrete examples of your actions, and then explain the significance of those actions. Consider the following example:
  
  o “As an ethnomusicologist, I understand ethnographic work as an opportunity to invest my efforts for the common good (value). While a pragmatic interest both in professional skills and a community-oriented career motivated me to earn a master’s degree in education, I wanted to study music and culture—specifically, situations that included both compelling social dilemmas and inspiring performance works (value, vision). My research on contemporary political activism in indigenous Mapuche communities in Chile examines music as a site of articulation among performance, sound, and social struggle. It also satisfies my intellectual curiosity and pragmatic concerns (value, commitment, vision). As a lecturer and researcher at Universidad de Santiago de Chile, I engage with Chilean musicians, scholars and students on these issues daily (commitment, vision). My own writing (in refereed journals, a dissertation, and eventually a book) deepens a general understanding of the importance of creative work to the wellbeing of communities (vision).”

• **Proofread:** Make sure that your final statement is free of typos, grammatical and punctuation errors, and has enough white space to make your essay easy-to-read.

**Additional Resources:**

• Chronicle of High Education fellowship application advice from a fellowship winner: [http://chronicle.com/article/How-to-Win-a-Graduate/46782](http://chronicle.com/article/How-to-Win-a-Graduate/46782)

• Personal statement advice from Academic Admissions Officers: [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/03/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/03/)

• Advice for writing personal statements from the Purdue Online Writing Lab: [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/)