

Writing the Personal Statement/Letter of Intent/Statement of Purpose

When applying for graduate school or to a professional program, there is a good chance you'll be asked to write a personal statement, letter of intent, or a statement of purpose. These are all very similar documents that serve the same purpose for graduate committees: these statements provide additional information about a candidate that is not found elsewhere in the application packet. This statement is your opportunity to discuss experiences and influences that have impacted you academically or intellectually, and which have led you to graduate study.

The personal statement/letter of intent/statement of purpose can be difficult to write because you're discussing personal history through a scholarly lens. Many applicants wonder how much of their personal background is appropriate to include. How does one convey academic successes or strong personal characteristics without conceit? How does one address gaps or discrepancies in the academic record?

Below you will find general advice for writing this document, as well as questions to ask yourself before and as you're writing. These questions will help you develop your "angle" and structure your writing.

For UNM Letter/Statement of Intent guidelines, please see:

<https://grad.unm.edu/resources/gs-forms/letter-of-intent.html>

General Advice for Personal Statements *(adapted from Purdue OWL)*

Follow guidelines provided by your school or program

If your program provides guidelines for writing the statement/letter, always follow them. Some programs leave this task entirely up to you to figure out, while others may provide general advice or ask that you respond to specific questions. This means that you will not be using the same statement for every school/program to which you've applied. You should tailor your statement/letter for each application. If one school calls it a letter of intent and another school calls it statement of purpose, use the same language.

Answer the questions that are asked

If the school or program asks you to address particular questions, be sure to answer them explicitly. Do not use another personal statement that you think touches upon what the school wants—do exactly what is requested and be sure your answer fits the question being asked.

Tell a story

If there are no specific questions, think in terms of demonstrating your qualities or influences through concrete experiences. How is your story unique? Do you tell your story in a lively way that will make you memorable to the graduate committee *and* show that you are the best candidate for their program? Through telling your story, you will also avoid the use of clichés that are generally boring and don't really say much about a person.

Be specific

Don't state that you would make an excellent doctor unless you can back it up with specific examples that show why this is so. Your desire to become a lawyer, engineer, or anthropologist should be logical; the result of specific experiences that are described in your statement. Your desire to pursue graduate study should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.

Find an angle

To set yourself apart from other applicants, finding an angle or hook is vital to your statement. The angle is the theme of your story and dictates how you tell your story. Finding your angle can be one of the most challenging aspects of writing the personal statement. Refer to the "Questions to Ask Yourself" to help you think about your angle.

Concentrate on your opening paragraph

The opening paragraph is what grabs the attention of readers (or loses their attention). Your opening paragraph becomes the framework or roadmap for the rest of your story. Revise and edit your opening paragraph, and be sure to review it once you've completed a draft.

Share what you know

The middle part of your essay should detail your interest and experience in your particular field. Often, applicants have little or no knowledge of the nuts and bolts of the profession or field they hope to enter. Don't be this person. Do the necessary research so you can convey what you know about the field. Refer to experiences (work, research), classes, conversations with people in the field, seminars you've attended that connect to the career you want and why you're suited for it.

Don't include some subjects

Although it's often called a "personal" statement, there are some things you should not include. References to experiences or accomplishments in high school are generally not a good idea because they are too far-removed from your current position. However, if you had a research experience in high school that *directly* relates to your graduate study, you may want to include it. Additionally, avoid mentioning controversial subjects (religious beliefs, political biases).

Write well

In addition to conveying who you are and your motivations for pursuing graduate study, the statement also indicates your writing skills and command of language. Graduate committees want to see a statement that is interesting, clear, and concise. Be sure to have others proofread your statement and always use spell check. Adhere to word limits and spacing requirements.

Before Writing the Personal Statement

You're about to sit down and write your personal statement/letter of intent/statement of purpose. The program you're applying to doesn't have any specific questions to address and you don't really know how to begin. Start by thinking about these questions and jot down answers that you can flesh out into a full essay.

- **What are your motivations for pursuing graduate study?** If your answer is career or salary advancement, frame your motivations as career goals and discuss how this degree/program will help you achieve your future plans. Discussing your future plans is a great way to show a graduate committee that you're dedicated to completing the degree and are thinking about next steps.
- **How did you become interested in this field and what do you know about it?** Answering this question will help you convey that you are well-suited to this discipline and will allow you to discuss influences and insights you have gained through your interest in the field.
- **What is unique, impressive, or distinctive about you?** Often, we don't think of our life story as being particularly interesting, so consider people or events that have shaped you or led you to graduate study. Think about obstacles or hardships you have overcome and how you managed to rise above them, or what you learned from these experiences. Perhaps you didn't overcome something, but you developed resiliency. Reflect on the details of your life that could help a graduate committee better understand you or that will set you apart from other applicants.
- **Maybe you don't have many obstacles or unique events in your life, but you have a lot of workforce experience.** What leadership, managerial, or interpersonal skills have you learned or developed through your work experience? How can these skills transfer to success in graduate study?
- **Do you have certain personal characteristics or soft skills that make you a strong candidate for success in your discipline?** Rather than stating that you are persistent or analytical, think about specific experiences that demonstrate these characteristics. Sharing a story that illustrates these traits provides concrete examples that will help a committee remember you and also helps you avoid boastfulness.
- **Are there any discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain?** Did you have a bad semester in undergrad but continually improved after that point? Or maybe you didn't do so well on the admission exam despite having stellar grades in classes. The personal statement is where you want to address these issues or discuss other aspects of yourself that do not show up elsewhere in your application.
- **Why are you a stronger candidate than others for graduate study?** The goal is to provide the admissions committee with compelling, demonstrated reasons why you should be a part of their department. This includes why you would be more successful in graduate school and in your career than other applicants.