

UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

GRAD SCHOOL APPLICATION STATEMENTS

Graduate and professional schools often require some sort of written statement—often called a “statement of purpose,” “personal statement,” or “letter of intent”—as a part of the application. Some statements require rather specific information: for example, the applicant's intended area of study within a graduate field. Still others are quite unstructured, leaving the applicant free to address a wide range of matters. The importance of the statement varies from school to school and from field to field.

Determine your purpose in writing the statement

Usually the purpose is to persuade the admissions committee that you are an applicant who should be chosen. Whatever its purpose, the content must be presented in a manner that will give coherence to the whole statement.

Pay attention to the purpose throughout the statement so that any extraneous material is left out. Pay attention to the audience (the committee) throughout the statement. Remember that your audience is made up of professionals in their field, and you are not going to tell them how they should act or what they should be. In this context, at least, you are the amateur.

Determine the content of your statement

Be sure to answer any questions fully. Analyze the questions or guidance statements for the essay completely and answer all parts. Usually graduate and professional schools are interested in the following matters, although the form of the question(s) and the responses may vary:

- *Your purpose in graduate study.* Think this through before you try to answer the question.
- *The area of study in which you wish to specialize.* Learn about the field in detail so that you are able to state your preferences using the language of the field.
- *Your intended future use of your graduate study.* Include your career goals and future plans.
- *Your unique preparation and fitness for study in the field.* Correlate your academic background with your extracurricular experience to show how they unite to make you a special candidate.
- *Any problems or inconsistencies in your records, such as a bad semester.* Explain in a positive manner. Since this is a rebuttal argument, follow up with a positive statement of your abilities. In some cases, it may be more appropriate to discuss this outside of the personal statement.
- *Any special conditions that are not revealed elsewhere in the application, such as a significant (35 hour per week) workload outside of school.* This, too, should be followed with a positive statement about yourself and your future.
- *You may be asked, “Why do you wish to attend this school?”* Research the school and describe its special appeal to you.
- *Above all, this statement should contain information about you as a person.* They know nothing about you unless you tell them. *You* are the subject of the statement.

Determine your approach and style of the statement

There is no “perfect way to write a statement.” There is only the one that best fits you.

DO’s:

- 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 “academese.”
- Form conclusions that explain the value and meaning of your experience, such as what you learned about yourself, your field, and your future goals. Draw your conclusions from the evidence your life provides.
- Be specific. Document your conclusions with specific instances. See below a list of general words and phrases to avoid using without explanation.
- Get to the point early on and catch the attention of the reader.
- Limit its length to two pages or less. In some instances it may be longer, depending on the school's instructions.

DON'T’s:

- Use the “what I did with my life” approach.
- Use the “I’ve always wanted to be a [fill in the blank]” approach.
- Use a catalog of achievements. A list of what you have done says nothing about you as a person.
- Lecture the reader. For example, you should not write a statement such as "Communication skills are important in this field." Any graduate admissions committee member knows that.

Words and phrases to avoid without explanation

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

Where to go for help

- If you need help figuring out what to write, make an appointment with a Writing Center tutor and/or visit the Hiatt Career Center.
- Once you have written a draft (or two or three), show it to people you trust such as faculty, family, friends, letter of recommendation writers, etc. The best people to review your statement are those who know you well and who have excellent writing skills.
- Read samples of successful admissions essays online or in published collections.

Credit: Adapted from UC Berkeley Career Center, 2020, <https://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/GradStatement>.

The Brandeis University Writing Program, including the Writing Center, First-Year Writing, and Writing in the Majors, offers support for writing throughout the community, including undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and staff.

For more information, see www.brandeis.edu/UWP or write to UWP@brandeis.edu.