

WRITING YOUR PERSONAL ESSAY (STATEMENT OF PURPOSE)

The personal essay is your best opportunity to convey a sense of who you are, your academic and intellectual development, what is important to you, and why you would be an outstanding graduate student. Many of the other applicants are likely to have similar academic credentials, but none has your *particular* experience, background, ideas, or outlook. The admissions committee is looking for reasons to accept you, and you can make a strongly favorable impression with a thoughtful, well written essay.

There is no one formula for a successful essay, but every personal statement should be:

- ▶ **Honest:** Never misrepresent your record or experiences.
- ▶ **To the point:** Respond to the particulars of the question and make every sentence matter.
- ▶ **Specific:** Avoid vague statements, clichés, and sweeping generalities.
- ▶ **True to yourself:** Trust your ideas, experiences, and perspective. Admissions committees have little regard for generic, “assembly line” essays.
- ▶ **Letter perfect:** Make sure there are no spelling, punctuation, usage, or grammar mistakes. Don’t give the committee any reason to question your capabilities, care, or commitment.

Here is a brief outline of the essay writing process, adapted from the more comprehensive Guidebook available from Professor Bobrow.

Getting Started

1. **Read the question carefully.** It is absolutely essential to follow the assignment/instructions for each question, which means responding to the particulars as they are asked and conforming to word/page restrictions.
2. **Interview yourself.** For purposes of the personal essay, there are generally three types of experience: academic, work (including internships teaching or tutoring), and personal. By far the most important is your academic experience, preparation, and goals. You should ask yourself about your experiences, achievements, and goals in each area, focusing not on *what* you have done, but on *how* and *why* your experiences and achievements make you a strong candidate. In other words, committees are not looking for a recitation of the facts of your academic experience and personal history. They want to know about the significance of your experience as it relates to your career goals and graduate school. Don’t focus on what you studied; focus on what it meant to you, what you learned that contributes to your qualifications for graduate school, and how it

helped shape your interests and professional commitment. It is also important to remember that the only aspects of your personal experience in which they are interested are those areas that relate directly to your academic, intellectual, and professional development.

3. Analyze the results of your self-interview. Determine which responses, ideas, and topics are most important and show you in the most positive light.

4. Get another perspective. Show your questions and responses to people who know you well either personally or professionally.

5. Make use of academic resources. Talk to Professor Bobrow or another advisor, and to professors who know your work. Get feedback on the material you have and ask for sample essays from successful candidates.

Shaping Your Personal Statement

1. Choose which responses to your self-interview you plan to use. You may also wish to write a preliminary outline at this point.

2. Write a preliminary draft. Your focus at this stage should be exclusively on content. Try not to edit yourself too much; you can always revise and edit later. But do try to avoid empty generalities and stock phrases in favor of specifics. Remember, writing is a form of thinking. We often discover what we want to say by putting it on paper.

3. From preliminary draft to second draft. After writing a preliminary draft, assess the material for content, focus, and clarity. Try to objectify, to step back from the material and begin to put yourself in the position of a reader. You should also begin to think seriously about the sequence and general structure of your essay. Pay particular attention to your opening paragraph, which should immediately draw the readers' attention to your "story" and make them want to know more about you. It can be effective to begin your essay with a poignant, compelling anecdote, but if you don't have one, don't force it.

4. From second draft to final draft. Assess the draft again for content, focus, and clarity. Now also examine the draft for paragraph unity, coherent sequence, and transitions. Go back to your self-interview to make sure that you have not omitted essential material. Begin to attend to matters of grammar, punctuation, usage, and spelling. Finally, get feedback from Professor Bobrow or another advisor, professors with whom you've worked closely, and those who will write your letters of recommendation.

5. The final draft. Check again for content, focus, and clarity. Revise and edit as necessary, paying particular attention to structure, grammar, usage, punctuation, and spelling. Finally, proofread the essay several times and have at least one

other reliable reader (a professor, for example) do so as well. It is absolutely essential that your essay be letter perfect.

Remember, there are no short cuts. The personal essay can be the determining factor in whether you are accepted or rejected. Treat it as one of the most important essays you have written and give it all the necessary time and care.