Personal Statements

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Today’s agenda and goals

Agenda
• Discuss personal statements
• Workshop: identifying & constructing characteristics of strong writing
• Write your seed statement

Goals
• Basic understanding of personal statements
• Gain a systematic approach to writing personal statements
• Leave with a foundation for your statement
Ice breaker!

Turn to the person next to you and introduce yourselves to one another with:

• Your name

• A fact about yourself or your life that makes you distinctive
Two minute quick-write

• Write down an opportunity (graduate program, research internship, fellowship, etc) that you are likely to apply to in the future.

• Write a few sentences about why you want this opportunity.
Never the twain shall meet?

Take a look at:
- The interesting fact you introduced yourself with
- The opportunity you just wrote about

Can you imagine them going together in an essay that markets you?
What is a personal statement?

• For whom is it written?

• What goes into it?

• What does it accomplish?
Above all, a personal statement is an act of ARGUMENTATION and PERSUASION.

- **Is the argument credible?**
- **Is the author credible, knowledgeable, reliable & trustworthy?**
- **Is the argument logical?**
- **Is the evidence sound?**
- **Specific?**
- **Accurate?**
- **Unified?**
- **Representative?**
- **Does it have emotional appeal?**
- **Does it appeal to readers’ needs?**
- **Values? & Attitudes?**
Above all, a personal statement is….

a narrative, not a litany.
Balancing Act

Your Audience
- Program mission
- Program offerings
- Expectations for participants

You
- Your goals
- Your perspective
- Your experiences
- Your qualifications
- Your potential success
The “shoulds” of personal statements

• Answer the questions asked
• Be honest and confident
• Introduce yourself on a personal level
• Highlight relevant experience(s), skills, and qualifications
• Be realistic about your impact & potential contributions
• Focus on 2-4 main topics that demonstrate how your attributes align with the opportunity (E.g. intellect, leadership, compassion, etc.).
The “should nots” of personal statements

Do not:

• Use empty, vague words
• Use clichés or gimmicks
• Try to be funny
• ‘Other’ people, groups, or places different from your own
• Use savior rhetoric
• Assume that the readers share the same views
  • Religion, politics, controversial scientific positions
• Assume you know what the committee wants to hear
• Be long-winded
Are these lines effective?

• “I have known I wanted to be a doctor ever since I was eight years old.”

• “My experience abroad made me a more globally-minded citizen.”

• “Volunteering with refugees made me realize how fortunate I am.”

• "I realized I need to 'be the change I wish to see in the world,' as Gandhi said."
Let’s look at some examples
Example 1 – Graduate program at Cambridge

Discuss with your neighbor:

• Is the statement effective overall? Why or why not?

• What is the writer’s central argument?

• What positive attributes do you feel they possess?

• Are you persuaded on their:
  • Skills and qualifications?
  • Commitment to their field?
  • Alignment with the opportunity?
  • Ability to have an impact?
Example 1 – Graduate program at Cambridge

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Do you want to root for them?
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  • Commitment to their field?
  • Alignment with the opportunity?
  • Ability to have an impact?
Example 2 – International Research Grant

Discuss with your neighbor:

• Is the statement effective overall? Why or why not?

• What is the writer’s central argument?

• What positive attributes do you feel they possess?

• Are you persuaded on their:
  • Skills and qualifications?
  • Commitment to their field?
  • Alignment with the opportunity?
  • Ability to have an impact?

Do you want to root for them?
What are some key differences you notice between the two examples?
“Leave them singing your tune.”

- Professor Colin Flint
  (Richelle’s PhD advisor)
Let’s write!
Getting started

• Analyze the question(s) & audience

• Research the program

• Take a personal inventory
  • What are your goals, values, and motivations?
  • What experiences have shaped and prepared you for this opportunity?
  • How does this opportunity align with your desired trajectory?

• Give yourself time for multiple drafts (+/-10 drafts)
## Audience analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who are the faculty?</th>
<th><strong>Sources:</strong> CVs, webpages, key outlets for their work (journals, conferences)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions:</strong> Where did they do their PhD? Where do they publish and present their research? Have they had many grad students, and what kinds of dissertations do they tend to produce?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kind of research do they do?</td>
<td><strong>Sources:</strong> Recent articles and conference proceedings, collaborations on ResearchGate, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions:</strong> What are their primary methods and theoretical frameworks? Who are they citing? What are their key sources of funding? Which research trajectories seem most imp.?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How is the lab organized?</td>
<td><strong>Sources:</strong> Lab websites, webpages of grad students and postdocs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions:</strong> Do grad students take on leadership roles in the lab? What are those roles?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will I have to/get to teach?</td>
<td><strong>Sources:</strong> Grad students’ webpages; syllabi for core courses; you may also have to ask!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is this lab/dept. connected to other units?</td>
<td><strong>Sources:</strong> Online listing of research centers at the university; individual lab/dept. websites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions:</strong> What other resources would be available to you at this university? Who might key colleagues be outside of your department/lab group?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who are the other key personnel in the dept.?</td>
<td><strong>Sources:</strong> Department website; individual faculty webpages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions:</strong> Who might your other committee members be? Where might you find additional funding opportunities?</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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Taking a personal inventory

Turning résumé into narrative!

• What is distinctive about you or your life story? (Family background, upbringing, education, etc.)
  • How do these details set you apart and help the committee to understand you on a personal level?

• What is an experience that sparked or reaffirmed your interest in your field?

• How have you learned about your field? (Coursework, independent reading, research, networking, etc.)
  • What key insights have you gained about your field? Can you critique it?
    How would you like to shape the field throughout your career?
Taking a personal inventory

Turning résumé into narrative!

• If you have worked a lot through college, how has this work contributed to your growth?

• Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles in your life?

• What evidence can you provide for your skills? (Leadership, communicative, analytical, interpersonal, etc.)

• What evidence can you provide for your positive attributes? (Persistence, intellect, creativity, compassion, etc.)
Quick-write: One sentence

Go back to the opportunity you wrote about earlier.

• Why do you need to do this program?
Quick-write: Two minutes

Take a look at your personal inventory.

Write a few sentences:

What 3-4 main ideas, examples, main points, etc., should you include in your personal statement?
Questions?