

Grad School Writing Statements

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Office of Undergraduate Research

Who am I?

- I am a professor in the Biology department
- I have been teaching at CSUDH since 2017
- I teach evolution, genetics, statistics, and writing
- I study how lizards and desert plants evolve
- In my free time, I spend time with my family & dogs, read books, sew, and do CrossFit

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After today, you will:

- Understand the role of writing in graduate admissions
- Be able to explain the difference between a personal statement and a statement of purpose
- Have brainstormed your personal statement
- Know the next steps to complete your personal statement

The role of writing in graduate admissions

When you apply to grad school, you will submit ...

- Grades and/or transcript
- Letters of recommendation (typically 2 or 3)
- Resume or CV
- Test scores (e.g., GREs)
- Personal statement (at some schools)
- Statement of purpose (at some schools)
- Diversity statement (at some schools)

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These allow you to “talk”
directly to the admissions
committee!!!

Your audience is the admissions committee

- Admissions committees typically consist of faculty and administrators at the program to which you are applying
- Committees can often be quite small (just 3 people) or much larger
- People on the admissions committee often have been on such committee for years
- The committee reads applications and provides recommendations on acceptance

Your audience is likely ...

Experts in their field	So nerding out is totally okay!
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Experts in their field	So nerding out is totally okay!
Tired	So make sure your writing is clear and easy to read!
In a rush	So make sure your writing is concise!
A little bored	So make sure your writing feels unique and specific to you!

Personal statement

vs.

Statement of Purpose

How are they different?

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Specificity	Can be tailored but does not need to be	Should be tailored to the programs at specific schools

One way to think about it

Your personal statement explains the journey you took to get where you are

Your statement of purpose explains what you will study in graduate school & why you are ready

To understand the difference better ...

- For the next five minutes, write down all the experiences that have prepared you for graduate school
- Think globally. Include experiences like:
 - Personal experiences, including challenges you have overcome
 - Work experiences (this can be work not directly related to your graduate goals)
 - Class-based research
 - Research (independent or with faculty member)
 - Volunteering
 - School activities and sports
 - Hobbies
 - Interactions with mentors / shadowing
- I challenge you to:
 - Write down 5 - 8 experiences
 - Write at least one example for most categories

To understand the difference better ...

Now, please share one of your experiences.

You can either share by sending it to me as a private Zoom chat message or by sending it to everyone as a Zoom chat message.

Which experience should be discussed where?

Personal Statement	Statement of Purpose
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• sister to an autistic brother• has a loud house that can make it hard to focus• fast food employment• long beach city cleanups• worked as WN at a LA hospital during COVID19• physical therapy clinic w/ a wide range of patients	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• UCLA summer internship on polymers• mentored by professors on campus on their research programs• mentorship from a former professor → research• internship at a non-profit → project was science related• class paper on forensics

A note

- Most schools will require a personal statement ONLY
- Some will require a statement of purpose AND a personal statement

If schools only require a personal statement, it will be a mash up of a more academic narrative and a more personal narrative

Brainstorming my personal
statement

Let's read an example personal statement

- This from a DH alumna who agreed to share her statement with other DH students
- I have dropped a PDF in the chat
- As you read, highlight sentences that stand out to you
- I will give you five minutes

Personal Statement

There was difficulty breathing and wheezing in my son's chest. I found him sweating and pale as his stomach showed the hard muscle contractions from his breathing. He looked confused as he laid in my arms. All I heard as I ran into the ER was screaming nurses asking for me to hand over my son. Right away, a tiny yet powerful injection of prednisone made all my son's pain go away. Later that night, I found out that I had just witnessed my son's first asthma attack. I repeatedly replay that night and sometimes wonder what would have happened if this medication did not exist. It was then that my initial interest in how drugs interact with the human body began. Pursuing a doctoral degree in pharmacy will allow me to give back to my community and continue to save lives by educating patients on how to properly take their medications.

My first step to pursuing a career in pharmacy began back in 2003. I became pregnant at a very young age. My main career goal became supporting my family financially. Yet, I wasn't ready to let go of my dream of becoming a pharmacist. It was then when I decided to enroll in the pharmacy program at Bryman College. After being in the program for a year, I obtained the pharmacy technician license to practice in California. This program allowed me to enter the pharmacy field, fulfilling my personal responsibilities while pursuing my next career stage. Soon after, I attended a local community college to get the prerequisites needed to apply to pharmacy school. The courses that I took helped me understand the complexity of the human body. After completing my prerequisites, I wanted to be a more competent pharmacy student, so I decided to pursue my bachelor's degree in Molecular Biology. I transferred to California State University Dominguez Hills in 2019. I have dedicated 18 years to acquiring knowledge to facilitate my career as a professional pharmacist, which has required restless nights, time from my family, and overcoming feelings of hopelessness. Yet, I refuse to give up and continue to work towards my goal of being a pharmacist.

While pursuing my degree, I also worked as a trained pharmacy technician at Kaiser Permanente for almost ten years now. This job is one of the reasons I chose to continue pursuing my goal of becoming a pharmacist. Every time I put my initials on a patient's medication label, I get a sense of joy knowing that I am saving a life. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, many pharmacies within Kaiser Permanente were closed down. My pharmacy was one of the few that remained open, which meant our prescription and staff volume doubled overnight. It was hard at first with so many different personalities coming together to start working as a team. Still, we all managed to put our differences aside, worked as a team, and even had some record-breaking days. Working with a team one can trust and depend on is priceless. One night, while packaging a medication for a member, I noticed that two drugs, Ibuprofen 800mg, and Metformin 850mg, were mislabeled. I took the initiative and fixed the error. After packaging the medication, I got the pharmacist's final approval and sent it out to the patient. Together with my supervisor, we avoided a major medical mishap. My days with Kaiser Permanente have shown me that a pharmacist does not just dispense pills. A pharmacist plays an essential role in patient's lives as

specifics

What works about this personal statement?

attention grabber

hook

Introduction was very good

well structured

easy to understand

good thesis

smooth transitions

evocative + specific

you are left wanting to know more

The structure of this statement is ideal

- Introduction (one paragraph)
 - A story that grabs the reader's attention ← hook
 - A strong thesis
- Body paragraphs
 - Specific examples that showcase why the applicant is prepared for graduate school
 - Organization of this can take many forms but chronological is typically easiest to follow
- Ending paragraph (one paragraph)
 - What you hope to do in graduate school (and after)
 - This should be specific to a given school (e.g., USC vs UCLA)

A personal statement should connect your experiences to your future.

Experience	What it taught us	Why it will help us in graduate school
pregnant at a young age	perseverance (18 years)	graduate school is hard, perseverance will help
pharmacy tech during COVID-19	communication organized detail oriented	→ pharmacy requires all these skills
under grad degree in Biology		

Your turn: go back to your list of experiences

We will be fleshing out these experiences to help us further brainstorm our personal statement.

Experience	What it taught us	Why it will help us in graduate school
LUN at hospital →	→	→
research off-campus →	→	→
living w/ an autistic brother →	→	→

One last brainstorming activity

Answer this question: why do you want to go to graduate school?

Some notes

1. Try to write at least 3 different answers to this question
2. Make your answers as specific as possible

For example: “I want to help people” is not specific. “I want to help invent new synthetic skin technologies to help people with burn injuries” is.

Once you have your answers ...

- Look back at your table of experiences
- Which experiences connect to your reasons for wanting to go to graduate school?

Your next steps

Suggested next steps (in order)

1. Continue brainstorming and reflecting
2. Identify if your target programs need a personal statement or a personal statement & a statement of purpose
 - Also identify word counts!
3. Draft your statements
4. Get feedback on your statements & revise
 - Writing Center: <https://www.csudh.edu/writing-center/>
 - Research & academic mentors
 - Peers applying to similar programs
5. Start tailoring your statements to each program

Other resources

- My favorite guides are from Purdue because they give an overview and provide examples: [personal statement](#) & [statement of purpose](#)
- From [MIT](#), personal statements that have been annotated to show why they are effective
- An [online workshop](#) from University of Minnesota that guides you through writing your personal statement
- From [Transylvania University](#), example statements and a resource guide
- A very useful [brainstorming guide](#) from UCLA