

Writing an Effective Personal Statement in the Sciences

by Adriana Cherskov

The Introduction (usually 1 paragraph):

I take out my stack of folders from my desk and remove the top one. This will make number ten today. I struggle to hold back a yawn as I open the manilla folder but refrain from getting up to make more tea. I have already finished two cups and doubt that a third would make much difference. Besides, I have to finish reviewing this application for the student-run free clinic by the end of the day. Unfortunately, my brain doesn't cooperate, and as soon I start reading, my eyes glaze over. Wait, haven't I read this one already?

Begin with a **hook**. This will not only engage that tired reviewer or admissions committee member, but also your first-person point-of-view will get them on your side. Often, this will be a story, maybe even told in the present tense (see above), engaging the reader and showcasing some key characteristic or relevant lesson that led you to this application.

End with your **thesis statement**. Yes, thesis. The personal statement is really just an essay, much like those you're familiar with from other assignments. The purpose of most essays is generally to provide evidence that will back a claim or stance, stated in the thesis statement. Likewise, in your personal statement, you are providing compelling evidence for why you should be admitted to a particular program, school, or job. Your thesis is just the one-liner (sometimes two-liner) summary for why you're a good candidate, keeping in mind any other specific questions included in the prompt.

Note: *It's often easier to write this thesis statement after you've already outlined your body paragraphs and evidence (see "The Body").*

The Body (usually 3-5 paragraphs):

Each body paragraph should focus on only **one** main idea. This idea can be relatively broad and multifaceted, but it still has to be cohesive. For example, your main idea could be "Research in X's lab." In your paragraph, you might describe what you did and what you learned. But you should not discuss research in X's lab and then go into a short story about how you also did an internship abroad in a different lab. Keep it simple for your reader. Adding multiple points in one paragraph will just add more things for your reader to attend to and keep in working memory, most likely diluting the impact of all your points.

This brings us to the next most important thing—make sure your main point, and a summary of all the points you will discuss in that paragraph, is in the first sentence (i.e. the topic sentence). This way, even someone just skimming your personal statement will get the gist of who you are and what important skills or qualifications you're bringing to the table.

Simple, clear language is key. Especially in the topic sentence. You may have been an English major as an undergrad and are now itching to showcase your literary flourishes, emphasizing subtext and subtlety. This is all well and good, but keep in mind that unless your key point is written out simply as well, that harried admissions officer with twenty other essays they need to read by lunch probably doesn't have the bandwidth to wade through the layers of your work of art. Simple, short sentences, and even blunt repetition, are your friends here.

Finally, a note about **choosing your main ideas** for each paragraph. This will take time and is intricately connected with outlining what you want to say as you are brainstorming. Often a good place to start is the prompt or mission statement of the program you're applying for.

Note: Paste the prompt at the top of your page when writing for easy reference!

If you are applying for a research-oriented program, the prompt might just ask you to expound on your relevant research. In this case, your outline might seem easy—each paragraph's main idea can be a specific research experience. But make sure you're not just listing research experiences as you would on a CV. Rather, you must answer the question, *"why should we pick you?"* (remember your thesis?). Often, this will entail emphasizing your research breadth which helped you make an informed decision about your specialty or highlighting qualities that led you to success in research.

As a result, the topic sentence for your paragraph won't just be:

"Then I went to work in X's lab."

Instead, if your thesis is:

"My experience and passion for Y field will prepare me for a career in X. This program is the first step."

you might say:

*"Deepening my understanding of Y field, I then worked in X's lab."
"My work in X's lab strengthened my passion for Y field."*

If the prompt is broader and more personal, things get a bit trickier. Consider the following approach as you choose your main ideas:

1. List out personal qualities that you think make you a good candidate without worrying about how to phrase anything or if you have space. Again, the mission statement can give you a clue about what qualities the program values and is often a good place to start thinking.

Ex. "I'm experienced," "I'm excited about this career," "hard-working," "compassionate," "team-player"

2. For each quality, think of evidence that you could use to show these qualities. Put down anything and everything you can think of. Later you can prune this list and focus on evidence that is more relevant to your professional career, but this way you won't miss any ideas.
3. Choose 3-4 qualities that you think are most important and that you feel confident explaining. This decision is a personal one, but feel free to discuss with your advisors, family, friends, etc. and keep in mind how much evidence you have from your pre-writing for each of them.
4. Congratulations, you have your main ideas and even some evidence to start writing! Moreover, incorporating this evidence will also help you *"show"* rather than just *"tell"* your main ideas.

The Conclusion (1 paragraph)

Phew, you did it. You went into the rabbit hole of writing about yourself and have emerged relatively unscathed. Alas, you remember that every good essay needs a conclusion. Unfortunately, you don't have anything else you want to add. And you're tired. Oh, so tired. So, you regurgitate (sorry, I mean paraphrase) your thesis from the introduction, add a sentence about how perfect "insert program name" is for you, and call it a day.

And you're in luck, because I would agree that this is a perfectly reasonable conclusion. The only thing I might add, for all those over-achievers out there, is perhaps reference your hook at the beginning, highlighting how you've grown. Also, don't forget to insert program name here.

Parting Thoughts

These are merely suggestions for where to start and how to think of a general structure. I have only been on one application-reading committee for a student-run free-clinic (see introduction—also see what I did there?). However, after writing (too) many personal statements and working with other students as a writing fellow, this is what I've gleaned and hopefully it will make that empty page seem less intimidating when you next have to write about yourself. Just also remember that each personal statement will be unique, so feel free to be creative with structure and content so that it can reflect *you*.

-- Adriana Cherskov