

## WRITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

The graduate school personal statement is your opportunity to convey what you might be like as a future colleague and professional within your discipline. It is your chance to articulate the passion that will make you a motivated scholar and teacher, as well as your familiarity with the field and your potential research interests. An interesting, well-written, and polished personal statement represents the confident, intelligent, and grounded professional you will become.

### *Initial Preparation:*

- Thoroughly research the schools and departments to which you plan to apply. Other than business, law, medical or other professional schools, most graduate programs enroll twenty or fewer students each year. Graduate admissions committees want to know why you are the best fit for their program/department. Each department is unique, and your statement should reflect your knowledge of the department's research strengths.
- Clarify your motivations and goals for pursuing a graduate degree. Keep in mind that graduate school prepares you for a specific profession: why do you want to join that profession?
- Talk to current graduate students and professors about the environment and expectations of the field you want to enter. Consider how your skills and experience have prepared you for success in this field.
- Read recent journal articles and other scholarship in the field that is close to your scholarly interests.

### *Goals for the Personal Statement:*

- Demonstrate your intellectual passion for the field—what thrills or excites you about the research you've done or you would like to do?
- Provide concrete examples of your skills, interests, and previous research in the field, and how they might inform the research you would like to pursue in your graduate studies.
- Show that you are familiar with the procedures and expectations of scholarship and professional training in your field, and that you have the character, qualities and experience to thrive. Use the professional language of the field to describe your scholarly interests.
- Graduate school is extremely challenging—intellectually, emotionally, and financially. Convey that you have the energy and perseverance to succeed through examples of challenges you've faced and how you've overcome them.

### *What to avoid:*

- Cliché: Statements like, "I've always wanted to help people," "I have always loved reading novels," etc., are both overused and uninteresting to graduate admissions committees. Using vague, clichéd phrases to explain your interest in the field undermines the seriousness and professionalism of the scholarly endeavor. Instead, try to provide a specific anecdote that illustrates what sparked and sustains your passion.
- Personal statements can have moments of humor that reflect your character/personality, but the primary purpose isn't to show how clever you are in composing the essay; it's to present yourself as an interesting and potentially inspiring future colleague. For example, writing a humorous piece about how you want to study psychology because you were inspired by watching *The Sopranos* (which might be acceptable for an undergraduate personal statement) wouldn't be useful for the graduate school application.

- Lists of accomplishments: This is what the rest of the application is for. Instead, focus on just one or two experiences that illustrate the qualities and interests that will make you a good potential scholar.

## **Drafting the Personal Statement**

### *Questions to prompt your writing:*

- What event or experience inspired your decision to seriously pursue studies in your field?
- What research, scholarship, or experience in the last few years reflects your future scholarly interests? How does it show your knowledge, skills, and passion about the field?
- What specific line of inquiry or areas of research would you like to pursue as a graduate student/future scholar? Why are those issues of particular interest to you? Why might they be important to the field as a whole?
- What experience illustrates your ability to meet the rigors and challenges of graduate study?

### *General suggestions for organization:*

- Begin with a story: Use the first paragraph to tell a narrative that illustrates your intellectual passion and personal commitment to the field.
- Use the middle section of your essay to focus on your intellectual experience with the field and your goals for future research.
- Conclude with why you would excel in your studies, especially at the particular institution to which you are applying.

### *Revising and polishing your statement:*

- After writing an initial draft, set up an appointment with a Residential College Writing Tutor to discuss the content and organization of the draft.
- Revise the draft and then arrange a meeting with a professor/mentor in the field to look over your statement and offer suggestions.
- Revise your draft again and meet with a Residential College Writing Tutor to polish the essay in terms of structure, style, and grammar.

### *Other things to keep in mind:*

- Tailor each statement to the question asked by each graduate school.
- Tailor each statement to reflect your knowledge of that particular program and professors. For example, is there an archive at the university that you would like to take advantage of? Are there particular laboratories or specialties among the graduate faculty that would give you an opportunity to pursue your interests?