

Career Development Centre

Personal Statements/ Letters of Intent

When you apply to graduate schools/professional programs, most often you will be asked to submit a personal statement or letter of intent as part of your application. This guide uses the wording of 'personal statement', but this is with the recognition that it could be called a letter of intent, statement of interest or admissions essay depending on the program to which you are applying.

What is a personal statement?

- Your opportunity to convince the admissions committee about why you would be a great addition to the graduate program
- A self-analysis of who you are, why you are interested in a particular program and how it fits with your goals and objectives
- A marketing tool to provide information not found in other areas of your application

How important is the personal statement?

- It depends on the graduate program/school, but often the personal statement is a crucial part of the application process as it distinguishes one applicant from another.
- Grades and standardized test scores are often very similar among applicants and reference letters are typically strong, so the personal statement is where you have an opportunity to stand out from other applicants.

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What is included in a personal statement?

Personal statements are as varied as the individuals writing them. There is not one right or wrong format or style for writing a personal statement. This can be a challenge as it can be difficult to know where to start but it is also a unique opportunity to have a statement that reflects you.

As a starting point, read all the instructions from the graduate program to which you are applying. Some programs will say, 'Submit a personal statement', others will say, 'Submit a statement that addresses your reasons for applying to graduate school, your goals with the program and your career goals', and others will give you a very detailed list or series of questions to answer. Ensure that you have taken the time to research what your program of choice is asking as you want to customize your statement to the specific school.

Personal statements can be likened to an admissions interview on paper. What would you say to an admissions committee in person if they asked you why you were applying and how you are well suited to this field/program? Do not assume that the admissions committee knows anything about you. Be detailed with examples so they get to know you through the personal statement.

The following is a list of ideas for content in your personal statement:

- An interesting first paragraph to grab the reader's attention
- Details about why graduate school is of interest to you
- Information on why this particular school is a good fit for you
- The value you will add to the program
- Your academic interests – why this field of study?
- Your research interests if applying to a research-based program
- Past experiences that have shaped your academic interests
- Key personal/professional accomplishments or characteristics that define you as an individual
- Your career/academic goals or how this program fits with your future plans

Length – This will vary by school and/or program. Check the application instructions carefully for a word or page limit and ensure you follow this limit. If no limit is indicated, aim

for 500-750 words. You may find the word limit to be a challenge as you likely have more you would like to say. It is important to be succinct (although provide enough detail to convey your experience) and selective in what you write. Each sentence and idea needs to speak to your strengths and interests and sentences that speak in generalities should be removed.

Spelling and grammar – Your personal statement is an example of your writing ability and as such, it needs to be free of spelling and grammatical errors. Ensure you proofread it several times, have a trusted friend proofread it and then check it again. Sentence structure, flow of ideas and being free of spelling and grammatical errors all contribute to the reader having a good impression of your personal statement so that they can focus on the content.

Components of an Effective Personal Statement:

- Well-written
- Insightful and perceptive – demonstrates self-awareness and an understanding of how you fit with the academic program and/or profession
- Honest and credible – with appropriate examples to demonstrate credibility
- Personal – written in the first person (but try not to overuse 'I')
- Confident – demonstrates your confidence and enthusiasm for the program
- Well-researched – demonstrates your knowledge of the field/profession and of the program at a particular school
- Specific – avoids vague statements that any applicant could write (e.g., I am applying to clinical psychology because I like to help people). Push yourself to be specific with your reasons for applying to the program and in describing your experiences. Choose words that accurately describe the depth of the experience and actions you took.

How do you get started?

1. Research the program, the school and the profession
 - Learn about the research interests of faculty, specializations within the program, opportunities for practical/field experience, required and elective courses, and the culture of the program and the philosophy or mission statement of the program/school.

- Read the school's website thoroughly including information about faculty members.
 - Connect with a professor or the graduate co-ordinator within the program you are considering to learn more about the program and school and how it fits with your interests.
 - Talk with your professors about your interests – this will help you research particular programs but also helps your professors learn more about you which will be an asset if they are writing reference letters for your applications.
 - Research the key competencies, skills or attributes in a particular profession through professional associations, program websites or through talking with professionals in the field. Connect these with your attributes/experiences.
2. Talk with a friend, professor, family member or mentor about your decision to apply to graduate/professional programs and explain why you have decided that this is your next step.
 3. Create a bulleted list of your reasons for applying to graduate school.
 4. Write a list of key experiences, attributes, courses, skills and personal accomplishments that have been important to you and/or have helped in your decision to pursue graduate/professional education. Focus on what you learned, accomplished and enjoyed.
 5. Look for key themes between your reasons for applying to graduate school and your list of experiences.
 6. Use these theme(s) as the basis for writing a first draft of your personal statement.
 - If you are struggling to start the writing process, you may want to try speaking your ideas aloud to a friend who could type what you say or you could record yourself speaking and then type it out.
 - You will go through several drafts of your personal statement so it is important to get started with a first draft and you can work from there.
 7. When you are getting closer to a final draft, have your personal statement reviewed by people you trust. This could be a professor, a friend or a staff member in the Career Centre.
 8. Ensure the final version is free of spelling and grammatical errors.

If you are struggling to see a connecting theme after generating your lists, you may find it easier to write a first draft by simply telling your story – where you have come from, where you are and where you are going.

Do you need to tailor your personal statement for each school?

Yes! Tailored personal statements demonstrate to the admissions committee that you have taken the time to research the school/program and related it to your own experiences and interests. It also helps you in deciding which schools are best for you, which becomes especially helpful if you receive multiple admission offers and need to decide which offer to accept.

Disclosing Additional Information

Personal statements can be a place for you to provide additional information that you need the admissions committee to know including any potential weaknesses in your application. Deciding what to include is a very personal decision. For example, you may want to explain why a semester worth of grades is significantly lower than others (especially in your upper years), discuss a personal experience that was instrumental in defining who you are or if relevant, disclose a disability. What you choose to discuss will depend on you but also on the program. The key is to focus on the positive, even if you need to explain a negative situation. Think carefully about the reasons why you want to disclose this information. When discussing potentially-negative situations, address the situation and then describe what you have done to improve or grow and what the results are now. Meet with a staff member at the Career Centre to discuss your specific situation and any questions or concerns you may have.

Final Tips:

- Give yourself lots of time to research, write and edit.
- Think about what image you want to portray.
- Think about who the reader could be (e.g., a potential research supervisor, the director of admissions, current students or a professional who works in the field).
- Be confident, enthusiastic and honest.
- Be positive – avoid criticizing people or yourself.
- Avoid controversial topics.

If you are required to submit a CV (curriculum vitae) with your application, think of it as an academic version of your resumé and focus on your education, research and/or teaching experience. Refer to the Career Centre's [Resumé Guidebook](#) for more information.

Differences for Graduate Programs and Professional Programs

Graduate Programs

Graduate programs typically refer to academic programs such as an MA or MSc. These programs can be coursework based or research based. In your personal statement, you will want to focus on your academic interests – why this field, why this program, how you have become interested in this area, faculty members researching your areas of interests, and your academic accomplishments. It is appropriate to include specific research interests as they relate to faculty who may be potential supervisors. Some applications will specifically ask you to include this. Others may ask for a statement of research objectives in addition to the personal statement and that is where you would detail your research plans.

Particularly if you are applying to a program with a thesis component, it is helpful to be in contact with professors with whom you would like to work. Some applicants will include information about career goals which may or may not be appropriate for you. Your goal with this statement is to focus on why you are interested in learning more about this field and how it fits with you and your interests. If you do know where you would like it to lead, it is appropriate to include this; but you also want to show you are open to learning and the possibilities that will arise from the program.

Professional Programs

Professional programs typically refer to programs that train you for a particular profession or are oriented to preparing you for a particular type of career. Examples include law school, MBA, MPA (Public Administration), MSW (Social Work), etc. The focus for these personal statements will be balanced between your academic interests and information about who you are, how you are prepared for studying in this field and how the program fits with your future goals. An MBA or MSW personal statement will typically include information about your related work and volunteer experiences as these experiences often are required for admission. However, do not simply list experiences in a personal statement (your resumé provides that list); you want to reflect on the significance and value of the experiences and how they have prepared you for professional education in this field.

Reference Letters

While this guide is focused on personal statements, a discussion about reference letters is also necessary due to the importance of strong reference letters in applications. The number of reference letters you will need depends on the program – you may need two to three academic referees and/or one to two non-academic referees. Typically programs will request no more than two to three letters in total, so read the application instructions carefully to ensure you are sending the quantity and type of letters they have required. You may find asking for reference letters to be one of the most difficult aspects of completing applications, but it does not need to be. The information below will assist you in asking for strong letters of reference.

How to ask?

When asking for a reference letter, ask the individual if they feel they can write you a strong letter or a letter in support of your application. Pay attention to the individual's reaction – if they are hesitant, thank them for their time and ask someone else. You are looking for referees that want to support you and will write strong letters.

Academic referees

- These are professors who have taught you and can attest to your strengths and abilities as a student.
- Keep in mind that professors often are writing letters for several other students so give them enough lead time to write the letter and provide clear information regarding deadlines and procedures.
- Do your best in helping your professors get to know you – participate in class, try to take more than one class with a professor, volunteer to assist them with research projects, take a directed studies or seminar course and talk with them about your interests in graduate school.
- Offer additional materials that may be helpful to them such as your personal statement, resumé and/or academic writing sample.

Non-academic referees

- These will often be work or volunteer supervisors who can attest to your strengths and abilities as a person or as a professional.

Additional Resources:

Online:

- Writing the Personal Statement - Purdue University Online Writing Lab
owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/
- Graduate Admissions Essay Overview – About.com
gradschool.about.com/od/essaywriting

Print Resources available in the Career Resource Centre:

- Get Into Graduate School: A Strategic Approach for Master's and Doctoral Candidates by Tim Haft and others, Kaplan Publishing, 2011
- How to Write the Perfect Personal Statement by Mark Alan Stewart, Peterson's, 2009
- Law School Bound by John Richardson, Richardson Press, 2006 (specifically for law school applications)
- Several other books about applying to graduate school including sample personal statements are available in the Career Resource Centre at the Waterloo and Brantford campuses

Laurier students and alumni can access individual assistance for personal statement review as well as for other questions about the graduate/professional school application process at the Career Centre.

If you require assistance with career exploration, resumé and cover letter preparation, job search, interview techniques, further education preparation, please contact us:

Waterloo, Kitchener, Toronto: 519.884.0710 x4495
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