Writing Personal Statements for Graduate School Applications

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If you have any questions, or if you would like to set up a face-to-face or email consultation to review a piece of writing, feel free to contact me:

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Purposes of the Personal Statement

- Makes a first impression

- Provides extra detail

- Makes your application come alive

  - Gives you a voice, distinguishes you from the other applicants

Sample Prompts

DNP Program, UK College of Nursing

Post BSN:

In one to three double-spaced pages, discuss your reasons for seeking doctoral study, including your short- and long-term professional goals.

Post MSN:

In one to three double-spaced pages, discuss your reasons for seeking doctoral study, including your short- and long-term professional goals. Discuss one or more professional issues in your area of interest. Describe a clinical problem you have solved for a particular population or a clinical innovation you developed to improve health outcomes of a particular population. Return your Goal Statement with this application.

Sample Prompts

- Some programs (like UK's) distinguish between Post-BSN DNP applicants and Post-MSN DNP applicants, but some do not.

Sample Prompts

- **<u>PhD Program, UK College of Nursing</u>**

  In one-to-three double-spaced pages, discuss your reasons for seeking doctoral study, short- and long-term academic and career goals, and your area of research interest. Provide a self-evaluation of your motivation, initiative, and the potential for independent learning; include an example of leadership experience where initiative and self-motivation were important to success.

Sample Prompts

MSN Program, Loyola University Chicago

Please provide an explicit statement in 300 words that includes the following:

1. Describe how your work experiences and professional interests have prepared you to be successful in the graduate program to which you have applied.

2. Discuss how completing the graduate program that you have selected will help you meet your professional goals.

Sample Prompts

<u>DNP Program, Loyola University Chicago</u>

1. Describe your personal vision of yourself as a leader in health care; discuss how the DNP program will help you to operationalize this role.

2. Provide a statement describing how your work experiences and professional interests have prepared you to be successful in the DNP program to which you have applied.

Sample Prompts

PhD Program, Loyola University Chicago

Please provide a statement describing your professional and academic goals. Indicate your intended area of research and any faculty mentors in this area with whom you would like to work. <u>You must submit a research or scholarly referenced paper as a part of your completed application</u>.

Getting Started

- **Make an itemized checklist.**
  - Break prompt into individual requirements

- Use the checklist to:
  - Plan an outline
  - Double-check your final draft
  - Make sure you don't miss anything

Sample Checklist: Post-MSN DNP Prompt

- One to three double-spaced pages ___
- Discuss reasons for seeking doctoral study ___, including:
  - Short-term professional goals ___
  - Long-term professional goals ___
- Discuss **one or more** professional issues in my area of interest ___
- Describe a clinical problem I have solved for a particular population… ___

  OR

  A clinical innovation I developed to improve health outcomes of a particular population ___

Getting Started

- **One caveat:**

  - Don't let the checklist tempt you to organize the statement in a particular order

  - Organization should be thoughtful and logical, not necessarily based on the order of your checklist

    - Unless the application requires a certain order

Getting Started

- **Get organized**
  - Make a note of each application deadline
    - Allow plenty of time to plan, write, revise, and proofread
  - Applying to more than one program? Make a folder for each.

Getting Started: Brainstorm

- **Brainstorm:** Ask yourself the questions asked in the prompt, or if your prompt is more general, ask:

    -Why do I want to pursue this degree?

    -Why do I want a DNP instead of a PhD (for example)?

    -Why am I a good fit for this school's program?

    - **Freewrite** for 15-20 minutes—highlight the most interesting ideas to use as a starting point.

Getting Started: Make an Outline

- Include an introduction, body, and conclusion

- Use transition sentences to lead readers logically from idea to idea

- Pay attention to <u>logical organization:</u>
  - Could be chronological
  - Could be based on logical flow of main ideas
  - Just make sure it makes sense

Getting Started: Revise!

- NO ONE writes a perfect first draft!
- Allow time to let your statement evolve
- Take a few days off when revising
  - Come back and read it with fresh eyes
- Ask a trusted colleague or professor for input

What do admissions boards look for?

- **Most programs want information in two basic areas:**
  - Your <u>motivation</u>
  - Your <u>qualifications</u>
- This doesn't mean you should write a separate section for each of these…
  - Think about how they interrelate

What do admissions boards look for?

- **Strong sense of direction**
  - <u>Clear rationale</u> for why they want a grad degree
  - <u>Specific goals</u> for graduate study <u>and</u> career after grad school

- **Clear reasons for choosing this school**
  - Why are we a good fit?
  - How do your goals align with our program?
  - Is there a faculty member with expertise in your area of interest?

*Thanks to UK CON's Suzanne Prevost for contributing some of these

What do admissions boards look for?

Provide your rationale for choosing a school:

- DON'T mention their rank or level of prestige

- Avoid generalized praise

- **Be specific**—show you've done your homework

  – Mention a faculty member or two whose work interests you, show knowledge of their work

- Focus on relevant connections between you and the school

What do admissions boards look for?

- Consider contacting 1 or 2 faculty members whose work interests you
  – Talk to them about your mutual interest and how you might work together
- Mention these conversations in your statement

What do admissions boards look for?

- **Clear reasons for choosing the program**
  - MSN vs. DNP vs. PhD
- **Good grasp of writing fundamentals**
  - Ability to make a coherent, persuasive argument as to why applicant needs/wants a grad degree, and…
  - Ability to show intellectual readiness to pursue one

*Thanks to UK CON's Suzanne Prevost for contributing these

What do admissions boards look for?

- **Adherence to prompt**
  - Applicant addresses all specific items requested in prompt (another good reason for a checklist)

- **Good understanding of program outcomes, & how they mesh with applicant's own goals**
  - Example: PhD programs prepare students for careers in healthcare research, so applicant should discuss his/her goals in relation to that outcome

*Thanks to UK CON's Terry Lennie for contributing these

What do admissions boards look for?

- **Some schools may ask you to address how you will enrich/contribute to their program.**

  – Again, do your homework on the school.

  – Do you plan to join any organizations/clubs/committees?

  – Do you have expertise in an area that would enrich the program?

  – What will you bring to the table?

What do admissions boards look for?

- **Some schools may ask you to describe your research interests.**

  – Could be in addition to or instead of a discussion of your personal qualities

- Always pay CLOSE attention to instructions

  – The quickest way to get rejected is to ignore requirements

What do admissions boards look for?

- **Red flags for admissions boards:**
  - Vagueness
  - Lack of focus
  - Poor grammar, spelling, sentence structure
  - Poor presentation, lack of proofreading

Dos and Don'ts

- **DO** use clear, straightforward language
- **DON'T** use flowery, overly formal language
  - Avoid wordiness and redundancy
- **DON'T** use contractions or slang
- **Clarity** and **conciseness** are key!

Dos and Don'ts

- **DO** use descriptive, vivid language, and active voice (not passive voice).

  - Passive voice: My goal was achieved.

  - Active voice: I achieved my goal.

- **DO** use the first person ("I")—remember, this statement is about you!

Dos and Don'ts

- **DO** use specific, vivid <u>examples</u> to illustrate main points

  – Stories are more memorable than explanations

- **DON'T** waste time telling the admissions board what they already know (Example: A list of qualities possessed by the best nurses).

  – **DO** focus on giving specific examples that illustrate your attributes and abilities

Dos and Don'ts

- **DON'T** include every detail of your undergrad and/or professional experience

  - This info appears elsewhere in your application

- **DO** hit the high points

  - Focus on the details that best demonstrate:
    - Your qualifications and strengths
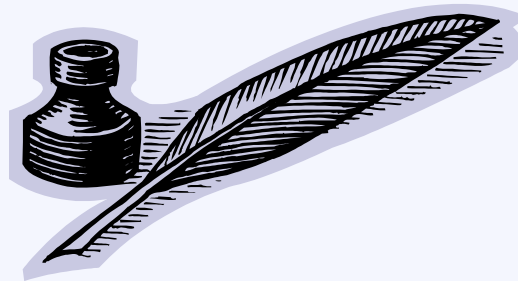   - Your experience and interests

Dos and Don'ts

- **DO** submit a professional, clean, impeccably proofread statement

- **DON'T** use gimmicks
  - Fancy fonts
  - Colors or images
  - Poetry/verse
  - Etc.

What to include, what to omit

- Always follow the prompt, but prompts can be short and non-specific. In general, include:
  - Any academic and/or professional achievements that set you apart
    - Especially if they relate to your stated academic or career goals

What to include, what to omit

- Academic/professional achievements might include:

  - Internships

  - Publications

  - Posters

  - Presentations

  - Study abroad/nursing abroad

What to include, what to omit

- Include any special skills that set you apart
  - Mention any research experience/skills
- If there are inconsistencies in your record, you can explain
  - Example: You took a year off during undergrad study to help support your family

What to include, what to omit

- Avoid cliché introductions
  - "I have always been fascinated by…"
  - "Ever since childhood I have wanted to…"
- If you discuss what led you to nursing, do so in specific terms
  - Tell a story to illustrate what sparked your interest

What to include, what to omit

- **Definitely do NOT include**:
  - Anything irrelevant to your main points
  - Anything inaccurate
  - Anything exaggerated
  - Anything untrue

What to include, what to omit

- Don't believe the myth that "everybody bends the truth"

- It's not just about ethics

  - Your statement should reflect your true interests and expertise

  - Admissions faculty read hundreds of statements—they can spot untruths and exaggerations

Tips for Second-Language Applicants

- Consider getting some one-on-one tutoring to help you:

  - Write a better statement

  - Prepare for the intense amount of writing required by graduate programs

- UK's Center for English as a Second Language offers classes and other resources

  - http://esl.as.uky.edu/about-esl

Tips for Second-Language Applicants

- Check the Blackboard "Writing Resources" website for more ESL resources

- Online resources are in the "Useful Websites" section

  - Sites that offer grammar guides, TOEFL preparation, live conversation practice, etc.

- Printable resources and PowerPoint presentations are in the "Course Content" section

Tips for Second-Language Applicants

- The Blackboard "Writing Resources" website is helpful for native speakers too…

  – Lots of general tips on writing and grammar in both "Useful Websites" and "Course Content"
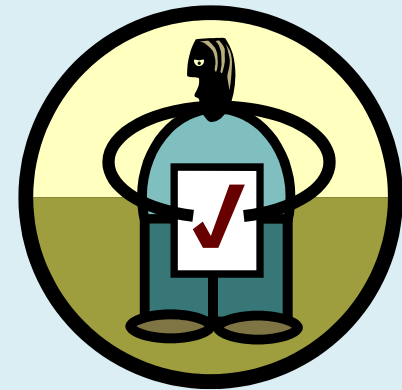
A personal statement should be…

- **<u>Personal</u>**
  - Should reflect you and your reasons for pursuing graduate study—should not be generic

- **<u>Specific</u>**
  - Show, don't just tell—examples speak louder than explanations

- **<u>Readable</u>**
  - Impeccable spelling, grammar, and sentence structure

- **<u>Tailored</u>**
  - Aim your statement at the specific program to which you are applying. What makes you a good fit for this program?

Proofreading and Editing

<u>Proofread</u> carefully

- Use "spell check" but don't rely on it 100%!
  - It won't catch "that" instead of "than," "their" instead of "there," etc.

- Read your work ALOUD
  - Forces you to slow down and hear how your sentences sound

Tips to Remember: Avoid Wordiness

- Wordiness—flowery language, using too many words to make a point. Examples:

  - Instead of *due to the fact that*, use *because*.
  - Instead of *at the present time*, say *now*.
  - Instead of *for the purpose of*, say *to*.
  - Instead of *the present study*, say *this study*.
  - Instead of *there were several students who completed*, say *several students completed*.

- Look for places to trim your language.

Avoiding wordiness: More examples

- Use *about* in place of:

  as regards   in reference to   with regard to

  concerning the matter of   where ___ is concerned

- Use *must* or *should* in place of:

  it is crucial that   it is necessary that   there is a need for

  it is important that   cannot be avoided

- Use *may, might,* or *could* in place of:

  it is possible that   there is a chance that

  it could happen that   the possibility exists for

Tips to Remember: Avoid Redundancy

Redundant: unnecessarily repetitious, as in the underlined:

- they were <u>both</u> alike
- <u>a total of</u> 68 participants
- four <u>different</u> groups saw
- instructions, which were <u>exactly</u> the same as those used
- assemble the parts <u>together</u>
- <u>completely</u> eliminate the problem
- each <u>and every</u> time
- the reason is <u>because</u>
- during <u>the course of</u> the experiment
- has been <u>previously</u> found

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I hope this workshop was helpful! If you have any questions, or if you would like to set up a face-to-face or email consultation to review a piece of writing, feel free to contact me:

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