



## Writing a Graduate School Application Essay

Office for Alumni Affairs & Career Advancement

### Getting Started

Every graduate school requires applicants to submit either a personal statement or a statement of purpose (sometimes called a research statement). This handout details some of the main differences between the two types of documents, and provides tips on how to create an essay which clearly demonstrates your personal strengths, goals, and commitment to the field and highlights why you are a good fit for the program to which you are applying.

### Personal Statement

A Personal Statement should be a story describing how your personality, motivations, and experiences all come together to make you a great candidate for the program. Your statement should explain how you will contribute positively and effectively to the specific department, and to the academic discipline itself. Each institution will likely give you its own prompts or questions to answer, but regardless of what these are, your aim should be to highlight your special story – how you came to be where you are/who you are and what you aim to achieve in the future. Perhaps you might describe how a summer internship experience first sparked your interest in public health or how having overcome certain educational obstacles motivated you to pursue your graduate degree. Whatever your story is, it must explain how it now connects you to the institution. Additionally, you will need to share what you plan to do with your degree and how it will help you achieve your career goals.

### Statement of Purpose/Research Statement

As with the Personal Statement, for this type of essay, you will be prompted to answer certain questions and/or to comment on particular topics. However, instead of telling a story about how you arrived at this point, you will primarily discuss what your academic interests are **now** and what you plan to do in the future. You will likely be asked questions about your research interests and professional goals, how you plan to attain your goals, and why the program is best suited for you to achieve your goals. In order to demonstrate your fit with the institution, you will need to be specific about your specialized interests within your major field and be clear about how the program connects to both your previous training and future goals.

### BEFORE WRITING

- **Read the question(s):** You need to be thorough and address **everything** asked of you. Failing to do so won't reflect well on you as a potential candidate – you need to show you can follow directions!
- **Reflect on the overall goal:** Keep in mind always that your overall goal is to: a) explain how you are a great match for the department, b) describe how the qualities of the department will enable you to address the public health challenges that shape your life and career, c) elaborate on how you are likely to become a leader or mover in your field (using examples from the past).
- **Brainstorm – freely write out your thoughts and ideas:** Within the context of the question and your overall goal, make a list of your interests, personal passions, past experiences, hardships, successes, etc. to give yourself some writing topic options. Some questions to ask yourself: What is distinct, special, and/or impressive about me and my life story? Have I overcome any particular hardships or obstacles? When did I become interested in this field and what have I learned about it since? What are my career goals? What personal traits, values, and skill sets do I have that might make me stand out from other applicants? How do I “show” my fit with this program?
- **Create an outline:** Create an outline for your essay, with a concrete thesis and examples to support it. Organize your points and examples to meet the needs of your readers, narrow your thoughts and experiences down from the brainstorming session. Perhaps most importantly, keep in mind any page length or word count restrictions!
- **Know your audience:** Consider what you know about the program to which you are applying. What are they looking for? Will faculty be reading this? Administrators? Others? Use the correct tone & vocabulary for your audience(s).



## WRITING YOUR ESSAY

- **First Paragraph:** Use this to introduce and identify yourself (MD from X; MPH (and field of study) at Harvard Chan since Y), providing your reader with your overall big picture. You may want to start your essay with something you believe will immediately pique the reader's interest, such as a critical experience that moved you to study public health or a particular health concern of importance to you. No matter how you arrange this paragraph, by the end it should be clear what your long-term career goal is and how admittance into this program would allow you to achieve this goal.
- **Middle Paragraphs:** The next several paragraphs should support your decision to pursue this long-term career goal by describing the experiences and learnings that made you understand the importance of a public health (and/or other) perspective and forged your long-term career goal. If this is a personal statement, you may want to reach back into history to explain how you arrived at where you are now before moving on to detailing your future goals.
  - **Link these paragraphs together to tell the story of how you learned and realized your goals**
  - **Writing in chronological order (from past to the present) often works best**
- **End strong:** End your essay with a conclusion that refers back to the intro and restates your thesis. This helps unify your essay as a whole, connecting your experiences back to the reason you are writing this essay in the first place—to detail your career goals and show your qualifications for your graduate program of choice. Return to how this doctoral program will give you the skills and tools to become a leader/mover in this field to improve the health of populations (or other goal).

## FINAL TOUCHES

- **Write well:** Your essay is a sample of your writing abilities, so it's important to convey your thoughts clearly, effectively, and grammatically well. Be succinct - you don't need to write out your full autobiography or resume - and only include sentences that support your thesis.
- **Revising:** give yourself enough time to step away from your draft. Return with a fresh pair of eyes to make your edits. Plan on making a few rounds of revisions. Most importantly, **ask for help!** Have your essay critiqued by friends, family, educators, and our staff (make an appointment via CareerConnect).
- **Proofread:** Proofread your statement carefully and try reading your essay out loud to help catch any mistakes or poor phrasing. Finally, ask others to review it one final time to check for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors – do not rely on your computer to catch everything!

### *Some additional tips for composing your application essay/statement:*

- Demonstrate motivation, enthusiasm, maturity, and personal uniqueness, while articulating clearly why the program is a good match for your interests; explain your passion for the field and note any connections to the department or program.
- Articulate long-term goals, why you want to go to graduate school, why you've chosen this particular institution and department, and, if applicable, any specific faculty member(s) with whom you hope to work.
- Cite any previous work you've done in the field and/or discuss past research projects completed or papers published.
- For research-intensive degrees, propose specific questions that intrigue you, how you might approach them, and why pursuing this line of inquiry would contribute new knowledge to the field. You will likely not pursue this particular project for your thesis, but this mini-proposal illustrates your ability to think independently and creatively and allows you to demonstrate how your research interests fit with the department.
- Do not overstate or understate your qualifications and try to support general statements with examples.
- Ask yourself if the statement is interesting and provides a compelling argument to the committee for your admission into the program – ask your friends if upon reading your essay if they are convinced that you are a good fit!
- Keep your statement(s) concise; if provided, stick to the word limit or page length – **do not go over!** If there are no instructions on length, keep your essay to two pages, double-spaced.

Some information adapted from: <https://gecd.mit.edu/grad-and-med-school/apply-graduate-school/graduate-school-application-essays>; <http://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/ma-phd-arts-sciences>, & Donald Halstead, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health Writing Instructor.

