
Writing Personal Statements for Graduate School

Pat Sokolove, PhD
Deputy Director, OITE
sokolovp@mail.nih.gov





Why Does a Graduate School Ask for a Personal Statement?

- To get to know you, not your record
- To see if you can think logically
- To see if you can write well
- To try to determine if you are likely to succeed*
 - What do you know about doing research?
 - How effectively can you talk about science?
 - What do you know about the program?
 - How sophisticated are you about graduate school?
 - Do you have **characteristics that favor success?**
- To see if you will be a good fit for the school

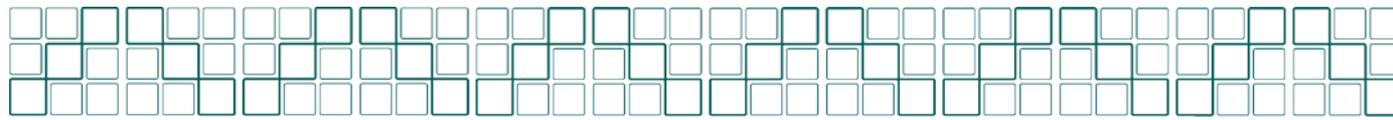


Desirable Characteristics*



Getting Ready to Write

- What sets me apart from other applicants?
- How did I learn about this field?
- Why am I interested in this field?
- What experiences have stimulated and enhanced my interest?
- What skills or personal characteristics do I possess that would enhance my chances for success?
- What are my biggest accomplishments?
- What are my career aspirations?
- Why THIS school and program? Do I have any connections?
- What will I be doing between now and next fall?
- Have I overcome relevant obstacles in my life?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in my academic record?



What do I want the Admissions Committee to Know?



The General Structure

- The “hook”*
 - Introduce yourself.
 - Explain why you want to go to graduate school.
- The substance
 - Explain your science.
 - Highlight other relevant experiences.
- The future
 - Explain “why this program”
 - Briefly describe your career goals.



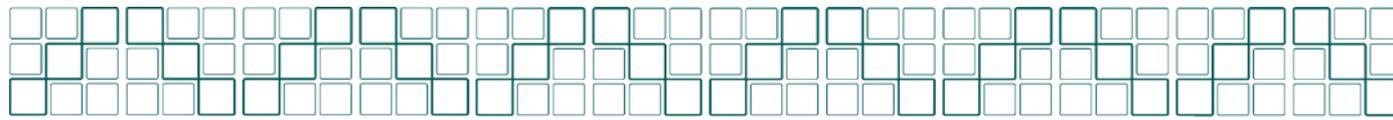
Explaining Your Science

- Include your IC and the name of your PI or mentor
- Present the big picture – the overall goal of your group or lab
- Describe your project
 - What specific question are you trying to answer?
 - What techniques are you using?
- Present your results, briefly
- Indicate what your results mean and/or possible future research directions



General Thoughts

- Answer the questions that are asked
- Tell a story – but content over style
- Analyze – don't just list
- Give concrete examples
- Share credit when appropriate
- Personalize each statement to the school and/or program
- Be concise rather than long-winded
- Make your statement easy for committee members to read

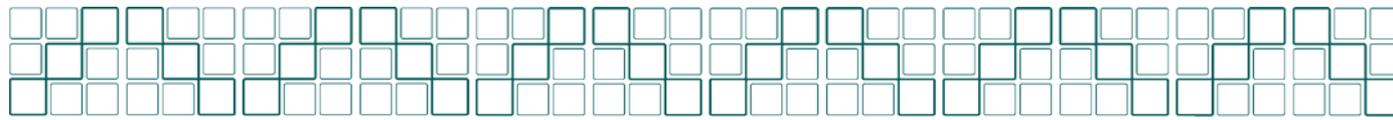


Statement of Purpose

Describe in your statement of purpose:

- Your reasons for applying to the proposed program at Stanford and your preparation for this field of study
- Your research and study interests
- Future career plans and other aspects of your background and interests which may aid the admissions committee in evaluating your **aptitude** and **motivation** for graduate study

Your statement should not exceed two pages in length (single spaced).



Personal History Statement

Please describe how your personal background informs your decision to pursue a graduate degree. Please include information on how you have overcome barriers to access opportunities in higher education, evidence of how you came to understand the barriers faced by others, evidence of your academic service to advance equitable access to higher education for women, racial minorities and individuals from other groups that have been historically underrepresented in higher education, evidence of your research focusing on underserved populations or related issues of inequality, OR evidence of your leadership among such groups.



General Thoughts

- Answer the questions that are asked
- Tell a story – but content over style
- Analyze – don't just list
- Give concrete examples
- Share credit when appropriate
- Personalize each statement to the school and/or program
- Be concise rather than long-winded
- Make your statement easy for committee members to read

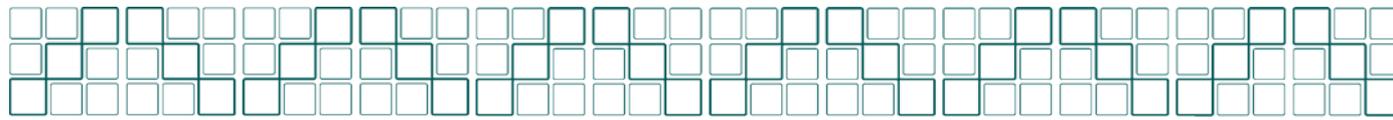


Five graduate level courses are required for the PhD. Formal course work is generally finished in the first twelve to eighteen months, permitting students to begin full-time research early in their career. Courses are selected according to the special interests and needs of each student. Penn State's chemistry department is noteworthy in its effort to break down unnecessary barriers; hence there are no formal divisions between chemistry areas. Lists of suggested courses are provided for concentration in specific areas of chemistry (analytical, biological, chemical physics, inorganic materials, organometallic, organic, physical, polymer, surface, theoretical). Students are encouraged to begin research as soon as they are ready and to choose courses that strengthen their research capabilities.



General Thoughts

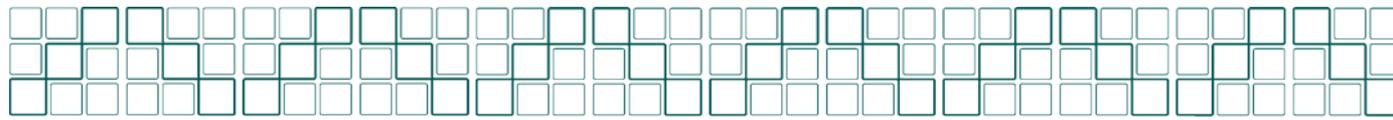
- Answer the questions that are asked
- Tell a story – but content over style
- Analyze – don't just list
- Give concrete examples
- Share credit when appropriate
- Personalize each statement to the school and/or program
- Be concise rather than long-winded
- Make your statement easy for committee members to read



Dealing with the Elephant in the Room - I

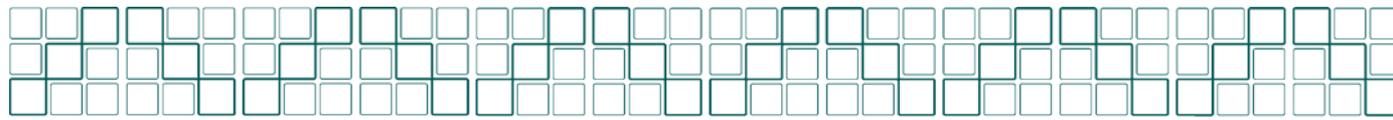
Attempt this only if the problem is

- Sympathetic
- In the past
- Resolved
- Unlikely to come back



Dealing with the Elephant in the Room - II

- Use either your personal statement or an attached letter to the Graduate Program Director
- Avoid making excuses or assigning blame
- Point out more recent evidence showing that you are a good candidate
 - Success in graduate level courses
 - Steady improvement in your GPA
 - Success in the lab
- Offer to discuss this further with the Program Director



Polish Your Draft

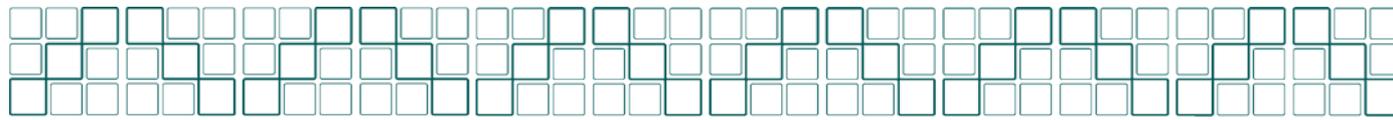
After you have edited, have your statement read by

- Friends and non-scientists for general writing and flow
- Your PI, your IC Training Director, OITE staff, undergraduate teachers for content and style
- Someone with experience on an admissions committee



Common Mistakes

- Not enough intellectual depth
- Too much humor (or drama)
- Too long – too short
- Failure to answer the question(s) asked
- Failure to explain a weakness in your application
- Trying to impress the committee with big words
- Poorly written, written in the passive voice, or wordy
- Too many (or too few) transition words
- Re-stating the obvious



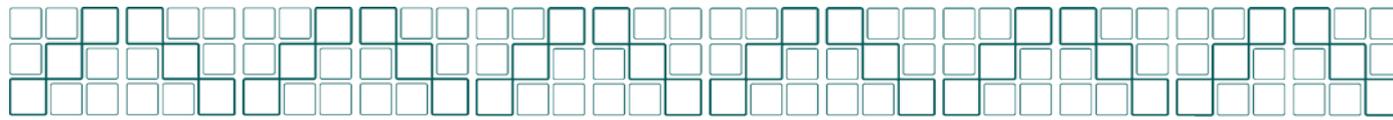
The Penn State Dance Marathon was great fun and a huge success; in the aftermath we were able to contribute \$25,000 to the fight against cancer.

I'm in a number of clubs that focus on servitude and improving the community around us.



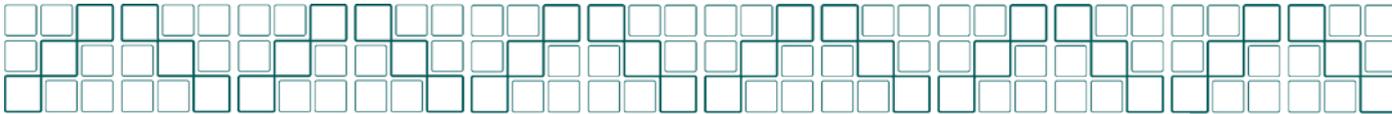
Common Mistakes

- Not enough intellectual depth
- Too much humor (or drama)
- Too long – too short
- Failure to answer the question(s) asked
- Failure to explain a weakness in your application
- Trying to impress the committee with big words
- Poorly written, written in the passive voice, or wordy
- Too many (or too few) transition words
- Re-stating the obvious



Things to Avoid

- Criticizing past professors (or anyone else)
- Bad-mouthing other graduate programs
- Expressing intolerant religious beliefs
- Sharing political beliefs
- Extended descriptions of mental anguish
- Arrogance
- Sexist language
- Too many adjectives: “wonderful”, “meaningful”
or adverbs: “terrifically”, “extraordinarily”
- Flowery language





General Writing Principles

- Be specific and accurate.
- Make certain grammar and spelling are perfect.
- Avoid lofty sounding statements that communicate little.
- Be ruthless about eliminating extra words.
- Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence and make certain all sentences in the paragraph address the topic.
- Use white space to make the document look easy to read.