

Applying to Graduate School

The Personal Statement

Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman (2000, p.32)

- *"The ideal student, seen through the eyes of graduate faculty, is gifted and creative, very bright and extremely motivated to learn, perfectly suited to the program, eager to actively pursue the lines of inquiry valued by the faculty, pleasant, responsible, and devoid of serious personal problems."*

“Do not misinterpret the meaning of *personal* in the phrase *personal* statement!”

The statement is a professional essay that should outline your
1) previous research experiences, 2) research interests,
3) relevant experience, and 4) career goals.

Questions to consider BEFORE you start writing...

- Are there any gaps/discrepancies in your academic record you should explain (e.g., great grades but mediocre GRE scores)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles (e.g., economic, familial, physical) in your life?
- What personal characteristics (integrity, compassion, persistence) and skills (leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field? Is there a way to document that you have these characteristics?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

Questions to consider BEFORE you start writing...

- What's special, distinctive, and/or impressive about your life story?
- What details of your life (people or events that have shaped your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in psychology? What have you learned about it & yourself that has further stimulated your interest & reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to the field?
- How have you learned about the field (e.g., classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences)?
- If you have worked a lot during college, what have you learned (e.g., leadership or managerial skills), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?

General Advice

- **Tell a story**
 - Think in terms of demonstrating through concrete experience. Don't be boring; make your statement fresh, different, & memorable.
- **Be direct**
 - Answer each question asked & be sure your answer fits the question asked.
- **Be specific**
 - Your desire to become a psychologist should be the logical result of specific experience described in your statement. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.
- **Find an angle/"hook"**
 - If you're like most people, your life story lacks drama, so figuring out a way to make it interesting becomes the big challenge. Finding a "hook" is vital.
- **Concentrate on your opening paragraph**
 - The opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab the reader's attention or lose it. This paragraph is the framework for the rest of the statement.

General Advice

- **Tell what you know**

- The middle section of your statement might detail your knowledge of and experience in psychology. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field. Refer to research experiences, classes, seminars you've attended, or any other source of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it.

- **Don't include some subjects**

- ...references to high school accomplishments & potentially controversial subjects (e.g., religion, politics). Think of it as a professional, not personal, statement.

- **Avoid clichés**

- An applicant who writes that s/he wants to help other people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from such tired statements.

- **Write well and correctly**

- Be meticulous. Proofread carefully. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Adhere to stated word limits. Avoid slang words that make you sound uneducated, & overly elaborate words that make you appear pretentious.

The Personal Statement

- Tailor your statement to the program so the admissions committee is convinced you belong.
 - Write a rough draft; set it aside; read it a week later.
 - If it still sounds good, move ahead. If not, rewrite it until it sounds right.
- Ask two instructors for feedback on your rough draft.
 - Include these comments into your 2nd draft.
 - Ask for another reading and comments, and then prepare your final statement.
- Keep it brief !
 - Stick to the points requested by the program, avoid lengthy personal or philosophical discussions, do not be redundant or wordy.
- Do not feel bad if you have little experience in psychology to write about; no one who is about to graduate from college does!
 - Explain your relevant experiences (e.g., practicum, research projects), but do not try to turn them into events of cosmic proportion. Be honest, sincere, and objective as this conveys you have a mature and realistic perspective.

Kisses of Death in the Graduate School Application Process (Appleby & Appleby, 2006)

- 88 Chairs of Graduate Admissions Committees of Psychology graduate programs provided *“one or two examples of kisses of death you have encountered during your career”*
 - Kisses of death were defined as *“aberrant types of information that cause graduate admissions committees to reject otherwise strong applicants”*

“Kisses of Death” categories

- **Damaging personal statements**
- **Harmful letters of recommendation**
- **Lack of program information**
- **Poor writing skills**
- **Misfired attempts to impress**

Damaging Personal Statements

■ Personal Mental Health

- Discussions of a personal mental health problem will likely DECREASE your chances of acceptance.
- Such statements may create the impression you are unable to function as a successful graduate student.
 - Committees commented that an applicant showed “*evidence of untreated mental illness,*” “*emotional instability,*” or was seeking graduate training “*to better understand one’s own problems or problems in one’s family*”
- Graduate school is an academic path, NOT an intervention for personal problems!

Damaging Personal Statements

■ Excessive Altruism

- Admissions committees are NOT impressed by statements such as *"I want to help all people,"* or *"I think I am a strong candidate for your program because people have always come to me with their problems; I'm viewed as a warm, empathetic, and caring person."*
- These statements could be interpreted to mean you believe a strong need to help others is more important to your success in graduate school than a desire to perform research & engage in professional activities.
- Let your letters of recommendation comment on your personal qualities!

Damaging Personal Statements

■ Excessive Self-Disclosure

- Avoid “*a long saga about how [you] finished [school] over incredible odds*”
 - Have a letter of recommendation allude to this!
- Avoid statements that you want to pursue a career in clinical psychology because of a personal family experience with psychopathology
 - Faculty may interpret such information as a sign you are unaware of the value of interpersonal or professional boundaries in sensitive areas.

Damaging Personal Statements

■ Professionally Inappropriate

- Avoid inappropriate humor, attempts to appear cute or clever, and references to God or religious issues when these issues are unrelated to the program to which you are applying (e.g., “*God has given me natural talents that make me a very good clinician*”).
 - This type of information could be taken to mean you lack awareness of the formal nature of the application process or the culture of graduate school.

Other “Kisses of Death”

- **Avoid attempts to impress the members of a graduate admissions committee with information they may interpret as insincere flattery (e.g., referring to the target program in an excessively complimentary manner) or inappropriate (e.g., namedropping or blaming others for poor academic performance).**
 - Graduate admissions committees are composed of intelligent people; do not use your application as an opportunity to insult their intelligence.
- **Avoid statements that reflect a generic approach to the application process or an unfamiliarity with the program to which you are applying.**
 - These statements signal you have not made an honest effort to learn about the program from which you are saying you want to earn your graduate degree.
- **Avoid statements that indicate you and the target program are a perfect fit if these statements are not corroborated with specific evidence that supports your assertion (e.g., your research interests are similar to those of the program's faculty).**
 - Graduate faculty can interpret a lack of this evidence as a sign that you and the program to which you are applying are not a good match.

Other “Kisses of Death”

- **Avoid spelling or grammatical errors in your application.**
 - Such errors are an unmistakable warning of substandard writing skills, a refusal to proofread your work, or your willingness to submit careless written work.
- **Avoid writing in an unclear, disorganized, or unconvincing manner that does not provide your readers with a coherent picture of your research, educational, and professional goals.**
 - A crucial part of your graduate training will be writing; do not communicate your inability to write to those you hope will be evaluating your writing in the future.
- **Do not use boring intros or conclusions**
 - *"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is..."*
 - *"This question asks me to discuss..."*
 - *"I would like to thank the admissions committee for considering my application."*
 - *"It is my sincere hope that you will grant me the opportunity to attend your fine school."*
 - *"In sum, there are three reasons why you should admit me..."*

Appleby, D. C., & Appleby, K. M. (2006). Kisses of death in the graduate school application process. *Teaching of Psychology*, 33(6), 19-24.