

Personal Statement

Draft Due October 15

Final Due October 29

An important part of your graduate school application is the Personal Statement. It is your opportunity to show you are a good fit for the program you're applying to.

You will need to write a personal statement following the model provided at the end of this sheet. Use the explanation below, the statement you wrote for your McNair application, your McNair Handbook, and the Asher book as guides. Make sure to pay close attention to the examples of personal statements from a variety of disciplines in Chapter 8 of Asher's book (starting on p. 88).

General Information

The personal statement, **your opportunity to sell yourself** in the application process, generally falls into two categories:

1. General, comprehensive statement of purpose
2. Responses to specific questions being asked

Assignment

As you start to construct your personal statement, answer the questions below in a paragraph or two. Don't worry about connecting your answers in a statement form. Just answer the questions. These will help you decide what to focus on in your statement.

1. Why do you want to attend graduate school? (knowledge, money, prestige, etc.)
2. What research experiences have you had if any? (both formal and informal)
3. What are some topics that you *think* you might want to research?
4. What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story? What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the admissions committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
5. What are your career goals?
6. What is your ideal vision of the future?
7. When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
8. How have you learned about this field – through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
9. Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
10. What skills (for example leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
11. If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?

DRAFT (DUE October 15): In your draft, you'll need to write a general statement of purpose, see prompt below. Remember that this is only a draft, and need not be perfect, however; you need to put some serious thought into this, since your personal statement is usually an important contributor to admissions into graduate school. Statements should be within the page limit specified by the school, however; if no page limit is specified, the statement must be two pages single-spaced.

Draft Prompt: Please provide a Statement of Purpose regarding your current goals, plans for your professional career, and reasons for selecting a field of study.

FINAL DRAFT (DUE October 29): Your first draft will be reviewed and you will receive suggestions on how to improve your statement. You'll need to make changes and we would suggest you have two faculty members read your draft and offer suggestions. The final draft will be due on December 12th.

General Advice

1. ***If there is a question, answer it!!!*** Schools will have different formats for asking questions so pay attention to detail. Do not be tempted to use the same answers or statement for each application.
2. ***Tell a story.*** Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do is bore a committee. If you distinguish yourself, you will make yourself memorable.
3. ***Be specific.*** Do not, for example, state that you would make a good statistician unless you can back it up. Your desire to become an engineer, psychologist, etc. should be logical – the result of specific experiences described in your statement. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.
4. ***Remember: motivation, experience, goals.*** The majority of graduate programs do not interview their applicants. The personal statement might be the only part of your application that comes to the committee in your own voice. Make sure that it tells the committee things that cannot already be found in your transcript. The three key issues are your motivation or pursuing this particular degree, the experience you have that has prepared you for the rigors of graduate work, and your long and short term goals. Do not get more too personal and don't use more than 1/3 of your statement on personal stories. Think about the culture of the field for which you are applying, and write accordingly.
5. ***Make every word count in your favor.*** Do not exceed the page or word limit (if there is one – typically it is one or two, single spaced pages), do not use smaller than 11 – point font, and do not shrink the margins. You need to be concise and as specific as possible. Do not be repetitious or make a list of work or class experience. Do not reiterate your transcript.
6. ***Use the language of the discipline to which you are applying.*** When discussing your research and the areas that interest you in the graduate program to which you are applying, use the correct terminology and vocabulary. Doing so will illustrate to the reader that indeed, you know that of which you speak. Do not be afraid to raise important issues you want to tackle in graduate school.
7. ***Speak in depth about your research experiences.*** Faculty are interested in finding colleagues from among the many applicants to their programs. Imagine reading 500 statements to accept 10 or 15 students. What would you want to know about the people you are selecting? If you have experience as an undergraduate working with ultra-fast laser spectrometry, and are interested in pursuing this in your graduate program, let them know! If they have such research group, you might be a great fit. If they don't have that kind of research, why are you applying there? List research projects in order of interest to your target audience but don't limit yourself to only those projects.
8. ***Research the programs to which you are applying.*** Make contact with professors you are interested in working with. Let the reader know that you will fit into the work that is going on there. Remember that in addition to answering the question of why you will be the best student for the committee to accept, you must explain why this program is the best one for you. The fit issue works both ways. Do your homework – go online and find out exactly what kind of research is going on your prospective department. If you have established contact with a professor at a potential school and have an interest in working with them, mention their name.
9. ***Be grammatically correct.*** Use spell check (or even a dictionary) and have at least three people proofread it (preferably faculty or editor types) particular flags for some faculty: its and it's;

there, their, and they're; committees have been known to trash an application with one typo, so be aware. It is always a good idea to have at least three people proof your final draft.

10. ***Avoid clichés and do not include some subjects.*** There are certain things that should be left out of personal statements. For example, references to experiences or accomplishments in high school are not a good idea. Do not mention potentially controversial issues (religious, political etc.).
11. ***Above all, be yourself and do not apologize.*** While you should explain any gaps or inconsistencies in your transcript, do so in a positive manner rather than an apologetic one. Remember that these inconsistencies might be addressed in a separate letter. It's a good idea to have one of the faculty briefly address this issue in their letter of recommendation if they are comfortable with it.

Sample Outline

Opening paragraph – Introduce yourself and give your general reasons for pursuing graduate study. Grab their attention by stating particular talents that make you an individual they should consider.

Body – Build your foundation for your forthcoming work

- Explain why you chose this field.
- Explain your expertise and accomplishments in your field, including research (mention the project name and professor that you worked with)
- Talk about your undergraduate studies in general and how they relate to what you want to do in graduate school (do not list specifics that are contained in transcripts).
- Describe other relevant experiences (volunteer, organizations, jobs, etc.) and be sure to include names and other important details.
- Explain why these various experiences demonstrate your motivation and inspiration for continued study.
- Briefly explain any discrepancies on your transcript. No details are necessary.
- Mention specific faculty you are interested in working with (make sure they are still at that university).

Background – Tell them about yourself. Describe your family and community (or a community in which you once lived). Did someone influence you to pursue higher education or a particular career goal? Give examples of personal attributes or qualities you know will help you successfully complete graduate school. For example, describe your determination, initiative, creativity, capacity to solve problems, ability to develop ideas and work with people, etc. Be sure to back these up with facts.

Closing paragraph – Finally, leave the reader with a strong sense that you are qualified and will be successful in graduate school. Briefly summarize highlights and close strong.

Remember: Drafts are a good thing! The more drafts you do, the more refined you can be. Don't be afraid to have others read your drafts, they can provide valuable insights on those places where you might be stuck.