

# *The Lincoln University*

## *Writing and Reading Center*

### *Writing Your Graduate School Personal Statement*

#### **Reading & Answering The Questions**

As simple as this sounds, many applicants fail or forget to answer the questions the Admissions Committee asks, which can have a drastically negative effect on the evaluation of any application. So always read the application questions and use them as the focus of your essay.

Although different universities ask different questions, the goal is basically the same — the Admissions Committee wants to know who you are and why you want to attend their school. To give them this information, though, you must remember to answer the questions in the order the Committee has specified in the application. You want to show yourself as an organized, deliberate thinker.

#### **Why Am I Writing This Essay?**

Or...the purpose of Graduate School Admissions Essays

Personal statements are sometimes the most important part of your graduate school application. When a university has so many seats to fill in any program, it's not only going to be your grades, transcripts, GRE scores, or letters of recommendation that narrow down the choices.... It'll also be your essay. Sometimes, your essay can be a more powerful representation of who you are and can give you the upper hand over others who might have better grades, but who could not honestly and strongly express their motivation and commitment to that graduate program.

In so many ways, everything in your application says that you're just a number or statistic. However, your essay says that you're a person, an individual.

And universities want personalities who will commit to their program, who can endure, and who will take full advantage of the opportunity.

Personal statements give "life" to an application that would otherwise be just a collection of cold impersonal facts. Your essay is your chance to give the Admissions Committee a glimpse of you as a person, a glimpse of your personality, life experiences, and future goals. To succeed in this endeavor, you should:

- Show that you are different from other applicants
- Show serious intent to pursue graduate studies
- Show a match between you and the program
- Show that you can think and write clearly

If you notice, the operative here is "show," as in "show, don't tell." In other words, illustrate who you are through your essay; do not dictate and try never to start your essay with "I always wanted to be..." Showing is subtle and far more effective than telling. However, choosing the most effective means to show yourself and your motivation can be the most challenging endeavor you'll undertake when trying to individualize your essay.

## ***What To Do?***

### **1. Just get started.**

Yes, your first sentence or opening should be compelling and attention-grabbing. Make an outline or free write.

### **2. Articulate your reasons for selecting your chosen career.**

Although these essays are often called personal statements, they are not an autobiography. Instead, view it as an essay about your journey as an emerging scholar. Provide evidence to demonstrate that you have actively confirmed your interests and that earning an advanced degree will help you achieve these goals. Describe the courses, articles, professors, research, service projects, internships, shadowing or co-curricular activities that have shaped your aspirations.

### **3. Be specific.**

For example, it is not enough to say that you aspire to be a social worker because you want to help children. You could do this in a variety of occupations. Similarly, anyone can say that they are interested in law. Earn credibility by demonstrating this passion. Have you worked at a law firm or participated in student government, Model UN and/or mock trial?

### **4. One size does not fit all.**

Unless it is a common application system, such as those used by law, physical therapy and medical schools, you should describe your rationale for selecting the program among other alternatives. By the way, most of the schools that use a common application system will require supplemental essays that inquire about this. For the time being, you may omit it from your initial personal statement. Each institution has its own values, mission and faculty. What led you to select its particular program over others? Was it an emphasis in a particular area (e.g., rural practice, technology) or the research interests of a professor? Was your interest heightened by a conversation with its alumni?

### **5. Whatever your reasons for applying, be sincere.**

Briefly mention any noteworthy and appealing features that attracted you to the program or institution, but do not go overboard.

### **6. Describe your professional interests, particularly as they relate to research.**

If you identified faculty members who share your interest in a topic, describe your desire to work with them. Be specific, but keep your options open, too.

### **7. Demonstrate your motivation and capacity to succeed.**

Graduate schools are not only selecting students, but they are also choosing future ambassadors of their program. Persuade them that you will contribute to their reputation as an institution throughout your academic studies and professional career. Avoid summarizing other parts of your application. Instead, you

should provide them with concrete examples including relevant publications, presentations, classroom assignments and employment experiences. For example, describing a service project could demonstrate your compassion, which some medical schools value. If you collaborated with others on a research topic, describe your specific contribution. Research in particular is valuable to your readers because you will more than likely need to immerse yourself in this activity during your graduate studies, especially if you are a Ph.D. candidate.

If you have any blemishes in your application, such as low test scores, criminal convictions or poor grades, think carefully before you offer a rationale. If you elect to include this information, be brief and positive. Keep it simple and do not be defensive. Perhaps your academic ability improved once you discovered your passion. Maybe you persisted despite a serious illness or death in your family. If you decide not to address these anomalies yourself, consider asking one of your trusted references to include the topic from a positive standpoint in your letter of recommendation.

### **8. Be concise.**

Personal statements are generally no more than two pages. If the sentence is not essential to your thesis, remove it.

### **9. Carefully proofread and refine the essay.**

Any errors reflect your ability as a writer. Confirm that you used transitions, diverse sentence structures, first person and active voice. Let it sit overnight. Then, read it aloud or backward. Have a consultant at your campus writing center or a professor critique the essay.

#### **References:**

Streufert, Billie. "10 Tips for Writing a Grad School Personal Statement." *Usatoday.com*. Usatoday, 2012. Web. 21 April 2016.

### ***Sample Personal Statement***

Ever since I was young, becoming a researcher who can enrich and better the world with his scientific efforts has always been my ultimate goal. To realize this goal, I hope to be considered for the Civil Engineering Doctoral Program at the University of California at Berkley.

Getting my degree in civil engineering at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth has given me the initial tools to realize my life-long goal. During my undergraduate studies, I embraced every opportunity to learn every technique, and to read about every new discovery, every work of genius, and every success by every engineer I could lay my hands on, aiming at developing my academic and research competence.

All through my undergraduate years, I successfully maintained a level of excellence. This step took me closer to realizing my dream of becoming a researcher in the field of soil engineering, which I became extremely fascinated with as an undergraduate.

After graduating with honors and in the top 20 in my class of 180 students, I seized every opportunity to put all the theories and applications I learned in college into action. In order to develop my skills in the

work field, I worked at *MotawieFor Road Construction* for over a year. As part of my work, I designed and constructed highways and inner roads in the ancient city of Cairo. I later worked as a junior engineer at *Petrojet*, the leading petrochemical company in Egypt, designing and supervising the construction of the new administration headquarters, buildings and roads for the company's housing district. Then in 1997, I worked at *Style Design Consulting Office* where I oversaw onsite inspections.

My fascination with the richness in the field of soil engineering has encouraged me to join the graduate Civil Engineering program with a concentration in soil mechanics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. As a student in the Master's program, I have managed to maintain a GPA of 4.0 and earn the respect of my professors and colleagues. For my thesis project, I am currently performing tests on the characterization of peat, organic and soft soil, a research project funded by the Mass Highway Department. Most of my research involves working with soil samples from the project site of Route 44 to find out and analyze the characteristics of the peat supporting the retaining wall along the route.

I am currently working as a teaching assistant at the University of Massachusetts. I assist professors with grading students' work and exams. I also work as a research assistant conducting various lab tests on organic soil and soft clay. Committed to my work, I have always maintained the deadlines the professors have set for me and have managed to perform at peak efficiency, constantly aiming at exceeding their expectations.

Becoming a researcher who can contribute to the available body of knowledge in the field of soil engineering is my primary objective in pursuing my doctorate in civil engineering at the University of California at Berkeley in spring 2004. Joining your highly-esteemed program and working with the guidance of your devoted faculty will give me the necessary tools to develop my research skills and enhance my knowledge in the field of civil engineering.