PERSONAL & RESEARCH STATEMENTS

Tips for perfecting your personal statement or research statement.

In this tipsheet, you'll learn about the purpose and potential of personal and research statements and see examples to help you get started.

What is a personal statement?

Personal statements are an often-requested element of professional and graduate school applications and can take the form of essays, letters or paragraphs of varying lengths. Personal statements provide you with the opportunity to place the rest of your application in a narrative context and they can help your readers understand your passion and motivation for applying to a specific program. Your statement should complement the rest of your application by giving readers a glimpse of the human being behind the data in your file.

Schools often provide guidelines of what they expect to see in a personal statement. If a school does not provide you with guidelines, you may want to help readers understand more about:

- your motivations for applying to the program or choosing the career direction
- why you are interested in attending their school
- experiences that have helped you make your decision or sparked your passion for the field
- your personal suitability and what will help you be successful in the program
- how the program may align with your career plans and goals

The beginning

Carefully review the guidelines put forward by your program of interest. The opening sentences of your statement are particularly critical in capturing the reader's curiosity and attention. You might consider opening with an (appropriately) amusing personal anecdote, an unexpected observation, or a bold and perhaps mildly provocative statement.
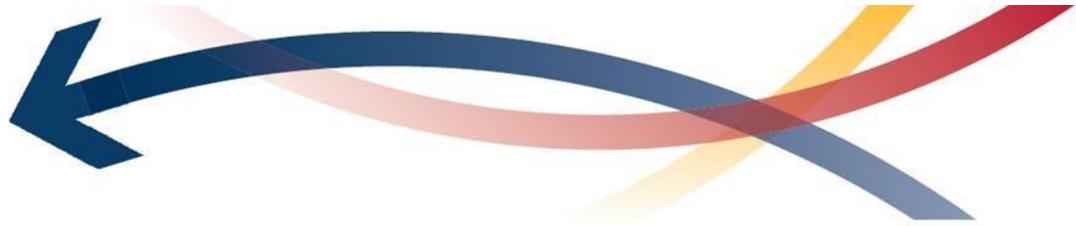
> **Here is a sample introduction from a "why I want to be a lawyer" personal statement:**
> *"My interest in the law began with donuts. As a child, I developed early persuasive skills during family disagreements on how to divide boxes of the treats. My parents belonged to the 'biggest people deserve the most donuts' school of thought; while as the youngest family member, I was a devout believer in the 'one person, one donut' principle. The debates were often cutthroat, but when it came to donut distribution, I sought justice at any cost."*
> *(Source: https://www.essayedge.com/blog/why-law-sample-essay/)*

The middle

Use the middle paragraphs of your personal statement to provide a narrative around one or two of your life themes relevant to the field you wish to pursue. You might choose to include information about your interests, skills, qualifications, experiences, and career goals that make you a good fit for the program. You may also wish to address any potential issues in your application; for example, poor grades related to academic difficulties after you experienced a death in your family.

Here is a sample of a middle portion from an engineering applicant's personal statement:
Most of all, I sought to solve problems that impact the real world. Inspired by the water crisis in India, I developed a water purification system that combines carbon nanotube filters with shock electrodialysis to both desalinate and purify water more efficiently and cost-effectively than conventional plants. The following year, I ventured into disease detection, designing a piezoresistive microcantilever that detected the concentration of beta-amyloid protein to medically diagnose a patient with Alzheimer's disease, a use for cantilevers that hadn't yet been discovered. The project received 1st Honors at the Georgia Science Fair.
(Source: https://www.collegeessayguy.com/blog/personal-statement-examples)

The end
The end of your personal statement should provide a clean summary of the themes you drew on throughout the letter. Tie up loose ideas and end with a hopeful and enthusiastic tone looking into the future.

Here is a sample ending from a student who used the pop-culture idea of "Where's Waldo?" to demonstrate the value he brought to his international travel experiences:
When an environment becomes too familiar, we change pages. Whether it was wearing the same letters as my American brothers in California, acting the part of a professional fund manager when interviewing the executive board of major corporations, or tutoring Chinese children in English, the Waldo within me adapts, challenges himself and discovers something new about the people around him.

Who knows where life will take me next? I have heard of a particular platform of intellectual and cultural exchange that gathers the most interesting minds from all around the world. The institution is praised for its ability to convey experience and wisdom through round tables of interaction and Socratic rhetoric. I believe it is a place where, as my Chicago family and friends would say, "finding passionate people is easier done than said." In other words, it is/would be a wonderful page to be on, completely invisible and singular at the same time
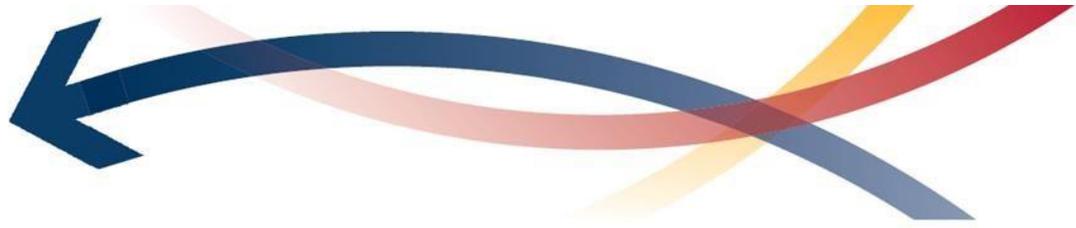*(Source: https://www.story2.com/blog/personal-statement-examples)*

What is a research statement?
Research statements are different from personal statements in that they have a stronger focus on the specifics of your research efforts and intentions, while being written in an academic format often with references related to your research interest. Programs that are research-based are more likely to request a research statement from applicants as they may want to assess your research intentions while you attend the program. It provides an opportunity for applicants to explain why they have decided to pursue a research topic, and the purpose or impact of their focus.

If a school does not provide you with guidelines, you may want to help readers understand more about:

- your experiences, motivations, and evolving relationship with a research topic
- why you would like to pursue this research at their school/program
- information on funding sources, materials, or industrial collaborations regarding your research
- the benefits of your research and how it contributes to the field
- how your research may continue long-term after completing the program

The beginning

Your statement should begin by situating your research within the larger context of your field, and the larger question or questions you are interested in answering. It should also articulate your specific interest, written for an audience of other professionals in your field.

Here is a research statement introduction example within the field of Gender Studies:
""Luscious fare is the jewel of inordinate desires," [1] cautions [2] the author of The Gentlewoman's Companion (1673), one of many early modern conduct books I surveyed this past year for an honors thesis entitled "'Chaste, Silent, and Hungry': The Problem of Female Appetite in Early Modern England, 1550-1700." [3] As indicated by the title, this project explores a provocative but as of yet scarcely studied facet of early modern gender constructions: female food desire.[4] I use the word "desire" here rather deliberately, as early modern definitions of appetite extended well beyond the physiological drive to eat to encompass all those physical (and shameful) longings associated with the body. And, in a culture where women were by definition immoderate and sensual, female food appetite, I argue, constituted an unruly[5] desire that demanded both social and moral discipline. In brief, my research concerns the patriarchal control of women's bodies in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England vis--vis a cultural idea about food desire and satiation as suggestive and immodest.[6]"
(Source: https://devlegalsimpli.blob.core.windows.net/pdfseoforms/pdf-20180219t134432z-001/pdf/sample-statement-of-purpose.pdf?sv=2018-03-28&si=readpolicy&sr=c&sig=MXHnWmn0sXNXztiU%2Bugk2d7DV7KBCOuXF3oBMx0EeEw%3D)

The middle

The body of your statement should also include how your **past research** has evolved, from the initial questions you set out to answer to how it has contributed to your field so far. Include mention of any publications under review, upcoming conferences you will be attending, and/or other professional involvement, as well as any significant recognition your research has received, including grants and awards. It should focus on the questions your **present research** is addressing and your findings or conclusions so far. How are you actively contributing to the broader academic conversation? Why does your research matter? Why is it important? Acknowledge the work of other scholars in your field, when appropriate.

Here is a middle portion of a research statement example within the field of Education:
"A New School in Town: School Openings, School Choice and Academic Achievement" is my most recent paper on new school openings. All developed countries spend a large share of their investment budget to build and open new schools in areas where existing schools are overcrowded. There is almost no evaluation of how these investments do impact students in developed countries, settings where children have already access to schooling anyway. Using a dataset on all middle school students in the Paris region, I look at the impact of opening on new school on students living in its neighborhood. I use a difference-in-differences strategy to evaluate the impact of new school openings. After a new public school opens in the neighborhood, families are 18 % less likely to opt for a private middle school, most likely because of the new geographic proximity to a public school. This result has important implications, as

identifying the determinants of private school choice is key for understanding how the private sector contributes to the inequality of educational contexts.

Three other works are in progress. First, with Eric Maurin and Arnaud Riegert, we evaluate a field experiment on a mentoring program for high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Second, with Thomas Breda and Clémentine Van Effenterre (PSE, PhD student), we explore when the gender gap across fields appears or increases during the school curriculum. We attempt to identify when stereotypes lead females to exit sciences, and how school and non-school contexts may influence both gender stereotypes and students' choices of major. Third, I start a work with Manon Garrouste and Meryam Zaiem (both CREST) to investigate how local supply of schools and tracks (vocational or general studies) may influence students' choices between general or vocational studies, using new openings of general or vocational high schools in neighborhoods.
(Source: https://www.wordtemplatesonline.net/writing-an-academic-research-statement/ "Graduate School Academic Research Statement 03")

The end

Describe the **future trajectory** of your research. Describe 2-3 feasible research ideas that interest you that you are hoping to address and how you intend on pursuing the research – e.g. potential funding sources, collaborative partners, programs, facilities. etc. How does your research goals align with the goals of the institution or department to which you are applying?

Here is the end of a research statement example in the field of technological communications:
Optimizing content freshness for geo-diverse OSNs: With researchers from the Internet Group at Telefonica Research in Barcelona I am currently working on exploiting structural properties of social networking websites with the purpose of improving the performance of such services. Online Social Network (OSN) applications have become highly popular over the last few years, having large user bases, distributed across the entire planet. It is generally accepted that in order to handle a geographically diverse user base, relevant data should be replicated as close as possible to the end-user, as this reduces the user perceived latency. The peak-based (i.e., 95-percentile) pricing policy used on WAN links raises an interesting trade-off between freshness of replicated content and bandwidth cost, where freshness characterizes how local copies on replicas capture latest updates. The system we propose [WYT] optimizes the aforementioned tradeoff by scheduling the transmission of contents, leveraging: (i) knowledge of the mapping between social relationships and geographic location, friends being generally geographically close, and (ii) knowledge of timing regularities in the activity pattern of users
(Source: https://www.wordtemplatesonline.net/writing-an-academic-research-statement/ "Generic Academic Research Sample")

Best Practices:

1. Strive for depth rather than breadth; narrow your focus to one or two themes, ideas, or experiences.
2. Provide the reader with insight into what drives you – i.e. what makes you "tick."
3. Be confident about your skills and abilities, rather than trying to pretend to be the "ideal" applicant.
4. Address the particular school/program's unique features that attract you.

5. Maintain a positive mindset and tone in your statement; consider an addendum to explain weaknesses or extenuating circumstances.
6. Evaluate and reflect on your experiences rather than merely recounting them.
7. Enlist others to proofread your essay for grammar, punctuation, word usage, and style.
8. Use a highly readable typeface with conventional spacing and margins.
(Referenced from Peterson's Perfect Personal Statements, 3rd ed., pages 23-24)

Some Red Flags to Watch Out For:

1. Write in a professional and authentic tone and format. Beware of writing an expository resume that repeats information already in your application.
2. Avoid excessive negative focus on the "system" or your circumstances in life; however, constructive criticism is fine as long as it related directly to your career goals.
3. Consider your use of tone; while expressing your values and opinions is fine, avoid coming across as fanatical or extreme.
4. Don't talk about money as a motivating factor in your plans for the future.
5. If you choose to disclose aspects of your identity, do contextualize it to your application to make it clear why that has been an influence/factor/barrier in your life.
6. Don't waste your writing space with a clichéd introduction or conclusion, or redundant statements such as the school/program's ranking.
7. Don't submit supplemental materials unless the school requests them.
8. Make sure to proofread, especially the name of the school or program!

Want to learn more?

Consider booking a career consultation appointment to explore how you'd like to approach writing this document, or to gather feedback on a draft of your personal or research statement.

Career Services offers Drop-in Career Advising to answer quick questions related to all aspects of your career planning and job search - Monday to Thursday from 1:30pm to 3:30pm.

For more in-depth explanations and examples, consult the following resources in our Career Information Area:

- *Peterson's Perfect Personal Statements* by Mark Alan Stewart
- *Great Personal Statements for Law School* by Paul Bodine
- *101 Medical School Personal Statements that Made a Difference* by Dr. Nancy Nolan
- *Research Statements 101 Binder* by Queen's Career Services