What is the personal statement and why is it important?

The personal statement is one of the most important and informative pieces of information that graduate review committees use to evaluate your application. The personal statement enables the reviewer to “get to know you” beyond numbers (GRE and GPA). It also allows the reviewer to get a sense of how well you write, how you articulate your thoughts, and how adept you are at organizing and presenting yourself. It is very important that you spend time on the personal essay, as it could be the difference between your getting in or not.

Preparing to write the personal statement:

As you begin the process of applying to graduate school, it is a good time to remember who and what your intellectual influences have been. You should answer the following questions with at least a full sentence, but less than half of a page:

- What writers and which particular articles in your field of study have had the greatest influence on the development of your thought?
- Who were your favorite professors in college and why? How has each influenced you?
- What is the best paper or exam you ever wrote in your major and what makes it good?
- What do you consider the most important book, play, article, or film you have ever read/seen, and how has it influenced you?
- What is the single most important concept you have learned in college?

Not all applicants to graduate school have a clear or specific career direction in mind. Therefore, your next exercise is to define your career goal, as nearly as you can. Consider why you have chosen the particular path you are now pursuing, and make a list of your real reasons for doing so. What attracts you to this career? What do you hope to gain? Be honest. When you have completed this list, you should write down other ways you could achieve or obtain them. It is now time to ask yourself questions regarding the historical overview of the etiology of your career choice:

- When did you first become interested in your current career direction? How has that interest evolved?
- When, as exactly as you can say, did you become sure of this career choice? What event or thought precipitated that certitude?
- What work experiences have led you to believe you would like to pursue a graduate education?
- What experiences as a volunteer or traveler have influenced your career direction?
- What experiences from your family life have contributed to this choice?

You should next consider your academic background:

- How have you prepared yourself to succeed in graduate school?
- What body of relevant knowledge will you take with you?
- What study, research, or laboratory skills have you honed to date?
- What personal attributes or physical characteristics would make you particularly likely to succeed in your new career?
Preparing to write the personal statement continued:

One important issue that should be addressed in the personal statement is your biggest accomplishment to date? You should take your time with this question, as it may not be obvious. While thinking of it you may want to make a list of “the many things I am proud of.”

The next important issue is the research you have completed to date. You should make a list of major research projects and your role in them. Be ready to describe the level of participation in the research. On one project you may want to point out that you designed experimental methodologies, scheduled and conducted experiments, analyzed the data, and drafted preliminary conclusions. You should list what you really learned from the research. It is important that you are honest in the personal essay.

It is important that you consider the future as well as the past. You should address your specific career plans, how graduate education can facilitate those plans, your five-year and ten-year goals, and will you be pursuing additional education beyond the program you are applying to? Envision as specific a future as you can and write a few lines on where you see yourself going.

Finally, research the schools for which you will be applying. Describe in detail why this school would be a good match for you both personally and professionally. Show the school that you have done your research by citing specific professors in the department and their research interests that parallel yours. However, do not describe in great detail that you want to work with one faculty member on a very specific topic because you will narrow your chances of acceptance tremendously. It is important that you show the school that they are your “perfect match.”

The essay hall of shame:

- Errors and sloppiness, words and phrases crossed out, even handwritten essays.
- Spelling errors and poor English.
- Anything that starts out with “I’ve always wanted to be _________”.
- Essays that don’t answer the question.
- When you say what you think they want to hear. They can pick up on it right away.
- A whole essay on deep personal problems. The essay should be upbeat, no whining and no excuses!
- Essays that are too long. It shows no discipline. Limit to 2 double-spaced pages.
- Students who are afraid to tell anything about themselves, which leads the reviewers, back to the numbers.

Bottom line: Reviewers want to see originality. What makes you unique and why would you be an asset to their institution. Be specific and be honest. Most important – take your time and get your professors to read over the essay – it could be the difference between your getting in or not.