

16. THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

By Chris Pappas

The personal statement, sometimes called a statement of purpose, is a chance for applicants to present their best *intellectual self* to graduate programs. From the start, we are presented with two problems with terminology. First and foremost, the personal statement has little to do with being “personal” as we usually understand that term. While it does offer applicants the chance to humanize the otherwise formulaic and/or quantitative aspects of their application materials, it should not be understood as anything close to a process that helps other people fully understand all the magic and mystery that makes someone unique. Rather, and here we deal with the second term—the personal statement is only personal as far as it helps introduce and clarify one’s intellectual self. That is, it should be tailored towards presenting one’s self as an intellectual/scholar/researcher/etc.—a bright, mature, and hard-working young professional who can gain something from and offer something to a particular graduate program.

An important thing to keep in mind, not only for the personal statement but across the whole application process, is that the personal statement represents the opportunity to build a relationship between you, the applicant, and the people who are reviewing your application. (At various points I will refer to these people as

admissions committees, the faculty, and so on.) Like it or hate it—and cards on the table, I hate it—you have to think about the process in the somewhat alienating terms of self-promotion and marketing. You are trying to convince a group of strangers that you are (and now take your pick of language to complete the sentence): awesome, smart, talented, dedicated, full of potential—essentially, that you are worth their time and resources because it will benefit everyone involved.

In the personal statement, you need to communicate how you will “fit” in with the program to which you are applying? Do your interests, skills, career goals, etc. fit in with the established interests and aims of their department/faculty? Do you seem to have the right temperament, cultural capital, etc. to be productive in grad school? Does the program/department/school have any research institutes/centers or other resources that focus on these same interests? Does it seem to the committee that this specific program is a good place for you, or does it appear that you are only applying there because of their prestige, location, or some other, let’s say, “non-essential” factors?

Let’s be blunt: if the answer to the above questions suggests a bad fit, you may want to rethink applying to that particular program. But

if the answers are more positive, here is some advice.

1. The writing has to be impeccable. In technical terms, the personal statement is a relatively short but dense document, typically about 1,000 words or between one and two single-spaced, or two to three double-spaced, pages. Of course, one should always defer to whatever guidelines are set forth in the application materials. The statement must be **extremely** polished; any and all errors in grammar, mechanics, formatting, etc. could be grounds for rejection. Faculty members will be reading and evaluating your statements (along with all other materials). Consider that a typical two- to six-person group is reading their share of fifty to a several hundred applications, and that is on top of their teaching, research, and other professional responsibilities, not to mention their personal obligations. The mindset you want to take from this is: faculty might be looking for any reason to reject you, because rejections take less time.

2. The purpose is to show your intellectual potential. Aside from these technical matters, the soul of the personal statement is your ability to communicate your intellectual self. Again, the personal statement is functional, and its function is to introduce the applicant as a promising student/intellectual/researcher/professional, and to demonstrate that the applicant is both qualified and deserving of admission.

3. The structure of the statement is (more or less) standard. Some programs will ask for a specific structure, but most of the time the statement of purpose is composed of four to six important elements, four are presented here, but arguments could be made for splitting some of them up. And again, always check the application instructions for any specifics.

Generically speaking, the core components are:

- a. Research interests, including why/how this program will help you realize them.
- b. Academic/Intellectual background to the extent that it has prepared you for this next step, especially with regard to skills and motivation.
- c. Career goals, and how the program will help you achieve them.
- d. Explanations for any aspects of your application that might be problematic.

All of these components must be present in the final product. However, one does have a little flexibility in how they are presented. In the next sections, I will describe each of these elements in more detail.

RESEARCH INTERESTS: SHOWING "FIT"

Transcripts, GRE scores, and the like can speak to the quantitative aspects of one's undergraduate career, but the personal statement is perhaps the only chance an applicant will have to discuss their central academic/intellectual concerns. Those who will be reading this document want *details* that other aspects of the application cannot provide.

For example, one could say that they are interested in studying race and ethnicity. However, this is broad and does not differentiate the applicant from the rest of the people who are also interested in this area. One might want to talk about a specific group or phenomenon (racialization among Arab Americans, experiences of upper class Blacks, how racial discourses are created and maintained), or one may want to reflect some personal insight that one's story can bring to the

topic (“as a multi-racial woman...,” “as the adopted Mexican-American son of Asian American parents...”), or one could raise some methodological points based on experiences in and out of the field (“My time at an internship showed me the internal divisions within a group concerning class lines and neighborhood...”, or “my time spent living in neighborhoods like these has given me tremendous local cultural capital, which allows me to understand historical and hidden symbolic and linguistic styles...”).

Another strategy worth considering is to talk about bringing together different schools of thought, or different methodologies, etc. A phrase one often sees on faculty web pages is something like “My work lies at the intersections of [x, y, z],” where x, y, and z are theoretical or methodological foci or different research/interest areas. This is another way of showing something special about one’s research interests. For example, one could state, “My research interests lie at the intersection of race, social movements, and transnationalism.”

It is **mandatory** that one has done at least some basic research on their research interests. Much of this, of course, will have come from coursework as an undergraduate, where one hopefully learned big names, texts, etc. on their interest areas. However, it is on the applicant to pore over faculty websites and CVs to find out which people in the department/program would be interested in the applicant’s research interests. Moreover, one should be familiar with any major publications faculty have produced in or near these areas. This serves four purposes. First, it shows that the applicant has good reasons for applying to *this* specific program/department. Second, it reinforces claims to scholarly/intellectual rigor. Third, these details show that the applicant is taking the whole process seriously and is being professional about it. Finally, it should help the applicant

figure out whether or not this program is a good fit, and who among the faculty the applicant wants to study under.

ACADEMIC/ INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND: PRESENTING THE INTELLECTUAL SELF

I have been using the term “intellectual self” to refer to the curated version of yourself you will put forward to admission committees. Here, I want to stress the importance of adding real substance to your intellectual self. Again, transcripts tell a vague story about interests and passions, *details* are crucial in the personal statement. As indicated above, information should be carefully tailored to fit the program to which one is applying. That is, it should complement and enhance the research interests already claimed, and should allow for some special insights to come through. Does the applicant share a theoretical or methodological focus with any faculty members? Are there any special projects or extracurricular activities that show engagement with these areas beyond the usual coursework?

THE OPENING STORY

Although it may be better positioned in the “Tone/Mood” section, this might be a good time to address one of the most common, if not cliché, moves in personal statements: the opening story. Many students are advised to open with a story from their past that shows early involvement with their research topics, or a personal history with social problems, or perhaps some experiences which led to an epiphany about how the world works, or how it can be studied, etc. If done well, these can add a lot of power to a personal statement. To do a good job, remember these three crucial points. First, these stories should be tailored towards the research interests on which the applicant is marketing themselves. Second, and related, the

stories are meant to demonstrate academic excellence and/or potential, not to delve into aspects of one's personal life unrelated to their intellectual work. Third, the story must have the appropriate tone; avoid humor, avoid obvious sensationalism, and be very careful about stories that involve any kind of trauma.

When describing one's background, again, remember that details are key; go beyond what the transcript already says. For example, there is not reason to say something like "As you can see, the 'A' I received in Sociology of Gender shows that I am awesome at these topics." Rather, build a bridge from these important beginnings to their potential futures. "In my undergraduate classes on gender, I began to focus on how interactions within the family shape gender roles, specifically, which factors lead to the adoption of more traditional roles versus those which produce alternative roles." Or perhaps "I am interested in exploring the ways in which intersectional feminisms have understood the family."

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: TONE, MOOD, AND STRUCTURE

Concerning structure, the general rule is to lead with what you feel is the strongest aspect of your intellectual self, 'sandwich' any potentially problematic stuff in the middle, and end with another pretty strong piece. Further, it is usually recommended that research interests come first or second. Looking over your application, think about what stands out as the most impressive. Is there a narrative that you need to establish before getting into the details? Is it something easily measured like a high GPA or test scores? Some accomplishments that demonstrate success and drive? A great idea for a research project that connects to the department/program's strengths? These are the kinds of things that could be great openers for the statement.

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the extremely common "opening strategy" of beginning with a biographical story. These stories are usually embedded in some personal experience which gave the writer the initial spark of interest in their major, or extra insight into the problem or issue on which they want to focus. Perhaps the story comes from a previous achievement in investigating a research interest. All of these are fine and good, but I am personally of the opinion that using an opening story is so common that it is now cliché. That is, it is an opening that so many applicants will use, and therefore a format the admissions committee will have seen too much of, such that its impact might get lost.

However, as previously mentioned, the statement is one of the few chances in the application process—perhaps the only chance—where an applicant can humanize themselves. The key here is to go through the story in such a way that it is not so transparently self-serving ("I did this amazing thing because I am amazing and in your program I can only get more amazing..."), but rather thoughtful and insightful. That is, keep the focus on how the story led to an improvement in your intellectual self.

However, and this is a big point, DO NOT OVERSHARE. Some of the experiences that demonstrate your ability to overcome adversity or which provide crucial insights might be controversial, unpleasant, etc. For example, I am familiar with many successful applicants to graduate school who had some sort of criminal record. Many were then interested in the sociology of criminology and deviance, and talked about how their experiences and observations going through the criminal justice system gave them additional insight that cannot be obtained from a classroom. Those not interested in criminology were able to connect other social issues/problems to their record,

and use that as a way to demonstrate their insight. But the goal is always the same: talk about something that makes one's interests "more than academic," which paints these interests as real and relevant.

Recounting various traumatic experiences can be useful in making one's research interests and insights more powerful, but they can also backfire, either by making the reviewer uncomfortable, by being seemingly unrelated to your intellectual self, or by creating the impression that you have not actually overcome these events, which could shape your scholarship on the issue. Again, the personal statement is functional, and therapy is not one of those functions.

As far as tone and mood, there are some other things to avoid. For example, humor is generally a bad strategy. It might undercut the seriousness of the rest of the statement, and like so much communication these days, it might be misread/misunderstood. If you would need to use an emoji to get your point across, avoid it altogether.

Another thing to avoid is making one's statement nothing more than a list of accomplishments. While this might be a good way to start drafting out a statement, it should not be the final result. As a way to bridge the gap from draft to final, every item on the list should have some explanation of how it has or will help clarify/expand one's research interests, produce some sort of special sociological insight, or demonstrate special proficiency in core skills or special/rare talents.

Finally, and perhaps most important: do not commit to anything about which you feel uncomfortable, and do not lose yourself in all of this advice if it feels wrong. The diversity of applicants and programs is too great to capture in one document, so I've provided a snapshot of

the process, but your story might be different. There is no need to hammer your intellectual self into a shape that you no longer recognize.

CAREER GOALS: THE HAZY FUTURE

There is a strong chance that both the applicant and the admissions committee understand that the career goals discussed in the personal statement are hypothetical, tentative, and contingent on a future that has not happened yet. Nevertheless, what faculty want to see is that the applicant has considered, to some extent, what might lie beyond grad school.

If it is a master's program, then how will you take advantage of the program to establish a career? What specific roles/positions/etc. are being sought after, and which are made available with this particular degree? If interviewed, consider asking questions about job placement, internships, and so on. Note that geographical location can be a powerful factor in master's programs, because programs are usually connected to local and regional resources and often see themselves as serving a particular community. In PhD programs it is assumed one will apply for academic jobs wherever they are available, but it is exceedingly rare that new PhDs will get hired at their degree-granting department/institution, and in most cases even rarer that they will stay in the same city or state (California is a little different due to its size).

If it is a doctoral program, is the plan to pursue a "traditional" academic career, finding a position at a university? If teaching is the focus, is a liberal arts position more likely? Is the goal to move towards a research position with a government/state agency or a think tank? How will you capitalize on the knowledge and skills the program will offer? Communicating something about these questions not only shows professionalism and drive, but also

shows cultural capital in understanding how academic careers work. Talk to your teachers if you have not yet considered these questions.

EXPLAINING PROBLEMATIC ISSUES: POLISHING COAL INTO A DIAMOND

The most difficult work of a personal statement is when one needs to address any shortcomings or disruptions in one's academic career. There are four "typical" cases here: a low GPA, significant gaps within one's undergraduate experience, significant gaps between graduating and applying for graduate school, and possibly overlapping with the above, extenuating circumstances unrelated to academics, like medical/health issues, financial issues, etc. While lying is never acceptable under any circumstances, you can spin the events into a compelling narrative.

First things first; if you know in your heart of hearts that there is no good reason that explains the blemish, consider not drawing attention to it at all. Take the hit. However, there are a lot of silver linings, so do not give up until you have really thought this through.

The most effective strategy to deal with these issues is to make them part of the narrative you may have staked out in your opening paragraph, or somewhere else in the statement. Typically, this narrative has something to do with overcoming adversity, a tried and true sociological story which can connect personal experiences to sociological issues/problems/phenomena, etc. In a way, you can use these narratives to make a claim to some special insight or perspective, as a way to show that you understand the issue not only academically, but through the real world. (If one wanted to be fancy, one could call this "epistemic privilege.") Simply put, if any part of your personal narrative has to do with hardship of any kind, and it is plausible that those hardships played a role in

the disruptions or blemishes on your record, it is also likely that the fact that you are being in a position to applying to graduate school means that you have overcome said obstacles in spectacular fashion.

Also, let's be honest here: there is a decent amount of spin that comes with writing a personal statement; it is an inherently self-serving document. As long as you do not fabricate, as long as you embellish without actually crossing over into a lie, then you are on the side of right. Get comfortable with this kind of writing, as you'll probably need to use it again when throwing some metaphorical glitter on research findings with weak statistical significance.

Below are some common issues that might need to be explained in a personal statement, and some narrative ideas that might cast them in a better light.

Problem: A low GPA, but one which shows increased improvement every term.

Narrative: I was a lazy/disinterested/aimless/etc. student until an epiphany in my coursework/research experience or real-life experience that connects to coursework/research caused a radical transformation in my intellectual and academic sensibilities.

Problem: A low but steady GPA

Narrative: I understand that my GPA might be lower than other applicants, but I believe that my record shows special insights and skills that go beyond the GPA. While working my way through college/dealing with a particular issue/finding my intellectual calling/etc. I gained great insight into the link between [the obstacle

you overcame] and [particular research interest]

Problem: A gap between schools, majors, etc.

Narrative: You will notice a gap between my first two years of college...

Option 1: I knew soon after the first year ended that I was not yet ready to make the most of my college experience. I took a year off to [learn how to study more effectively] [build up finances so I could immerse myself in my studies when I returned] [get involved with activist organizations about (significant cause related to research goals) to see if what I was learning was relevant to real world struggles and if not, how to fix that.]

Option 2: The gap between my first two years of college can be explained by (calamitous event), but I learned during this time that (insight into research goals). This structured the rest of my undergraduate experience, as I sought out courses and research opportunities that could [give greater understanding/help me to help others/etc.]

Problem: A three-year gap between graduating and applying.

Narrative: Since graduating from Sacramento State, I have taken my interest in (topic x) as far as it can go without graduate school. I have worked/volunteered/etc. at (organization 1, place 2, etc.) which has

- kept me up to date on significant legal challenges
- offered opportunities to better understand this issue

- set the stage to enter the field for an ethnographic study
- have allowed me to see key structural obstacles to improving this condition
- could be addressed with the resources (be specific) in your program.

Here is the real secret: **you only need to create a narrative that gets you into the program.**

After that, you can, in most cases, change your whole approach. Just because your statement highlights your interest in a particular area, does not mean you actually have to study or focus in that area; it is expected that research interests change. Note: This is not advisable if you've been hired as a research assistant, as there is a *quid pro quo* that you came to that program to work with a particular person on a specific issue; bailing out would be a drastic loss of face, but combining it with something else or being honest about other interests could lead to great things.

FINAL NOTES

There is no need to do this alone. By now, I hope you have cultivated some friends who will give you honest, critical evaluations of your writing. They can be useful in reviewing your personal statement. Anything you would feel uncomfortable letting them read is certainly too much for a faculty member who does not know you.

Talk to your teachers about the process, ask questions, and request that they look over the statement. Get a lot of different perspectives to get a sense of which approach makes the most sense for you. This is especially the case for those who are writing letters of recommendation on your behalf. If they agreed

to write the letter, they want to see you succeed and will help you to do so.

Finally, know this: according to every applicant, advisor, teacher, and admissions committee member I have ever met, graduate school admissions is a fundamentally random and strange process. Everyone knows applicants who should have been admitted that were not, and every program has students whose presence cannot be adequately explained. If

you get rejected, do not take it personally. Maybe there was an issue of perceived fit, maybe the department is restructuring, maybe the committee member got a ticket on the way to the office on the day they read your application, or maybe the best fit in the department will be on sabbatical the following year or will retire soon. Of course, I guess the same logic applies if you got accepted, but at that point, who cares? You got into grad school!

FIVE TIPS FOR PREPARING FOR GRAD SCHOOL

1. Find your sections. To help fine tune your interest areas and identify resources and programs, it is worth checking out the ASA's list of sections. These sections represent the major interest areas in sociology, and are the means through which conferences are organized, through which various awards are established, and which can clue you in to big names and current ideas in your interest areas. These sections will also occasionally have their own conferences, sometimes attached to the major annual ASA conference, but sometimes on their own. The list is at: asanet.org/asa-communities/asa-sections/current-sections

2. Start reading journals. Students are often shocked at the difference between the texts they encounter in classes and those that actually make up the bulk of professional sociology. You need to get used to it. In addition to reading tons of journal articles in grad school, you will also be expected to write them. Moreover, like the above, this can help you understand the major ideas, conventions, authors, etc in your interest areas. For suggestions of what to read, talk to your teachers and/or follow your interest areas.

3. Consider conferences. Planning on staying in California? The West Coast? There is no reason why you should not try to attend a meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association (<http://www.pacificsoc.org/>), one of the various regional divisions of the American Sociological Association. Presenting a paper or otherwise taking on an active role at this event is an excellent line on your CV, and it also gives you a chance to meet and talk with professors at programs to which you want to apply. Planning on leaving the West Coast? It will take more time to get there, but you can attend the other regional conferences as well: Eastern (<http://www.essnet.org/>) / Southern (<http://www.southernsociologicalsociety.org/>) / North Central (<https://www.ncsanet.org/>) / Midwest (<http://www.themss.org/>) / Southwestern (<https://sssaonline.org/>) / The Society for the Study of Social Problems (<http://www.sssp1.org/>) / The Association of Black Sociologists (<http://www.associationofblacksociologists.org/>) / Sociologists for Women in Society (<http://socwomen.org>).

4. Math is inevitable. Just about any worthwhile grad school program will require statistics, and some may even want you to demonstrate your proficiency as part of the application process. Aside from the standard courses you will take/have taken here, look to other resources if you need them. Many schools offer free online courses, and the internet is full of other options, from YouTube to Khan Academy to the kinds of services that advertise on podcasts. Besides, you will need these skills if you need to take the GREs. If you feel uncomfortable with your quantitative skills, do something about it!

5. Become a resource/Remember where you came from. After you go off to grad school and your future, don't forget about all of us here at Sac State. Perhaps you will be open to talking to future applicants about what it's like, what worked for you, etc. Maybe you will want to keep in touch with your teachers and tell them what they need to start doing to better prepare undergraduates. Develop a professional support system for yourself and others.