

# 7 STEPS TO WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT

..... a practical handout

*A personal statement is a piece of writing that reveals how your experiences have shaped your interest in your field. It supplements and adds a personal touch to your application to graduate school.*

## STEP 1 Research the University & Program

Graduate programs can be very selective. They want to choose students who are the best fit for their university and program, so your job is to help them see that you are the best fit. The personal statement will help you do that.

Start by researching the school. Use these questions to guide you:

- Do you meet the minimum requirements?
- How do your professional goals align with their mission?
- Does your philosophy of learning align with theirs?
- Do they have professors who specialize in the specific topics you are interested in?
- What types of professions or careers are their alumni doing?

## STEP 2 Review the Prompt Closely

Please highlight your academic preparation and motivation; interests, specializations and career goals; and fit for pursuing graduate study at UC Davis.

- **preparation and motivation** may include your academic and research experiences that prepare you for this graduate program (for example: coursework, employment, exhibitions, fieldwork, foreign language proficiency, independent study, internships, laboratory activities, presentations, publications, studio projects, teaching, and travel or study abroad) and motivation or passion for graduate study.
- **interests, specializations, and career goals** may include your research interests, disciplinary subfields, area/s of specialization, and professional objectives.
- **fit** may include how your preparation, experiences, and interests match the specific resources and characteristics of your graduate program at UC Davis. Please identify specific faculty within your desired graduate program with whom you would like to work and how their interests match your own.

Although graduate programs may have similar prompts, you don't want to assume they are all the same.

Print out the prompt and review it closely. Use highlighters, pens and sticky notes to help you remember the important parts of the prompt.

*The prompt on the right is from the UC, Davis graduate studies admissions page.*

## STEP 3 Reflect on Your Experiences

Pull out a piece of paper and reflect on your experiences. Use the following questions to guide your reflection:

### Personal Experience

How did your personal experiences influence your decision to pursue graduate school?

- *What kind of family do you have?*
- *Did your parents go to college?*
- *Who in your life has had the most influence on your decision to go to graduate school?*
- *What values did you develop throughout your life?*
- *Do you have a specific interest that you want to pursue in graduate school? How did that interest develop?*

### **Undergraduate College Experience**

How did your undergraduate college experience influence your decision to pursue graduate school?

- *Did a specific class/professor spark your interest in a subject?*
- *Were you in any special programs?*
- *Were you involved with any student organizations that helped shape your interest in graduate school?*
- *Did you participate in research?*
- *What were you curious about and did you find answers?*

### **Work Experience (if any)**

How did your professional experience influence your decision to pursue graduate school?

- *What positions did you hold?*
- *What were your responsibilities?*
- *What did you learn from these positions?*
- *What could be improved in these positions?*

### **Other Experience**

What other experiences did you have that influenced your decision to pursue graduate school?

- *What kind of volunteering experiences did you participate in? Why?*
- *Did you study abroad? What did you learn?*
- *Were you in any competitions? Did you win?*

### **Barriers/Challenges**

What barriers or challenges did you face while growing up or while pursuing your undergraduate degree that you have not mentioned yet?

When you are finished listing everything, organize your notes. Which of these experiences would you say was the most influential in your decision to pursue graduate school? Are there any themes within your experiences (working with animals, working with the law, international studies, working with women, etc.)? This can be helpful when you are writing your thesis statement.

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## STEP 4 Plan Out & Organize Your Statement

Your personal statement is essentially an essay, so you will need to plan it out like one. If you like outlining, this may be a good time to create an outline. If you don't like outlining, try making a list or mind mapping using bubbles.

Gather your prompt, reflection notes, and research notes. Answer each question or instruction in the prompt with the information you gathered during your reflection. No need to make it pretty. Just jot down notes for now.

Then organize your answers in a way that makes sense. Here's one way to organize:

- **Introduction** with a personal story and your thesis statement
- **Middle paragraphs** showing how your experiences naturally led you to want to pursue graduate school (this will be multiple paragraphs)
- **Conclusion** connecting back to your personal story and thesis statement

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## STEP 5 Write Your First Draft

The personal statement shouldn't be something you finish in one sitting. It may take several drafts before it's ready to be submitted with the rest of your application material. Make sure you give yourself enough time.

If you created an outline, use your outline to start writing your draft. If you didn't create an outline, start free writing using your organization notes, reflection, and prompt.

One strategy to use is the **Fill-It-In Method**.

1. Write the main topic of each paragraph.

*Volunteering as a translator at Free to Speak*

2. Once the main topics have been written and you have a rough sketch of how your essay is going to look, go back and fill in details.

*In 2017, I volunteered with a non-profit organization called Free to Speak in downtown Sacramento to help provide translation services to low-income elderly immigrants. After three months of translating for men and women at hospitals, social services and other offices, I learned to view language as the doorway to equitable programming.*

3. Add transitions to connect your paragraphs.

*My first real world experience with social justice work began in 2017, when I volunteered with a non-profit organization called Free to Speak in downtown Sacramento. For three months, I helped provide translation services to low-income elderly immigrants. Translating for men and women at hospitals, social services and other offices taught me to see language as the doorway to equitable programming.*

When you are done with your first draft, give yourself a few days break before going back to revise.

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## STEP 6 Revise & Reorganize

When you are ready to revise your personal statement, read through it in one sitting.

- Did you answer all the questions?
- Is your personal statement close to the specific length they asked for?

- Do the different parts of your personal statement flow together to show your motivation, goals and preparation for graduate school? (not necessarily in that order)
- Are there any parts that don't make sense? Mark them on your draft so you remember where they are.
- In general, does your personal statement focus on your strengths?
- In general, does your personal statement show you as someone whose goals are aligned with the university's?

If you need to reorganize, do it at this time before you start editing. Sometimes, just moving paragraphs around helps with the flow of an essay.

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## STEP 7 Edit

Editing should be one of the last things you do. Here are some tips:

- Read your personal statement out loud and listen to the way your writing flows. This will help you catch minor errors, run-on sentences and awkward wording.
- Make sure you are using active voice in your sentences.

*Active voice: I volunteered with a non-profit.*

Active voice shows you taking action. Passive voice, like the example below, shows actions happening to you.

*Passive voice: I was volunteered to help translate.*

- Make sure you are using the correct tenses. Use *past tense* for things that happened in the past and *present tense* for things that happened in the present.
- Be on the lookout for unclear writing.
- Try not to start every sentence with "I"—different sentence types will help your writing sound less monotonous.

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## Some Tips

- Try to avoid the "Ever since I was young, I've always wanted to..." approach.
- Try not to list all your accomplishments. Instead, choose what will best tell your story.
- Try to present events in the order they occurred. It'll be easier for the reader to understand.
- Remember that the events in your life should *naturally* lead you to wanting to pursue graduate school.
- Have someone else read your personal statement to give you feedback. Come to The Writing Center!

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