Personal Statement Workshop

For Undergraduate Students in the UIUC School of Molecular & Cellular Biology
Prepared & Presented by the UIUC Writers Workshop

> Thursday, September 17, 2009
> 5:00–6:00 PM • 140 Burrill Hall

Agenda

1. **Introduction & Overview**
   What is a personal statement? Why is it important? What are some hallmarks of personal statements in the sciences & related fields? How are personal statements evaluated within an admissions packet?

2. **Getting Started**
   Analyzing the connection between your experiences & the intellectual or social values of where you are applying; drafting strategies; questions to ask yourself

3. **Qualities of an Effective Personal Statement**
   Key considerations for statements: Things to Do & Things to Avoid

4. **Sample Statement Critique**
   Medical School Application Essays A & B

5. **Additional Reminders & Advice**

6. **Questions**

7. **Further Resources**

   University of Illinois Writers Workshop: *Home page*
   ▶ http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/

   University of Illinois Writers Workshop: *Personal statement materials*
   ▶ http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/tips/personalstatement/

   University of Illinois Career Center: *Home page*
   ▶ http://www.careercenter.uiuc.edu/

   University of Illinois Career Center: *About graduate school applications*
   ▶ http://www.careercenter.uiuc.edu/gradschool/application.asp

   Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL): *General writing advice, style manuals, & samples*
   ▶ http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_perstate.html

   American Medical Student Association: *Specific advice on AMCAS personal statements*
   ▶ http://www.amsa.org/premed/premedguide/pstatement.cfm

   Accepted.com: *Advice on AMCAS personal statements, with nine good sample statements*
   ▶ http://www.accepted.com/medical/sampleEssays.aspx

Overview of the Personal Statement

Personal statements are sometimes also called "application essays" or "statements of purpose." Whatever they are called, they are essentially **essays that are written in response to a question or questions on a graduate or professional school application form** that asks for some sort of sustained response.

Some applications ask more **specific** questions than others. There is no set formula to follow in shaping your response, only choices for you to make, such as whether you should write an essay that is more **autobiographically focused** or one that is more **professionally focused**. *To a certain extent, both strategies can work for applications to medical school or graduate school in the sciences. Consider this comment, from the American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS) Web site: "Medical schools are looking for the finest minds and the most motivated students who have a strong and demonstrated interest in working with people." Graduate schools in the sciences are also looking for the finest minds and the most motivated students. Your task in your personal statement is to show how you are such an individual.*

From application to application, requested personal statements also vary widely in **length**, ranging from a couple of paragraphs to a series of essays of a page or so each. *For medical school, for example, the standard AMCAS application calls for statement (called "Personal Comments Essays") to be no more than 5,300 characters and spaces (ca. 850 words). Some graduate programs in the sciences ask for a single "personal statement," wherein it is usually necessary to describe your particular research interests (regardless of whether you take an autobiographical or professional approach).*

Personal statements are most important when you are applying to an extremely competitive program, where all the applicants have high test scores and GPAs, and when you are a marginal candidate and need the essay to compensate for low test scores or a low GPA.

Context Considerations

How are personal statements read, and by whom? For **graduate school** applications, your personal statement will mostly likely be read by professors who serve on an admissions committee in the department or program to which you are applying. For **professional school** applications, your personal statement may be read by an admissions committee that includes admissions staff members as well as faculty. In developing your personal statement, you should carefully consider your **audience**. What are the areas of specialty of this department (or program or professional school), and what might it be looking for in a graduate student? Some of these answers may be available on the Web sites of the individual programs. *Note that your single AMCAS essay will be sent to all institutions to which you are applying; personalizing the essay for each school is therefore impossible.*

Additionally, since personal statements will most often be read as part of your **"package,"** they offer an opportunity to show aspects of yourself that will not be developed in other areas of your application. Therefore, personal statements should not simply be prose formulations of material contained elsewhere in the application.

Think, therefore, of the personal statement as the single opportunity in your package to allow the admissions committee to hear your **voice**. Typically, committee members must sort through large numbers of applications and essays, perhaps doing an initial quick sort to find the best applicants and then later reading some of the personal statements more thoroughly. Given that information, you will want your statement to engage the readers and to demonstrate clearly and effectively what makes *you* a unique candidate.

One Process for Writing the Personal Statement

1. Analyze the question(s) asked on each specific application. (See AMCAS 2010 Instructions, pp. 77–78.)

2. Research the school and/or program to which you are applying.

3. Take a personal inventory (see below). Write out a 2–3 sentence response to each question.

4. Write a preliminary draft of your essay.

5. Revise your essay for form and content.

6. Ask someone else—preferably a faculty member in your area—to read your essay and make suggestions for further revision.

7. Revise again.

8. Proofread carefully.

Personal Inventory Questions

- What makes you unique (or at least different from any other applicant)?

- What attracts you to your chosen career? What do you expect to get out of it?

- When did you initially become interested in this career? How has this interest developed? When did you become certain that this is what you wanted to do? What solidified your decision?

- What are your intellectual influences? What writers, books, artists, professors, scientists, theories, or concepts discovered in college (or elsewhere) have especially shaped you?

- How has your undergraduate academic experience prepared you for graduate/professional school?

- What are two or three of the academic accomplishments which have most prepared you?

- What research have you conducted? What did you learn from it?

- What non-academic experiences (work, volunteer activities, family, etc.) contributed to your choice of school and/or career?

- Do you have specific career plans? How does graduate or professional school pertain to them?

- How much more education are you interested in?

- What's the most important thing the admissions committee should know about you?

- Think of a professor you know in your field whom you like and respect. If this person were reading your application essay, what would most impress him or her?

When Writing Your Personal Statements, You *Should*:

- **Answer all the questions asked.**

  If you are applying to more than one program, you may find that each application asks a different question or set of questions, and that you don't really feel like writing a bunch of different responses. However, you should avoid the temptation to submit the same "generic" essay response for different applications: Tailoring your response to each question and each school is far better, if you have the opportunity to do so.

  If you do find yourself short on time and must tailor one basic essay to fit a number of different questions from a number of different schools, target your essay to your first-choice school, and keep in mind that the less your essay is suited to an application's particular questions, the more you may be jeopardizing your chances of being admitted to that school.

- **Be honest and confident in your statements.**

  Use positive emphasis. Do not try to hide, make excuses for, or lie about your weaknesses. In some cases you may need to explain a weak component of your application, but in other cases it may be better not to mention those weaknesses at all. In either case, write an essay that focuses on your strengths.

- **Write a coherent and interesting essay.**

  Make your first paragraph the best paragraph in your essay.

- **Develop a thesis about yourself early in the essay and argue it throughout.**

  Each piece of information you give about yourself in the essay should somehow support your thesis.

- **Pick two to four main topics for a one-page essay.**

  Don't summarize your entire life. Don't include needless details that take space away from a discussion of your professionalism, maturity, and ability to do intellectual work in your chosen field.

- **Use the personal statement as a form of introduction.**

  Think of the essay as not only an answer to a specific question but also an opportunity to introduce yourself, especially if your program doesn't interview applicants.

- **Ask yourself the following questions as you edit for content:**

  – Are my goals well articulated?
  – Do I explain why I have selected this school and/or program in particular?
  – Do I demonstrate knowledge of this school or program?
  – Do I include interesting details that prove my claims about myself?
  – Is my tone confident?

- **Make sure your essay has absolutely perfect spelling and mechanics.**

- **Use technical terminology and such techniques as passive voice where appropriate.**

  You should write clearly and interestingly, yet you should also speak in a voice appropriate to your field.

When Writing Your Personal Statements, You *Should Not*:

- Write what you think the admissions committee wants to hear. You are probably wrong, and such a response is likely to make you blend into the crowd rather than stand out from it.

- Use empty, vague, over-used words like *meaningful*, *beautiful*, *challenging*, *invaluable*, *helpful*, *interesting*, *amazing*, *fascinating*, *wonderful*, or *rewarding*.

- Overwrite or belabor a minor point about yourself.

- Repeat information directly from the application form itself unless you use it to illustrate a point or want to develop it further.

- Emphasize the negative. Again, the admissions committee already knows your GPA and test scores, and they probably are not interested in reading about how a list of events in your personal life caused you to perform poorly. Explain what you feel you need to, but emphasize the positive.

- Try to be funny. You don't want to take the risk they won't get the joke.

- Get too personal about religion, politics, or your lack of education (avoid emotional catharsis).

- Include footnotes, quotations from dead people, or long-winded and slow introductions.

- Use statements like "I've always wanted to be a…" or any other hackneyed phrases or clichés (e.g., "beyond a shadow of a doubt," "a chip off the old block," "a fish out of water").

- Use gimmicks—they're too big of a risk on an application to a graduate or professional program.

- Allow any superficial errors in spelling, mechanics, grammar, punctuation, format, or printing to creep under your vigilant guard.

SAMPLE PERSONAL STATEMENT B (*850 words; 5,270 characters*)

His eyesight was almost completely gone, yet there he was on the diamond. I met Jason last summer in Chicago, where I volunteered at a tournament for Beep Baseball, a baseball-like sport for the visually impaired. He was my age—handsome, friendly, and athletic. But Jason was blind. Struck by glaucoma, he had begun to lose his vision in his early teens. By high school, he had become legally blind. My sympathy only intensified when I learned that, had his disease been diagnosed earlier, he almost surely would have retained partial vision. Financially strapped, Jason's family had avoided taking him to a doctor for as long as they could; when he finally visited a physician, it was too late. For years I had planned to work in technology, but my encounters with Jason and others like him convinced me that medicine is my true calling.

Actually, growing up I had always planned to become a doctor, but my goals changed as I began to take computer science classes at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In the first meeting of my sophomore-year class on Programming in Artificial Intelligence, Professor Libbie Morley joked, "You know those movies where killer robots eventually take over the world? Believe them." I did just that, placing my trust in the vast opportunities offered by computer programming. In my first computer course, I created applications that could beat a human in tic-tac-toe, calculate complex mathematical problems, and even converse with humans on a specified topic. Fascinated with the potential of these programs, I embarked on a different path, away from clinical medicine. I saw a world in which computers would change and even replace processes in every industry, and I wanted to join the researchers at the forefront of this revolution.

Five years after that first class, the potential contribution of computer technology still inspires me. The possibilities are astounding. Scientists mapped the human genome years before their original deadline. Nanotechnology promises to revolutionize the way we detect and cure diseases. Still, the more I learn about technology, the more I recognize its inadequacies. Although the "psychologist" program I created faithfully reproduces human responses, I discovered that I would never want to speak with a computer about my problems. Certain interactions simply demand personal contact. As I have tutored underclassmen in math and science, worked with athletes in the Special Olympics, and visited with patients as a volunteer at Northwest Community Hospital, I have realized that the human element in such relationships is irreplaceable. Although technology may shape the future of mankind, only humanity can touch individual lives.

Jason's story touched mine, confirming my growing sense of the deficiencies in science and technology. Advances in medical knowledge and techniques are useless without parallel progress in healthcare accessibility, widespread education about health issues, and, most importantly, strong doctor-patient relationships. The revolutionary treatment methods I imagined myself inventing might never have an impact on patients like Jason. On the other hand, the dedication of just a few volunteers allowed him to play the sport he had always loved. Science could not fix Jason's eyesight, but supportive doctors, volunteers, and friends could help him live a fulfilling life. Spending time with him and others convinced me that, in addition to my research in medical science and technology, I wanted to work directly with those whose ailments cannot currently be cured.

I have thus circled back to my original path toward medicine, with no regrets about the scenic route that led me here. Indeed, I am confident that I will make good use of my computer science skills as I research potential advancements in medical technology. This summer, I began work as a research assistant to Dr. Chi-Hung Chang at Northwestern's Buehler Center on Aging. With Dr. Chang, I am developing a computer program that determines the "quality of life" of terminally ill patients. By compiling physician diagnostics and patient responses to questionnaires, the system assesses the value of given treatments as well as the efficacy of specific pharmaceuticals. Through this project, we hope to understand and improve the current care of the terminally ill. After observing Dr. Chang and other doctors at the medical research facility, I can now declare with confidence that I want to follow their example in my own career, combining clinical practice and research.

My work on the "quality of life" evaluation project gave me a perfect opportunity to fulfill this dual goal, and I look forward to a lifetime spent on similar pursuits. Yet I will never forget that the seeds of my current ambition arose not in the laboratory or at the health center, but on a baseball diamond filled with people playing a game they likely thought they would never play again. In my own career as a physician, I will strive to serve my patients not only as a healer but also as a friend, supporting them in their toughest moments, and as a mentor, guiding them to live healthy lifestyles. Robots may assist in my endeavors, but they will never possess the compassion of my fellow physicians and me.