



# Writing the Personal Statement

Edu B. Suarez, Ph.D.  
PRISE Program  
Professional Development

# Objectives

- Review the purpose and basic structure of a personal statement for internship and graduate school applications
- Know the essential components
- Avoid common mistakes
- See examples

# Guidelines

- There is no magic formula to writing a successful and convincing personal statement
- Key elements to facilitate the process and minimize frustrations



# What is a Personal Statement Letter?

- Writing samples used in selection of candidates that describes **YOU**.
  - ✓ Who you are and why you are applying
  - ✓ How you will add value or fit the internship/program
  - ✓ Connections between past influences and future goals
  - ✓ Your writing ability

# Purpose of a Personal Statement

- Part of the initial screening; therefore,
  - Watch grammar and spelling
  - Should be clear and easy to read and follow
- Highlight relevant life accomplishments:  
professional, academic, personal/civic
- Convey what you have to offer
- “Sell” your skills and abilities
- Most importantly- describes what you will gain from the experience

# Basic Structure of a Personal Statement

- Balance between
  - **85-90%** Academics, professional goals, and research interests
  - **10-15%** Extracurricular activities and other info
- **Quality is critical**
- **Enthusiasm throughout**
- **Examples are a must**

# Basic Structure of a Personal Statement

- Introduction - start with an opening sentence that encourages the reader to read on.
- Content- Structure what you want to include in an order that's most relevant. \*
- Conclusion -reinforce your commitment, enthusiasm and skills suited to the internship

# Basic Structure of a Personal Statement

- Content

- Why you're interested in the subject.
- Your enthusiasm for the internship.
- How your previous studies/experiences relate to the internship.
- Relevant aspects of coursework, research experience or volunteering.
- activities or hobbies that show your interest in the subject.
- Any training or achievements that show your skills (that they are looking for)

# Basic Structure of a Personal Statement

Frame the content:

- Chronological
- Goals
- Anecdotal
- Research experience

Examples later

# What reviewers look for

***They have seen it all! They want to know:***

- Why do you want to do an internship?
- Why do you want their internship, vs. others?
  - Should not be because of ranking or reputation of university
- What are your expectations for the internship?
  - Show you took time to learn what the program has to offer
  - Research the faculty, labs, etc.
- How will the internship help you?

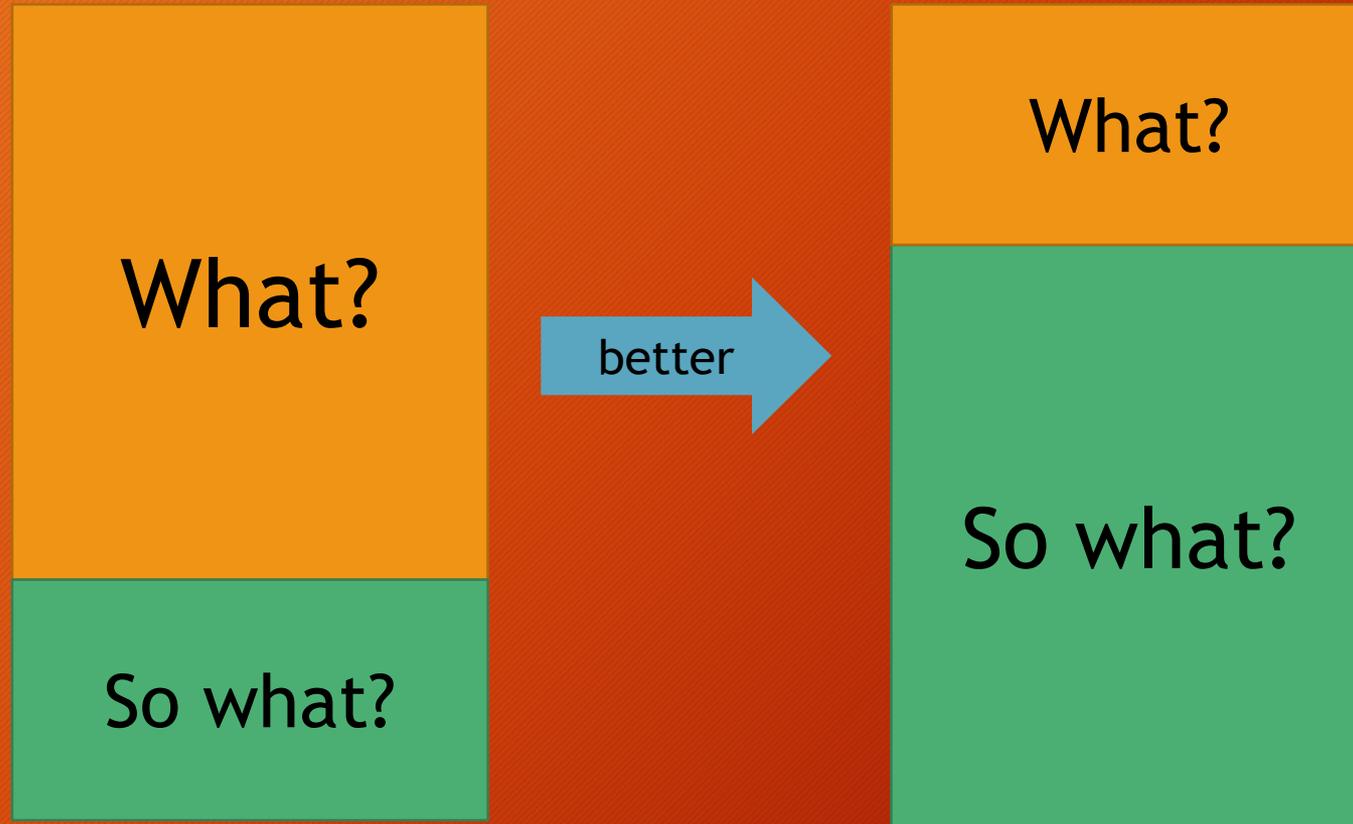
# What reviewers look for

*How did you make the decision to apply? What experiences lead up to that?*

Previous professional/academic/research experiences

- That Immunology book you read that changed your views on vaccine development
- An epidemiological report in a Puerto Rican population of women that details the mortality risk and sought your attention
- How you wish to unravel the underlying mechanisms of Alzheimer's Disease using human neurons cells or Tau -/- knock out animal model
- The project you worked in Dr. Rivera's lab
- Attended a specific seminar on epigenetics and autism

# Focus on the main idea- the, So what?



# Showing vs Telling

Using examples, data, statistics, anecdotes, quotations, dialogue- elaboration - to develop, persuade, explain.

Using broad generalizations, vague statements

After I took Psych 101, I continued to wonder about how engaging in the artistic process can contribute to better mental health, specifically in regards to depression. The next quarter, I participated in a research study that investigated the varying levels of depression in teenagers who engage in the creative arts versus those who participate in competitive sports.

I'm intellectually curious.

# Showing vs Telling

I was the captain of the school football team, and this has taught me the importance of working together as a team, and allowed me to prioritize my time between my studies and football practice. I feel that this has provided me with the experience to successfully balance my academic and social life, and I plan to continue this balance while in college.

I have good time management skills.

Last year I noticed that the local senior center was in bad need of some upkeep. I contacted the director and explained that I have a summer's worth of experience painting houses, not to mention a lot of left-over supplies, and would love to help spruce up the place.

I'm ambitious and driven.

# Examples

## Chronological beginning Example #1

My interest in science began when I was a young child. When I was 8 years old, my favorite aunt was diagnosed with cancer and, after a painful year of treatment, she died. I could not understand why physicians were unable to prevent this. My parents and teachers told me that there simply were limits to our knowledge of human biology and disease. When I went to college, it was with the goal of majoring in biology and physiology so that I could go on to further study, obtain my Ph.D. and find a cure for cancer.

- A touching story, but is it realistic for one person to believe they will be the one to “find the cure”?
- It would be better to tell of wanting to understand what cancer is and to aspire to join the community of scientists seeking new treatments.

# Example

## Chronological beginning Example #2

My interest in science began when I was a young child. Growing up with parents who were physicists, it was perhaps unavoidable that I too would develop a passion for science. From a young age I was always provided with interesting science books and I was encouraged to participate in scientific extracurricular activities such as Science Olympiad and science fairs. By the time I was in high school I was certain that I would pursue a career in science and my interests lay mostly in biology.

- This avoids the naïve statements of the prior example, but it is not clear what internal factors motivate the student to like science.
- Is s/he just doing what the parents expect?

# Example

## Chronological beginning Example #3

Alpaca breeding taught me to think of biology as a problem-solving tool. In an independent project in high school, I used alpaca genetics to develop breeding strategies for my family farm, applying the inheritance models I had learned in class and the limited information available about alpaca genetics to predict breeding outcomes. Though my interests have since evolved from alpacas to biomolecular systems, my enthusiasm for applying biology to real-world problems has persisted. Undertaking graduate studies in molecular biology will enable me to pursue my passion for designing and characterizing biological systems solving some of the most challenging problems in the world today.

- The beginning relates to something of relevance to the family.
- The description conveys the intellectual engagement at this early point in time and is a nice precursor to telling the reader about what then happened in college.

# Example

## Another way to begin is by stating your career goals

“My personal development in college began with a plan to become a physician, something strongly encouraged by my family. However, my first experience engaging in research opened my eyes to possibility of impacting the health of many more people than I could ever treat as a doctor. The prospect of using the tools of biomedical science to improve treatments or even develop new ones is what has made me want to pursue a Ph.D. in microbiology at the University of XXX.”

- This gives a straightforward start to the essay.
- The desire to help people by becoming a doctor is one the reader can understand.
- The transition to wanting the PhD is now in context.
- This can be tied to how the program's strengths will help you reach your career goals.

# Example

A third way to begin is to relate a relevant personal anecdote.

“Why are the easy things so easy? The answer is, they are not. They are only easy because we do not have conscious awareness of all that goes into what makes them easy. I came to this conclusion when I tried to embody the easy things in a robot. Putting a hoop on a peg was more difficult to capture in code than I realized. I did not consider that, in humans, we must first see the peg, segment the peg, recognize that it is a peg, make the decision to put the hoop on the peg, and coordinate the motor actions to do so. We are unaware because these computations only take milliseconds. My inability to successfully build a robot that could do the easy things quickly developed into a passion for investigating the intricacy of the brain and in particular the visual system. Since then, I have made many steps towards a lifelong career in neuroscience.”

# Example

- Research experience
  - How it contributed to your desire to apply to internship / graduate school
  - Describe where and with whom
  - Goal of the project
  - Hypothesis? Experiments? Results?
  - Implications of the results-
  - What did you learn about yourself?
  - How did this experience shape your goals?

**Do not just list techniques**

# Style & formatting

- No more than 2 pages long, preferably 1 to 1.5, with 3 to 5 well-structured and clearly defined paragraphs
- Single space, font size 12, Times New Roman or Arial
- In English
- Avoid *italics*, **bold** or underlining
- Use a natural tone of voice
- “grammer” spel ling and punctuation; .?!’:

# Getting started



- Just begin writing!
- Create an outline or map
  - “I’m a great candidate for [XYZ opportunity] because...
    - [my interests / values]
    - [my skills / accomplishments]
    - [connections between my past experiences and future goals]
    - [ways I will bring value]”

# Getting started

- Short-term goals vs long-term goals
  - 6 months to 1 year- current academic priorities
  - Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
  - How will you achieve them?
  - Tie it to the internship!



# Getting started

- PLAN! Make a timeline.
- Work back from DUE date
- This takes time.
  - Many drafts and revisions.
  - Proofread and share.



action  
plan

# Things to consider

## HONESTY / PLAGIARISM

- Do not exaggerate or make stuff up.
- You will be asked about it in the interview.
- Do not copy anyone else's personal statement
  - Copy/paste, templates
- Be very careful recycling!
- Some Institutions have the software to detect plagiarism

# Common mistakes to avoid

- No proofing!
- Jokes, trivial info, too personal
- Providing personal info (politics, kids, marital status, sexual orientation, SSN)
- Too many details! Writing to impress
- Being too general/vague

# Eliminate empty content



VAGUENESS  
GENERALIZATIONS  
MEANINGLESS  
CLICHÉS

*In countless ways  
I feel that I am...*

I LOVE SCIENCE

*There are  
moments in  
our lives  
that come to  
define our  
beliefs and  
perspectives*

*Since the  
beginning of  
time...*

*From an early  
age...*

*I believe I will make  
a difference in the  
world because I  
like to help people.*

**Biology is my life.**

# In summary,

- <https://www.ucas.com/ucas/undergraduate/getting-started/when-apply/how-write-ucas-undergraduate-personal-statement>

# References

- Gottesman, John (2016) *How to write an effective personal statement*. Office of Biomedical Graduate Education & Training, University of Minnesota.
- Suarez, E. & Vazquez, F. (2015) *Personal statements: How To's*. University of Puerto Rico Ponce PRISE Program