11/5 Psi Chi General Body Meeting

Personal Statement Workshop

**Sam:** For the first part of our meeting, Academic Advancement Programs (AAP) will be presenting resources and critiques on personal statements.  For the second part, a post-doctoral researcher will be presenting how you should and should not write personal statements..

**Chance from AAP:** AAP is designed to help you advance academically and offer resources towards succeeding.  We want to help you become a graduate school applicant, and we try to reach out to the general UCF population as much as possible.  Some of the vehicles we use to do that are programs like McNAIR/RAMP, or graduate school workshops to help you become a stronger candidate.  We also have peer advisors for different majors. In the spring, we’ll have the graduate school prep academy - make sure to check up on our website for details!

Now we’ll talk more about personal statements and other statements of purpose.  Could you guys list some of the programs in Psychology you’re applying to?

**Salim:** I’m applying to Human Factors Psychology programs.

**Dory:** I’m applying to Industrial Engineering programs.

**Chance:** Statements will differ by the program you apply to, so it’s great to know how to write these statements and what they look like.  I’ve provided some sample prompts to get a look at how people write these.

How many of you have experience or know about personal statements?

The goal of a personal statement is to set yourself apart from great GPA, high research applicants and create the piece that will show you how to create a successful graduate school career.

We’ll focus on the personal statement.  You’re constructing a picture of your place in society, and sharing your background, challenges you’ve faced, and experiences that you’ve overcome.  You’ll have to demonstrate readiness for a graduate program in terms of fit and character.

A statement of purpose: You’ll construct a picture of your academic self that is an amplified, more detailed version of your curriculum vitae.  Graduate programs will sometimes put statements of purpose in personal statements, so you’ll want to identify writing promppts. For UC Berkley’s statement, they bullet point everything they want to cover.  For me, I create categories to write in based on the bullet points, which I coalesce into paragraphs and sections for my personal statement. For a personal history statement, this statement combines a personal statement and diversity statement

Another thing to consider is what the graduate program’s goal or vision is.  You’ll want to align your personal statement with their goal, something you can find on their website.  Make sure you address what they say they’re looking for, and play to your strengths in ways that makes you a good fit.  Sometimes you’ll get unspecific statement prompts, and you’ll want to look past the prompt to the program’s website to identify what they are looking for.

I’ll talk about the different strategies along the way.  UC San Diego uses a good format consisting of brainstorming, outlining, rough drafting, revising, among others.

For brainstorming, I like to take a 30 minute session to create sections for the prompts and generate content for them.  I also like outlining the sections I want to work with first, so I can organize the information well and the flow of the essay I’m writing.  Once you have the outline and content, you can merge this into a first draft.

For rough drafting, you’ll want to have an opening paragraph, supporting paragraphs, and closing statement.  We have peer advising hours in AAP and you can set-up a meeting with a peer advisor to get feedback and edits for your statements.

You’ll want to get further feedback, and you’ll keep revising until you get to the final submission.

This personal statement has a lot of fluff and talks most about high school experiences.

Student: A lot of these sentences look like run-on sentences.

Chance: You’ll definitely keep these things in mind and want to make this paragraph more concise in the process.  This will leave you more room for the rest of the prompt.

Here is another sample statement.

Chance: What do you think about this statement?

This statement is good because it includes the problem to address, the goals to undertake it, and ties it back into why the student wants to apply to Yale University.

Your statement should leave the reader with the impression that you will be a productive researcher and an outstanding Ph.D./Master’s student in particular.

You should have an objective reader who can critique your statement.  Ask them what they get from the main points, and if they tell you something that doesn’t align with your goals, you should reword and edit things to boost your statement’s clarity and convey the message you want to administer.  I like to look back and forth at the prompt as I’m writing, to make sure I don’t get too far off topic and flow they want. Try to take your statement and play it out to a friend in an elevator pitch. Ask yourself, why this program?

You can use our resources along the way.

I am a graduate student coming from Psychology into Family Management.  I came from Alabama to Florida, but a lot of decision-making went into my path towards graduate school.  I’m going to pass out fliers to give you an idea on the differences between a personal statement and a statement of purpose.

When I was rough drafting my personal statement for UCF, the funding was the last of my reasoning for coming here.  Diversity was a large aspect for me coming here, and you’ll want to try and visit programs you’re interested in. How are they presenting themself in person versus on the website?

It was very hard to put my personal statement together, but AAP helped me a lot to show my interest and passion for psychology.  Come to us, and Chance and I will help you revise your stataements for graduate school.

Sam: Now we’ll transition over to our post-doctoral student Stephen.

Stephen: So this is going to be tailored towards cognitive psychology and research.  This is me as an undergrad, and I started writing grants my senior year of undergrad.  I used these essays for both my fellowship and grad school applications. They’re going to have to be tailored a bit, but to save time you can kill two birds with one stone.  To date, I’ve been awarded 8 predoctoral/postdoctoral grants worth over one million dollars. It’s an art, honestly. I started off sucking at writing, and didn’t know what I was doing as an undergrad.  I learned how to thrive in my editing process, and there are formulas you can undertake.

This has allowed me to travel the world and stay completely funded.  I even used it to leverage a position at UCF, and all this makes you more competitive for professor positions.

Some fellowships you’ll want to apply for are the predoctoral NSF, which awards $34,000 a year, and you can apply before you go to grad school and once in grad school.

The predoctoral Ford fellowship is a diversity grant, which pays less ($24,000) but you get way more out of it.  Typically it’s for minority students, and we meet up at a conference each year. You don’t have to be a minority, and they’re really helpful for getting to know people for furthering your career.

So there will be three types of essays you’ll need to write:

A personal statement, a research statement, and proposed research statement.  A personal statement is where you sell who you are and what you bring to the table.  Research statements are a more indepth description of your past/current research.   
  
I think the personal statement introduction is the most important part of your essay.  Does the reader want to keep reading or not? One way I try to hook people is I establish a theme.  Something to connect with you that you can remember afterwards. Can you solidify the theme to one or two words?

An example I use is from one of my undnergraduate students.  “Throughout the course of my life, I have come to develop a healthy respect for the meaning of “difference.”  I connected one word with who I am and everything else I do, such as individual differences work. Reviewers read quick and you’ll need something to match to you.  They read lots of essays and you need someone to discuss later on.

My student talked about the weird things he did as a kid and challenging himself, which has fueled the experiments he wants to do in grad school.  It’s difficult to connect the theme to everything else, try to figure out and define the experiences you want to undertake in grad school.

Try and transition into research/relevant experience quickly, rather than drawing your story past one paragraph.  After the first paragraph, reviewers should get the idea of who you are. I could have tightened up some of my introduction into less paragraphs when I first applied.

One of my undergrads listed off all the skills he could bring right after the introduction.  He didn’t drag these out into experiences,but got straight to the point. Personal statements transition better from paragraph to paragraph than chronological order, necessarily.  Don’t mention high school accomplishments unless it is critical to the story. Grad school doesn’t care about what you do in high school, unless it’s part of your story. Don’t dwell on it.

Only mention classes if they are relevant to and progress your story.  Most people have taken classes in college, that isn’t something unique.

Do’s and Don’ts list for discussing research:

Do discuss important skills you learned, and studies you played a key part in and what the study was about.  Don’t menialize your labor into pressing buttons. Do discuss projects you presented such as honors’ theses. Mention posters and all presentations.  Do give one or two sentences that simplify what the study was about, and why they should care. I simply transitioned from the opportunities I was given, to what I made out of it specifically.  Discuss terms that may be unfamiliar to the reader, but do not lecture them. If you’re applying to fellowships, they are experts that do not need explanations for phenomena or techniques you want to research with.  Give a one line summary of what you found and why it is important to science. Do seem passionate and excited about your research/findings! We are all nerds here. Try and have your excitement come across in your writing!  They want people who can succeed in programs that can be miserable.

Don’t say you are the first to study a particular phenomenon, because you want to build off previous research and why this helps society.  Everyone says they’re the first study to do something, but it doesn’t get you anywhere. Don’t drone on about your project, progress your study!  Don’t lie or overestimate what you have done. They might ask you about it! If it’s in writing and you haven’t done it yet, you’re kinda screwed.  You don’t want them to remotely think you’re embellishing your study. They will question you because you are one of the few accepted out of 500, and they are trained to break down research.  Don’t make yourself seem like a typical RA/undergraduate, talk about what makes you unique! I don’t know of any graduate lab that will take a typical student.

In your closing paragraph, you want to tie up who you are/what you’ve learned/what you want to do.  Use this to transition into why you are applying to a given school and even the given researcher. This is a good place to change things for each program you’re applying to.  Tie this back into your theme to solidify where you started from and how you’ve gotten here. Make sure to contact researchers before submitting your personal statement and application.  Start 2-3 months in advance of applying, because everyone is busy, and what separates you from someone else is the amount of preparation you put into it. Put so much time into it it can't be anything but the best.  Make an outline first! We become married to our writing. It is easier to make changes if not even a complete sentence. Once you fully write things out, it’s hard to rearrange giant chunks of text. Give yourself the freedom to move things around before they hold weight and are anchored in place.  Have people read your statement who aren’t knowledgeable on a toopic. My best feedback came from academics in other fields, period. You should have around 12-14 drafts per essay you write, it’s a great formula.

Some tips I took from the National Institutes of Health that apply to all types of writing:

“It’s not the most words, it’s the right words.”  Don’t just fill up all the pages, get to your point in record time.

“Avoid hard-to-understand, syntactically difficult, compound sentences that go on forever.”

“Be specific rather than using cliches.”  What does what you’re doing actually mean specifically?

Avoid weak words such as believe, hope, may, etc.  Use words like expect that are stronger and more plausible.  Use the correct word when words are similar, such as affect versus effect, led versus lead, and tenet versus tenant.  Be careful!

General Tips: Don’t use a thesaurus to try and sound smart!  My little cousin in Colorado tries to get away with it, and it doesn’t work - this isn’t high school!

Write clearly and concisely, or people will get bored with your writing.

Turn your essay into an audio file, so you can identify things you’ve missed such as grammar, run-on-sentences.  Listen to it so you can see how boring your writing is.

If you don’t like writing (or have writer’s block), set your timer for 20 minutes and just write for 20 minutes.  If you want a break afterwards, you deserve a break! Getting into a flow in writing and keeping that creative flow - and oftentimes I’ll just continue for 40 minutes or an hour!  This is an amazing trick to keep yourself from getting distracted.

My last words of advice: these essays are the most important essays you’ve written to date.  What schools you go to, who will take you, how much you’re valued if you’re getting paid, and making sure the schools don’t have to pay for your future.  This is something you’ll have to do for the rest of your career. Your job as a professor will be writing essays and getting grant money. Take the time to make your writing awesome, because most people don’t!  People who write these two weeks in advance won’t be getting these fellowships. You’re being judged, so take your time and be patient. You’ll be okay, as long as you have other people look over these statements.