Personal Statements
for Postgraduate Applications

Overview

At Masters & PhD level, application methods vary from institution to institution. You may be asked to complete any or all of the following depending on the course: CV, cover letter or personal statement, application form and/or research proposal (usually for a PhD or MPhil).

General information on the concepts and structures of writing CVs, completing application forms etc is available from the Careers Service.

This information leaflet focuses on one specific part of the process found within many post graduate applications - the personal statement.

Personal Statements - What to Expect

Personal statements form part of formal applications which embody your commitment to studying a particular subject area, usually at a specific institution. It is important that you follow all the instructions on the application form. Some application forms will give you a clear indication of how much to write and what to cover, others may be more open-ended; whatever the format, you will need to provide evidence to support your application.

Aim for a clear impact statement at the beginning that will hold the reader’s attention for the rest of the text and which will provide a framework around your reasons for choosing your postgraduate course and studying at your choice of university.
Structuring your Statement

Plan your statement in the same way that you would any other formal document:

- An Introduction
  Aim for a strong opening statement that clearly states your intentions. It should:
  - provide your motivation for continuing with further study
  - grab the attention and make the reader want to continue reading
- A main body of evidence that demonstrates the points made in the opening paragraph:
  - why you’ve chosen that specific course
  - why you’ve chosen that specific university
  - your skills and knowledge gained through university so far, linking these to the course you’re applying to
  - how this PG qualification will contribute to your future career plans
- A Conclusion
  - Bring together the key reasoning behind why the understanding you have outlined makes you a suitable candidate for the Postgraduate programme
  - Draw out your enthusiasm and motivation as drivers for why you will be a successful member of the course.

What sort of things might you include?

About them and the programme:

- Why you want to do the course/research and why you have chosen that university
- Is the programme noted for a distinctive emphasis or speciality?
- Are there certain academic staff with whom you want to do research or study?
- What is it about the structure of the course or the choice of modules that appeals to you?
- Why you have chosen this specific course/subject and how it fits into your study interests. Show that you have carried out detailed research into the course and that you meet the required entry criteria.
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you discovered about it since?
- How have you learned more – through seminars, classes, work or conversations with academic staff?
- What is the relevance of your first degree and any non-academic interests to this study?
About You

You need to show that you have the ability to study independently, combined with strong study skills. Demonstrate your enthusiasm and motivation for the course/research by including actual examples such as your final year dissertation to display your academic ability while working on an individual basis. You could write about how you found the initial idea, how you went about researching it, methodology used, problems encountered and how you solved these and what you have learned from the experience.

What are your unique selling points?
Show that you have seriously considered your strengths and weaknesses for postgraduate study or research.

What are your career aims?
You may not have a clear pathway in mind but you should at least have some ideas. A strong sense of direction will help convince selectors that you have a commitment to do well in your studies, particularly if you can show how the course fits into your career plans. Remember to include reference to any periods of relevant work experience to support your application.

Attention to detail

- You should always formulate a separate/different statement for each application you make.
- Not only will a generic statement be obvious to admissions tutors, but you will need a slightly different emphasis for each university to which you are applying.
- The conclusion should be positive, upbeat and reiterate the unique selling points that differentiate you from other applicants.
- Remember: Admissions tutors are looking for candidates who have academic potential, who are motivated and have researched the course and who can outline clearly why they want to undertake that particular study programme.
- As with all applications it is imperative that you focus on detail and verify that you have not made any spelling, grammar or punctuation mistakes.
- Make sure you have not exceeded any word limits.
- Visit the Careers & Graduate Futures Service to get a Careers Consultant to look over the draft before you send it
Writing a Research Proposal

When you apply to do a research degree, (PhD or MPhil) universities may, occasionally, ask you to submit a research proposal or ask you to show your interest in a particular PhD research project which you have seen advertised. This serves a number of purposes:

(a) it enables you to demonstrate your knowledge of your chosen field and provide specific details about your research interests.

(b) it enables you to provide an explanation of what you want to achieve and methods that will be used to carry out the research.

(c) it helps you refine and clarify your research plans, so that you can start your degree on a strong footing, and

(d) it helps the university assess your suitability for undertaking research at this level.

A research proposal can be expected to be up to 2-3 pages in length (around 1000 words on average, excluding the bibliography). Ideally, it should be structured around the following areas. You will see that there is more focus on the thinking around the research itself compared with the previous personal statement:

- Justification for the proposed research (why is it important to do this? What is original about the research you are proposing to undertake? What impact can you see this research having either in adding to or providing new knowledge and understanding?)
- Objectives of the research (what do you hope to find out or achieve by undertaking this research?)
- Research questions (these may be formulated either as hypotheses or as open research questions, but must be precise and must draw on a coherent theoretical framework)
- Data (what information / material will you be analysing?)
- Theoretical framework: what theory or theories do you intend to draw on in structuring your research? Theoretical insights can be drawn from a variety of disciplines as multidisciplinary approaches in research are common.
- Methodology (how you intend to go about doing the research). It is not always possible to specify a methodology at this stage (interviews, questionnaires, textual analysis, scientific/engineering techniques etc.) but it would help you to think in broad terms about what kind of elements your research would need to identify and describe.

It can prove extremely useful to ask for advice from academic members of staff for their input into writing a proposal as they are more familiar with established conventions required by research councils and committees. They can also offer advice on the appropriate sources and methodology for your PhD proposal. Make contact with your potential supervisor as soon as possible. Remember that they cannot help you devise ideas, only focus them - you must think about your interests, do some research and go to any meetings well prepared.

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