

# Writing Personal Statements and Statements of Purpose

UCLA Graduate Writing Center

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# We will cover:

- Reader expectations
- Genre and purpose
- Structure
- Content
- Other considerations/challenges
- Application-specific concerns

# Reader Expectations: Audience

- What does the audience value?
- What can be assumed as common knowledge?

# Reader Expectations: FAQs

- So how “personal” is the personal statement?
- Personal statement vs. Statement of Purpose – is there a difference?

# Reader Expectations: The Prompt

Two things to consider:

1. The actual text of the prompt
2. Knowledge about the application process

# Sample Prompt:

“In general, state your purpose in applying for graduate study. Describe your scholarly and research area(s) of interest, experiences that contributed to your preparation in the field, and your plans for your future occupation or profession. Briefly describe experiences that have prepared you for advanced study or research, and provide any additional information that may aid the selection committee in evaluating your preparation and aptitude for graduate study at UCLA. If you are applying for a research masters or doctoral program, you are encouraged to indicate specific research interests and potential faculty mentors.”

# Genre and Purpose: Thesis-Driven

- Thesis: I am a qualified applicant and would be a credit to your program.
- Demonstrate qualifications
- Demonstrate fit

# Purpose: Demonstrate Fit

- Fellowship
  - How are you a match for the fellowship's values?
  - How is your project a match for the fellowship's goals?
- PhD
  - What faculty do you hope to work with?
  - What will your focus be, and why is this institution a strong place for you to pursue that focus?



# Structure

- Outline
  - Intro, body paragraphs (usually 2-3), conclusion
  - Identify the specific purpose of each paragraph
  - Craft a narrative / Avoid the “laundry list”
- Organization
  - Chronological
  - Thematic/Order of importance
  - Specific pieces of prompt

# Typical Structures

## Prompt-driven

Introduction

Personal Narrative

Project description

Future goals

Conclusion

\*Institutional fit may be its own section or integrated throughout

## Chronological

X life experience led to my interest in the field

I pursued this interest in college in x ways

I will be a good fit for your program in x ways

## Thematic

Introduction

Interest in field – origins, future plans

Passion for research and (possibly) teaching

Research experience, future plans

\*Institutional fit may be its own section or integrated throughout

# Content: Introduction

Do:

- Establish your unique perspective/voice
- Get the reader's attention
- Set up the rest of the statement (road map)

Don't:

- Use clichés
- Use gimmicks

# Content: Evidence

- Is each main point backed up with an example?
- Are the examples specific?
- Do the examples show rather than tell?
- Does each example contribute something substantive and unique?

# Content: Closing

Briefly restate your main argument.

Other possible things to address:

- Future plans and career goals
- Research implications and significance
- If you started with a story, close it.

# Other Considerations: Context

- Does this statement coordinate with the rest of the application materials?
- What holes are left in other pieces that the personal statement fills?

# Other Considerations: Transitions

- What is the relationship between this paragraph and the previous?
- How does this paragraph relate to the main point of the personal statement?

# Other Considerations: Length

- Stick to the word/page limit
- Remove redundancies
- Remove unnecessary details
- Strategy: compare to other application documents and remove redundancies



# Rules of Thumb

- Tailor the application to the institution
- Present yourself as a professional
- Triple-check the requirements

# Genre-specific considerations

## PhD Applications

- Must show adequate knowledge of field
- Should talk about research plan
  - Topic & research question (if poss.)
  - Possible faculty advisor(s)
  - Other ways this institution will support your project and professional development

# Genre-specific considerations cont.

## Very specific prompts

- Use the wording of the prompt
- Challenge: to address everything they ask for without it feeling like a laundry list of answers

# Very Specific Prompt Example

- Personal Statement (maximum two pages, 12-point font, double-spaced) describing the applicant's background, experience, and commitment to the goals of the Ford Foundation Fellowship Programs by addressing *all* of the following that apply:
  - The applicant's capacity to respond in pedagogically productive ways to the learning needs of students from diverse backgrounds
  - The applicant's sustained personal engagement with communities that area underrepresented in the academy and ability to bring this asset to teaching and scholarship at the college or university level
  - The applicant's likelihood of using the diversity of human experience as an educational resource in teaching and scholarship
  - The applicant's membership in one or more of the following groups whose underrepresentation in the American professoriate has been severe and longstanding:
    - Alaska Natives (Aleut, Eskimo, or other Indigenous People of Alaska)
    - Black/African Americans
    - Mexican Americans/Chicanas/Chicanos
    - Native American Indians
    - Native Pacific Islanders (Hawaiian/Polynesian/Micronesian)
    - Puerto Ricans
- Applicants should describe their past and ongoing community service efforts such as:
  - Tutoring and mentoring students in challenging environments
  - Participation in housing or public service projects
  - Leadership and organizational skills that benefit a larger community
    - Campus-based student activities
    - Language teaching
    - Involvement in professional organizations that serve the community
- Applicants should note anything in their background that speaks to their unique perspective
  - Membership of a group designated by the Ford Foundation Fellowship Programs as currently underrepresented in the American professoriate
  - Membership of another underserved group
  - First person or generation in family to achieve college degree or seek advanced degree
- Applicants may also cite the following
  - Teaching methods and academic interests that are inclusive and sensitive to diversity
  - Any successes that can be attributed to using new techniques to create an inclusive and respectful teaching and learning environment
  - Personal goals, both longstanding and future focused, that involve increasing understanding in the college or university setting and are in the broader context
  - Employment that demonstrates a longstanding commitment to diversity and depth of understanding of a multicultural society
  - Efforts to improve access and opportunity for all, particularly in one's local community (neighborhood, place of worship, geographic region)

# Additional Advice(1/4)

- Don't speak of your achievements as if they were gifts.

# Additional Advice (2/4)

- Don't speak of your achievements as if they were gifts.
- ~~"I was *given* a scholarship to study abroad."~~

# Additional Advice (3/4)

- Don't speak of your achievements as if they were gifts.
- ~~"I was *given* a scholarship to study abroad."~~
- "I *earned* a scholarship to study abroad."

# Additional Advice (4/4)

- Don't speak of your achievements as if they were gifts.
- ~~"I was *given* a scholarship to study abroad."~~
- "I *earned* a scholarship to study abroad."
- Don't talk about your future plans and aspirations in terms of "hopes" and "wishes."



Questions?