

# Writing Personal Statements and Statements of Purpose

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**UCLA Graduate Writing Center**

# We will cover

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

# Reader Expectations: Audience (1/2)

- What does the audience value?
  - Learn about their mission and funding priorities
  - Make connections between their values and your research, experiences, or goals

# Reader Expectations: Audience (2/2)

- What can be assumed as common knowledge?
  - If you're writing for an expert audience, what kind of expertise do they have? (research expertise, professional expertise, subject matter expertise, lived experience expertise)

# Reader Expectations: FAQs

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

# Reader Expectations: Personal Statements

Focus of the personal statement:

- How your life experiences led to your desire to apply for this opportunity
- Why you're qualified

# Reader Expectations: Statements of Purpose

Focus of the statement of purpose:

- What you will do in the program or fellowship you're applying to
- How you're qualified to do it

# Reader Expectations: The Prompt

Two things to consider:

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

UCLA Graduate Writing Center Fellowship and Grant Archive Project: [click here](#)



# 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.”

# Sample Prompt (continued):

“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.

*“I am the most **qualified** applicant and the best **fit** because...”*

# 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

- Which faculty member(s) do you plan to work with?
- What will your research 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

- **Chronological**

- X life experience led to my interest in the field
- I pursued this interest in college in x ways
- This led me to pursue x additional training/be interested in studying x in graduate school
- 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

- **Prompt-driven**

- Introduction
- Personal Narrative
- Project description
- Future goals
- Conclusion
- Institutional fit may be its own section or integrated throughout

# Content: Introduction

## Do:

- Establish your unique perspective/voice
- Get the reader's attention
- Provide a roadmap for the rest of the statement

## Don't:

- Use clichés
- Use gimmicks

# Content: Evidence

- Is each main point backed up with an example?
- Are the examples specific to you?
- 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 your application materials?
- What gaps are left by other pieces? How can this statement help fill in the gaps?

# Other Considerations: Transitions

- What is the relationship between this paragraph and the previous one?
- How does this paragraph relate to the overall argument of the statement?

# Other Considerations: Length

- Stick to the word/page limit
  - Triple-check formatting guidelines
- Remove redundancies
  - Strategy: compare to other application documents and remove overlap
- Remove unnecessary details
  - Ask yourself: does this detail strengthen my argument?
- Remove vague/impersonal content
  - Replace impersonal content with details and examples

# Genre-Specific Considerations (1/2)

## PhD applications

- Show adequate knowledge of the field
- Discuss your research plan
  - Topic & research question (if possible)
  - Possible faculty advisor(s)
  - Other ways this institution will support your project and professional development

# Genre-Specific Considerations (2/2)

Medical & dental residency applications

- Don't focus exclusively on why you chose your specialty
- Communicate your values and strengths (show, don't just tell)
- Demonstrate field-specific knowledge without including unnecessary/distracting details

# Genre-Specific Considerations

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 are underrepresented in the academy and ability to bring this asset to learning, 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 long-standing and future-focused, that involve increasing understanding in the college or university setting and are in the broader context
- Employment that demonstrates a long-standing 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

- Don't speak of your achievements as if they were gifts.
  - Don't say: "I was *given* a scholarship to study abroad."
  - Do say: "I *earned* a scholarship to study abroad."
  - Don't say: "I was *granted* the opportunity to gain experience with..."
  - Do say: "I *pursued/sought out* training in..."

# Additional Advice (continued)

- Don't talk about your future plans and aspirations in terms of “hopes” and “wishes.”
  - Instead, talk about *plans*, *goals*, *aims*, and *objectives*.

# Resources

- Schedule a one-on-one appointment with a Graduate Writing Center consultant: <https://gwc.gsrc.ucla.edu/appointments>
- Join a GWC writing group: <https://gwc.gsrc.ucla.edu/writing-groups>
- GWC Fellowship and Grant Archive Project: <https://gwc.gsrc.ucla.edu/fellowship-grant-archive>