PERSONAL STATEMENT

Many graduate school programs require some sort of written statement as part of the application. It may be referred to as a statement of purpose, personal statement, letter of intent, or personal narrative. Sometimes there will be specific questions to answer. In other cases, candidates may write about a topic of their choice.

This tipsheet contains several resources to help you plan, write, and revise your personal statement. The WPI Career Development Center (CDC) and Writing Center are also available to critique your personal statement.

What should I include in my personal statement?

Before you begin to write, make a list of points you would like to cover in the statement. Consider your educational and career goals and select items from your list that reflect experience, skills, and interests that relate. Your essay should have a beginning, middle, and end. Your first draft will not be your final copy, as you will edit and rewrite several times. When preparing your final draft, you should proofread carefully to be sure there are no errors in spelling or grammar.

Make sure to include the following information in your personal statement:

- **Your Background:** This should include your prior academic experiences, project experiences, internships/research experiences, leadership and extracurricular involvement, and any other experiences that are relevant. You will likely want to reflect on your Major Qualifying Project (MQP) and your Interactive Qualifying Project (IQP) and stress any techniques or skillsets that relate to the program to which you are applying. Any internships or summer research experiences should also be highlighted. When talking about your background, make sure not to just share your experiences, but instead highlight how these experiences have prepared you for graduate school--what have your experiences pro-

vided you with that you can take into the classroom and apply to advanced research?

- **Your Interests:** When talking about the program you are applying for, make sure you emphasize why you need this specific degree and area of study to advance your career aspirations. You should reference particular classes of interest, along with professors (by name) and their area of focus. Make it clear that you want this particular degree and program and why.

- **Why this school:** Your statement should specifically mention why you want to attend this particular school and department and study under specific faculty members. If you are interested in Teaching Assistantships or Research Assistantships, inquire about those by referencing professors of interest. You should also try to have prior conversations with faculty members who interest you before applying, so that you can reference these conversations in your statement.

- **Your Future Career Goals:** In your personal statement, clearly articulate what you want to do with your advanced degree, and why you need this education to achieve the type of opportunities you are interested in. If you aren't exactly sure, pick a few areas of the program that really call to you and emphasize those. It is important that you have a clear direction when writing your personal statement.

Getting Personal

A grad school's first impression of you is your personal statement. Make it count.

By Joe Schall

Do you long to make your mark in image sequence analysis, conduct research on robust 3-D object recognition or master exemplary cache management skills? Then you're probably headed for graduate school, and to get there, you'll need to write a persuasive personal statement. Whether it's called a personal statement, a statement of purpose or a letter of intent, the goal is the same—you have about 500 words to petition for admission into a program that probably receives 10 times more applicants than it can accept. A well-written, thoughtful personal statement will help elevate you above the crowd.

Discern the Criteria of the Essay Question

Although some applications may simply request a one-page statement without specifying any content guidelines, typically you are asked to comment on matters of personal background, work experience, research goals, long-term objectives and your particular interest in the program to which you are applying. Attend to each of these categories, perhaps devoting one short paragraph to each, explicitly and efficiently. Anchor your topic sentences in the language of the criteria (e.g., "My long-term goals are…"; "My past research endeavors include…"), followed by examples demonstrating the specifics of your background and the clarity of your thinking.

Articulate Your Personal and Professional Inspiration

Having read hundreds of personal statements over the years, I recognize how valuable it is to paint an interesting personal but professional picture of yourself. Some students make the mistake of discussing something far too private or unsettling in their personal background (such as a serious family crisis or a bout with depression), while others come off as a wannabe hacker or exude a "computers are really cool" naiveté. Instead, give a thumbnail sketch that stresses positive and professional influence: a memorable and uplifting early experience, a high school or college project that ignited or deepened your interest in computer science, an especially inspiring teacher or relative who followed a career path that you emulate. The goal is to write an opening paragraph that no other candidate could have written, while striking a professional, positive tone.

Discuss Your Experience as a Set of Acquired Skills

With emphasis on professional experience and transferable skills, describe your background using action verbs (e.g., "I programmed…"; "I installed and maintained…"; "As part of a team, I redesigned…"). If you are not invited to submit a resume with your application, you may want to incorporate the job descriptions from your resume into your statement. Also, seek to interweave a discussion of your coursework, teaching and activities with a description of your actual work experience as necessary. Those web pages you designed as part of a classroom project, or your work as a teaching assistant for a lab course, or your active involvement in the student chapter of a professional association can be just as relevant as an internship position.

Describe a Research Plan or Identify an Area of Research Interest

Herein lies the toughest yet most important job for most grad school applicants—describing your specific research interest. Recognize, however, that you are not committing to an unbreakable covenant, but simply identifying a compatible area of interest. For specifics here, turn to your previous coursework, think about successful projects you have already taken part in, and browse the host program's web pages and applica-

tion materials to determine what kinds of projects the professors and research teams undertake. Selection committees will give special attention to students who show an interest in theoretical computer science, or those who have a background in a related application area, such as chemistry, mathematics or geographic information systems, and successfully tie their interests to a projected area of research. Stress your desire and ability to solve relevant problems and address research questions.

Establish Long-Term Objectives

As with the discussion of a research plan, long-term objectives are not lifetime commitments but thoughtful, concrete plans. Valuable options here include specifying continued work in a particular research area, the desire to obtain a Ph.D. or teach at the university level, or future plans to work as an independent or corporate consultant. By articulating a reasonable long-term objective or two, you persuade a program that you are worthy of serious consideration. If you're hazy about long-term objectives, discuss some possibilities with an advisor in your field from whom you might also receive feedback on your personal statement.

Close by Discussing Specifics About the Program to Which You Are Applying

Learning all you can about the target program not only makes sense, it gives you concrete closing material to include in your essay. Many graduate programs include downloadable application materials on their web sites, and just one phone call to the program's graduate office will secure plenty of materials. Also, be certain to research information about the faculty, perhaps reading some of the faculty publications to familiarize yourself with the research being done. Some students even email faculties whom they are especially interested in working with, establish a correspondence, and cite this interaction in their personal statement. The goal is to create a professional link between yourself and the program, its facilities and its faculty. Go beyond simply inserting the program name into your final paragraph; prove that you have done your homework.

Pay a Visit

Without question, an on-site visit is the best way to ensure a good fit between you and a graduate program, and graduate directors will always give special attention to candidates willing to make a visit. Do not count on being invited specifically to visit a program but set up an appointment on your own, ideally before or while your application is under consideration. While visiting the site, be certain to have relevant questions ready for the graduate director, ask to tour the facilities, and try to meet with a faculty member or two. If you are especially interested in a particular program, an on-site visit would be a finishing stroke to a perfect application.

Definition of a Personal Statement

Mary Hale Tolar[1]
Deputy Executive Secretary, Truman Scholarship Foundation

If you are applying for nationally competitive scholarships, for graduate school, or for a number of post-graduate service or employment opportunities, you have seen the vaguely phrased request; in one form or another, it comes down to "tell us something about yourself."

The Rhodes and Marshall competitions require a 1000-word personal essay: the Fulbright, a "curriculum vita."

You are asked to share your "academic and other interests." A clearer charge might be: compose an essay that reveals who you are, what you care about, and what you intend to do in this life. Tell this story in a compelling manner, and do so in less than a thousand words. What's so hard about that? Simply make sense of your life. (right.) But what does that mean? What will it look like?

Because personal statements are personal, there is no one type or style of writing that is set out as a model. That can be liberating; it can also be maddening. But while every personal statement is unique in style, its purpose is the same.

A personal statement is:

- *A picture.* Your personal essay should produce a picture of you as a person, a student, a potential scholarship winner, and (looking into the future) a former scholarship recipient.

- *An invitation.* The reader must be invited to get to know you, personally. Bridge the assumed distance of strangers. Make your reader welcome.

- *An indication of your priorities and judgement.* What you choose to say in your statement tells the committee what your priorities are. What you say, and how you say it, is crucial.

- *A story, or more precisely, your story.* Everyone has a story to tell, but we are not all natural storytellers. If you are like most people, your life lacks inherent drama. This is when serious self-reflection, conversation with friends, family, and mentors, and permission to be creative come in handy.

A personal statement is not:

- An academic paper with you as the subject. The papers you write for class are typically designed to interpret data, reflect research, and analyze events or reading— all at some distance. We are taught to eliminate the "I" from our academic writing. In a personal statement your goal is to close the distance between you and the reader. You must engage on a different, more personal level that you have been trained to in college.

- A resume in narrative form. An essay that reads like a resume of accomplishments and goals tells the reader nothing that they could not glean from the rest of the application. It reveals little about the candidate, and is a wasted opportunity.

- A journal entry. While you may draw on experiences or observations captured in your personal journal, your essay should not read like a diary. Share what is relevant, using these experiences to give a helpful context for your story. And include only what you are comfortable sharing—be prepared to discuss at an interview what you include.

- A plea of justification for the scholarship. This is not an invitation to "make your case." Defending an assertion that you are more deserving of the scholarship than other candidates is a wasted effort—you've likely just accomplished the opposit

Most importantly, a personal statement is authentic. Don't make the mistake of trying to guess what the committee is looking for, and don't write what you think they want to hear. They want to know you.

So, what must you include in the personal statement?
An effective personal statement will answer the following questions:

- Who am I?

- Who do I want to be?

- What kind of contribution do I want to make, and how?

- Why does it make sense for me to study at Oxford (or York, LSE, Cambridge, Sussex)?

For the Rhodes, you will want to include a proposal of study, one or two paragraphs devoted to why Oxford makes sense to you. For the Marshall and Fulbright, your "proposed academic programme" is presented separately. Your proposal should be as detailed and specific as possible, including degree plans, course titles, and professors with whom you hope to study (especially if you have contacted them by email or letter). Why is this the right place and program? Is it consistent with your studies and activities to date? Draw connections.

Remember the goal: grab the readers' interest, and make them want to meet you for an interview. Get a sense of the experiences and dreams you wish to share, then examine them for a helpful means of making sense of it all. You will find your story; and if you share it honestly, you will have written a personal statement.

Finally, know that writing a personal essay is hard and will take many drafts and much reflection. Don't wait until you have it right to share it with others; their input will likely make it stronger, clearer, and tighter. Don't put it off until you have it right … just write!

[1] Mary Tolar is a 1988 Truman Scholar and 1990 Rhodes Scholar; served as scholarships advisor at four institutions, and has served on a State Rhodes Committee of Selection. She has helped over sixty students win nationally competitive scholarships.