

TIPS FOR WRITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS

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Principle #1

Attend to all parts, stated and implied, of the essay prompt.

Typical topics covered:

- Personal and motivational background
- Details about current education
- Work or research experience
- Project design or study plans
- Long-term goals
- Material tailored to the program to which you are applying

Principle #2

Employ an explicit organizational scheme or overarching theme.

- Use essay criteria as organizational tool, with those criteria reflected by your topic sentences
- Create a hierarchy reinforced by your examples
- Consider an intriguing metaphor
- Link introduction and conclusion

Principle #3

Open in a focused, engaging manner.

“The building stood defiantly beautiful in the morning sun. Well over 20 floors of ochre-painted concrete graced the top of the hill and the surrounding Mediterranean countryside. As our minibus was wiggling its way up the uneven street, it seemed like our driver was seeking out every bump and hole in the road. In the midst of the breathtaking countryside, an eerie calmness enveloped our arrival. We were greeted by a group of two nurses and two doctors whose faces revealed a similarly tired, yet defiant posture, much like the building they worked in.”

Principle #4

Exploit a thesis or key statement that guides our reading of the essay.

“I am applying for the Purdue University Doctoral Fellowship and the George Washington Carver Fellowship to obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to pursue a career researching psychopathology among minorities. Given my personal strengths and previous experience, I am certain that I will not only enjoy clinical research but that I will use the knowledge and skills I obtain to make significant, innovative contributions to the program and the scientific community.”

“I am asking the selection committee to consider me as a strong applicant based on my varied experience, proven ambition, and genuine interest in studying environmental law.”

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Principle #5

As you provide evidence, also provide clear context.

My most inspiring research experiences involved studying health disparities among minority populations. While conducting the literature review for my study at Georgia Tech, I found that African Americans hospital patients often experience lower quality of care than their white counterparts. Moreover, researching the high HIV/AIDS prevalence rates among minority populations and urban neighborhoods at the CDC piqued my research interests in investigating minority health disparities.

Principle #6

Discuss your experience as a set of acquired skills and pieces of evidence that will apply to graduate study.

- Skills acquired through jobs, internships, externships
- Specialized education
- Relevant coursework
- Team projects and lessons learned
- Lab skills or other technical skills
- Research, writing, and language skills
- Travel and other evidence of diversity
- Activities and awards
- Nontraditional or interesting personal background

Principle #7

Establish some concrete and reachable long-term objectives.

“Once I obtain my master’s degree, I dream of teaching high school mathematics to emphasize to students the relationship of mathematics to the sciences.”

“After completing the master’s program I would like to continue my education and obtain a PhD in Applied Developmental Psychology. I want to know all there is to know in child development and educate others on my expertise. I am most certain that the Applied Developmental Psychology program at George Mason University will provide me with education and training necessary to accomplish this.”

Principle #8

Show you’re an informed “insider.”

- (Carefully) use jargon and acronyms with a specialized audience
- Don’t be afraid to cite sources, following standard practices
- Use a relevant quotation, giving it context within your essay
- Use current events and discuss a current problem
- Drop names, but not arbitrarily

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Principle #9

Close with specifics aimed squarely at the target program.

“My goal in applying to the Vanderbilt University is to obtain a Ph.D. in Clinical Science in a supportive environment integrating both research and practice. . . . The Clinical Science faculty members on the Child, Adolescent, and Family track are involved in a wide range of research areas in line with my own interests. I am particularly interested in Dr. David Cole’s developmental psychopathology research. His research stresses the need to modify adult models of depression to facilitate the identification of depressive symptoms in adolescents. I would like to research modifications that would not only control for age differences, but for gender and ethnicity as well.

Principle #10

Expect a huge time sink and never go it alone.

- Turn to advisors, mentors, and recommenders for help
- Interpret multiple application questions carefully, avoiding overlap in written responses
- Rely on models as writing aids
- Expect to go through multiple revisions (seven?) to achieve a perfect essay, and proof the hard copy
- Study and follow application protocol to the letter