

PERSONAL ESSAYS

Try to imagine what the selection committee would like to see in a personal essay.

1. Keep it short (1 page maximum). Selection committees must read hundreds!
2. Use good English. If you can't write a coherent essay, how will you write a thesis or TA a class?
 - Get good editing help from faculty, friends, family.
3. Try to give your essay a special slant. How will the selection committee remember your essay after reading hundreds? On the other hand, don't stray from the topic; being remembered for being weird is not what you want.
4. They need to know that you are interested in their program:
 - Describe your career goals.
 - Describe why their particular program fits your career goals.
 - It is **not** necessary to be totally certain about your career plan at this stage. If you are, great! Say so. If you are not, then give a couple of clear examples of areas that interest you to give the committee some feeling of your general direction. You are not committing yourself to anything in your personal statement. (Contrary to most undergraduate programs, the number of openings in graduate programs is strictly limited, so be sure the school actually offers degree programs in one or more of the areas of interest that you mention.)
5. They need to know that you are serious about getting an advanced degree.
 - Describe things that you have already done which show that you are genuinely interested in this field. This is the place to brag about your research experience.
 - Describe your motivation and/or personal inspiration. Warning: Many scientists at secular institutions are uncomfortable with religion. Refer to this particular inspiration cautiously.
 - Describe any people or experiences that have influenced your career choice.
 - Describe why it is important to your career to get an advanced degree. Are you excited about basic or applied research in a university or industrial laboratory? Have you always wanted to teach at a university?
6. They need to know that you will work hard.
 - Describe things that you have already done which show your willingness to work hard and/or your ability to persevere.

- This is your chance to discuss any anomalies in your background. Why is there a 5 year gap since you were last in school? “I have three small children who are now in school and am now able to pursue my own career goals.” is FINE! (Or if it’s not fine, you don’t want to go to that institution anyway.) “I worked for five years at an uninteresting job and hated it and now I want to get an advanced degree in ... so that I can get a more interesting position doing ...” is also FINE!
7. They need to know that your educational background is adequate.
 - This is your chance to explain any anomalies in your education. Why did you flunk 1 year. Be honest. “ I had a personal problem which I have now solved” looks better coming from you than your referees. Don’t gamble that the committee won’t find out.
 8. This is your chance to include any information about yourself which you want the selection committee to know but which does not appear anywhere else on your application.
 9. If you are applying for a TA, this is the place to include your teaching experience.