



# Personal statements

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# Why do we ask for a personal statement?

- For us to get to know you, not your record
- For us to see if you can think logically
- For us to see if you can write well

# Getting set to write

- What sets me apart from other applicants?
- How did I learn about this field?
- Why am I interested in this field?
- What experiences have stimulated and reinforced my interest?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in my academic record?
- What skills or personal characteristics do I possess that would enhance my chances for success in this field?
- Have I overcome relevant obstacles in my life?
- What are my career aspirations? □
- Why this school & program?

# The general structure

- The hook
  - Introduce yourself
  - Explain why you want to go to graduate school
- The substance
  - Explain your science
  - Highlight other relevant experiences
- The future
  - Explain 'why this program'
  - Briefly describe your career goals

# Dealing with the elephant in the room

- Can be in your essay or in a brief attached letter to the Director of Admissions
- Avoid making excuses or pointing blame
- Point out recent evidence showing you are a good candidate
  - Accomplishments in lab
  - Grad level courses
- Offer to discuss this in further detail with the Program Director

# General thoughts

- Answer the questions that are asked
- Tell a story - but content over style
- Give concrete examples
- Personalize each essay to the School and/or Program
- Concise is better than long-winded

# Polish your draft

- Friends and non-scientists for general writing and flow
- Then training directors, lab mentors, OITE staff, teachers and mentors from undergraduate for content and style
- Ideally, a final read by someone with experience on an admissions committee

# Common mistakes

- Not enough intellectual depth
- Too much humor (or drama)
- Too long - too short
- Failure to answer the question asked
- Failure to explain weaknesses in your application
- Trying to impress the committee with big words
- Poorly written, passive voice & wordy





# Sample Personal Statements

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I was born and raised by my mother in a small town called Cuba, Alabama, which is located on the Mississippi border. The population is about 390, with a median income of \$18,000. There, families have several acres and a mule. Because of Cuba's geographical location and low economic status, several educators, doctors, and state representative have said, "The only things that come out of Cuba are illiterate athletes and users of the government welfare system." After having been systematically desensitized to such degrading remarks, I challenged myself not to be categorized in these ambivalent statistics, but instead, chose to be a role model for my brothers and an example of hope for the Cuba community. So, while attending Sumter County High School, I served as Vice President of the Student Government Association. One of my duties was to organize activities centered on science. As a member of the science club at Sumter High, my main goal was to get students at the high school level involved in substantive science projects. The biggest problem was no one wanted to do the work, especially quality work for science fair competitions. I presented a project on the Pythagorean theorem that won 1st place at both the local and regional science fairs. Because of that motivational event, I was inspired to follow a career in science. I graduated with honors from Sumter High School in May 2001.

## Sample 1

I was born and raised by my mother in a small town called Cuba, Alabama. The population is about 390, and in 2001 the median family income was \$18,000. In Cuba, families really do have “several acres and a mule”, and it has been said that the only things to come out of Cuba are illiterate athletes and users of the government welfare system. I resolved to be different. While attending Sumter County High School, I served as Vice President of the Student Government Association; one of my duties was to organize science activities. My efforts to involve my classmates in science did not succeed, but I completed a project on the Pythagorean theorem that won 1st place at both the local and regional science fairs. I graduated with honors in May 2001.

From my graduate training, I hope to develop academic and research skills that will help me achieve my long term career goal of becoming a professor at a top tier institution where I can teach and do research. For instance, there were several times when I did not understand certain pathways or what possible mechanisms are responsible for hydrocephaly; Dr. X was able to explain it to me in detail but in layman terms. By gaining experience in teaching students how to understand complicated science, I will be able to lucidly explain my research to fellow colleagues as well as to the general public. In addition, being on the faculty of a leading academic institution will also give me the opportunity to continue gaining new knowledge and be on the cutting edge of new technologies. As a postbaccalaureate student at the NIH, I have attended seminars of researchers that work in academia, biotech, and pharmaceutical industries. I have learned that the successful scientists are able to collaborate and work together to bring about cutting edge research. Ultimately, my hope is that my research accomplishments will provide the basis for bench to bedside applications that will help improve and save lives.


## Sample 2a



After completing my graduate education and subsequent postdoctoral training, I want to combine my research career with teaching. I enjoy sharing my research experiences and findings with others and greatly value what I have learned from my teachers and mentors. I am always fascinated by the ability of some people to clearly articulate their thoughts and the difference it makes to the audience when a message has been delivered properly. Therefore, in the future I want to do my best to communicate my knowledge with passion and enthusiasm. In addition, my experiences as a Hispanic woman in a scientific career could motivate other minorities to pursue research careers as well, and increase the diversity of the scientific community.

## **Sample 2b**

After completing my graduate education and subsequent postdoctoral training, I want to combine my research career with teaching. I enjoy sharing my research experiences and findings with others and greatly value what I have learned from my teachers and mentors. I am always fascinated by the ability of some people to clearly articulate their thoughts and the difference it makes to the audience when a message has been delivered properly. Therefore, in the future I want to do my best to communicate my knowledge with passion and enthusiasm. In addition, my experiences as a Hispanic woman in a scientific career could motivate other minorities to pursue research careers as well, and increase the diversity of the scientific community.



Currently, I am pursuing a project in the Laboratory of Developmental Biology of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute of the NIH. My research involves analyzing the skeletal and cardiac anomaly phenotypes of mice that were recovered in an N-ethyl-N-nitrourea (ENU) mutagenesis screen. These mutants were recovered as part of a noninvasive fetal ultrasound screen, an approach based on the recognition that many mutants with congenital heart defects also exhibit skeletal anomalies. My project is to systematically analyze the skeletal malformations in these mutant mouse models. One of the mouse mutants I have been working on is now identified as having a missense mutation in the gene TP53BP1, which encodes a p53 binding protein. The mutation causes defects in outflow tract septation as well as craniofacial and other skeletal defects. These defects are reminiscent of human DiGeorge syndrome.



## Some General Principles:

- Be specific and accurate; scientists will be reading your statement. (Make certain grammar & spelling are perfect.)
- Avoid lofty sounding statements that communicate nothing; focus on facts.
- Be ruthless about eliminating extra words; generally you will be able to cut out 50% without changing the meaning.
- Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence and make certain that all subsequent sentences address the topic.