

# PERSONAL STATEMENT GUIDE

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PLEASE NOTE THAT THE EXAMPLES PROVIDED IN THIS GUIDE ARE NOT PERFECT. MANY MORE EXAMPLES CAN BE FOUND ONLINE BUT TRY TO WRITE WITH YOUR OWN VOICE!

## COMPONENTS OF THIS GUIDE

- WHAT IS A PERSONAL STATEMENT?
- GENERAL STRUCTURE
- ADDRESSING ISSUES
- GENERAL TIPS
- COMMON MISTAKES/THINGS TO AVOID
- QUESTIONS TO BRAINSTORM TO GET YOU WRITING
- AFTER YOUR FIRST DRAFT
- UCSD PROMPT
- OTHER PROMPTS
- EXAMPLE STATEMENTS

# WHAT IS A PERSONAL STATEMENT

- Chance for the admissions committee to get to know your goals, passions, skills, and intentions. How are you a unique applicant?
- Chance to make the committee care about you
- Written description of achievements and interests
- Includes short description of what drew you to this field
  
- The “hook”
  - Introduce yourself
  - What obstacles have you overcome? (Not necessarily in the first paragraph)
  - Your identity
  - Why do you want to go to graduate school? Should be woven throughout. Show don't tell (i.e. don't just say, “I am passionate about research.”) Give a story where your passion shows!
- Your research
  - What research have you done?
  - Include the name of the labs and/or PIs
  - What was the goal of the lab and/or your project?
  - Describe your project: what question were you addressing? What techniques did you use (do not go through the protocol)?
  - Brief description of results, what they mean, and/or future direction
  - What did each research experience teach you? How did it prepare you for a graduate program?

- Description of your research and what you have learned from each research experience. How can these added skills enhance your experience and research in graduate school?
- Why schools ask for a personal statement:
  - To get to know you, not just your grades and GRE scores
  - To see how you think and write
  - To determine if you are likely to be successful. Do you know about doing research? Can you talk about science? How are you a fit for the program?
  - Understand why you want this degree?
- Different than a Statement of Purpose:
  - SOP is more focused on academic credentials and goals
- What is NOT a personal statement:
  - A therapy session
  - A journal entry
  - An autobiography
  - A narrative version of your resume/CV

# GENERAL STRUCTURE OF A PERSONAL STATEMENT

- The future
  - Why this program? You can use words that are from the program website (i.e. names of sub-programs). This should change from program-to-program. Every program has “good research” and “interesting professors.” **BE SPECIFIC!**
  - What professors do you want to work with?
  - Briefly describe your goals
- Important notes:
  - These components can and should be woven throughout the statement

## ADDRESSING ISSUES

- This is not always applicable. Examples when needed could be something such as: unexplained very low grades for a semester,
- Explain issues in your application if the problem is:
  - Past
  - Resolved
  - Easy to sympathize with (NOT: "I was partying all semester, so my grades suffered.")
  - Unlikely to return
- Don't make excuses or blame others
- Point out recent evidence showing that this is resolved, and you are still a strong candidate

## GENERAL TIPS/WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

- Answer the questions that are asked in the prompt
- Include a clear narrative:
  - Communicate what makes you a strong applicant
  - Can address setbacks or issues in your application (e.g. low GPA for two semesters due to taking care of family member). Make sure to overall demonstrate positive qualities
- Include specific Examples. This can include:
  - Anecdotes demonstrating traits
  - References to work that has influenced your academic interests
- Explain why you are a good fit for the program:
  - Why do you fit the program and why does the program fit you?
  - Talk about specific professors you would be interested in working with and why
- Good writing
  - Communicate clearly
  - No spelling or grammar errors
  - Avoid clichés or gimmicks
- Don't just list what you have done
- Just start writing: the first draft doesn't need to be perfect. It is easier to revise and cut down once you have your whole "story" written out
- Explain why you are interested in this field
- Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence and address this topic throughout the paragraph
- Don't be too generic. While it can be useful to have a "personal statement template," you will need to modify it to be specific to each school

## COMMON MISTAKES

- Too little intellectual depth
- Too much humor or drama
- Length (either too long or too short) Not answering questions
- Not explaining a weakness in your application
- Trying to impress the committee with big (and often incorrectly used) words
- Passive voice or poor writing
- Too many or too few transition words
- Clichés or gimmicks
- Re-stating obvious points
- Accidentally writing the name of another school
- Not being school/program-specific
- Disclosing too much personal information
- Being too narrow or too broad in your interests

## AVOID

- Criticizing other graduate programs or professors
- Expressing intolerant religious beliefs
- Plagiarism
- Expressing political views
- Arrogance
- Sexism/Racism
- Flowery language
- Superlatives
- Lofty statements
- Selling yourself short

## BRAINSTORMING QUESTIONS TO START THINKING

- Why am I a unique applicant?
- How did I learn about this field?
- What interests me about this field?
- What experiences have added to this interest?
- What skills or characteristics do I have that enhance my chance of success?
- What are my biggest accomplishments?
- What relevant obstacles have I overcome?
- What are my career aspirations?
- What am I currently doing to reach these aspirations?
- Why THIS school and THIS program? Why would I be an asset to this professor/lab/university?

## AFTER YOU HAVE A DRAFT

- Proofread! Read out loud to make sure it flows.
- Give to friends (scientists and non-scientists) to check content and flow
- Give to someone with experience writing the statements
- If able, visit your school's writing center
- Edit and repeat!

## UCSD Prompt

Five primary topics to cover in your statement of purpose:

1. *How did you become interested in this field? Establish that you have had a long-term interest in the field and that you have taken positive steps in pursuing your interest. Give the committee members a sense of your particular talents and abilities and their relevance to your academic interests.*
2. What experiences have contributed toward your preparation for further study in this field? Demonstrate your interest by providing examples of research experiences, internships, work experience, community service, publications, or life experiences. Briefly describe what you did in each experience. Also, make sure to articulate what you have learned about the field and how those lessons stimulated you to pursue an advanced degree.
3. What are your future goals? Specifically state your degree objective (Master's or Ph.D.) and specify what subdisciplines you are interested in pursuing. For example, if you are applying in political science, the committee needs to know whether you are pursuing American Politics, Comparative Politics, International Relations, or Political Theory. Let the reader know that you are planning a future career as a university professor, researcher, or consultant, or in public service or private practice (or whatever your goal happens to be).
4. What are your research interests? Within your subdiscipline, you should be able to identify one or two topics that are of interest to you. When possible, be specific about your research agenda. Remember that you will be working with professors in research; therefore, your research interests should parallel those of the faculty. (You will usually not be expected to know exactly what you want to research; faculty know that initial interests often change.)
5. How are you a "match" for the program to which you are applying? Explain what attracts you most to the institution/program to which you are applying. Align your research interests with those of one or more of the affiliated professors. The better the "match" with the program/professors, the better the chance that you will be admitted.

Other factors to weave in (remember these are secondary factors):

- Give examples of personal attributes or qualities that would help you complete graduate study successfully.
- Describe your determination to achieve your goals, your initiative and ability to develop ideas, and your ability to work independently.
- Describe background characteristics that may have placed you at an educational disadvantage (English language learner, family economic history, lack of educational opportunity, disability, etc.).
- Leave the reader believing that you are prepared for advanced academic work and will be successful in graduate school.

## Other Prompt Examples:

*Example 1:*

- **Part A, Statement of Goals:** Please provide a 500- to 1,000-word statement of goals concerning your plans for graduate study and a professional career. Indicate the area(s) of neuroscience that most interest you. Include specific training faculty whose research programs are of great interest and list at least three of the faculty members with whom you would like the opportunity to meet should you visit.
- **Part B, Previous Research Experience:** Please provide a brief description of your previous research experience. This should include undergraduate and/or graduate research, your research supervisor in each project and the technical skills that you have acquired, and a description of the hypotheses you

were examining in your research. Include publications and abstracts (full title, place, year and page numbers).

- **Part C, College or University Honors:** Please provide any honors you have received such as scholarships, fellowships, honor societies, etc.

*Example 2:*

PERSONAL STATEMENT (Required for all) - Please upload a document answering the following questions: 1) Why do you wish to pursue graduate studies in your chosen area of specialization? 2) What is your research experience? 3) What are your research interests? 4) Why have you selected the research mentors whom you selected? If you are applying to the Clinical area, please respond to the following question as well: 5) What is your clinical experience? If you are applying to the Cognitive area, please respond to the following question as well: 6) Describe any other relevant skills or background you have, such as experimental or technical training, computer programming, or mathematics.

*Example 3*

:  
Please address the questions below in your personal statement. Upload one document with two or three **separate sections** (depending on whether you answer the optional question), with each section **clearly labeled**.

1. **REQUIRED** Describe your previous research experience(s). Make sure to elaborate on your motivation to pursue your research project(s), what your role was in the project(s), as well as any results/presentations/papers resulting from the project(s). If you have co-authored a peer-reviewed publication, please give the complete reference.
2. **REQUIRED** Tell us about your motivation for seeking a PhD in X, your research interests and what type of research you hope to pursue in graduate school. Also please tell us what you would like to do after graduate school and how you perceive a PhD will be a step in your desired career path.

**OPTIONAL** Is there anything else not addressed in the questions above that you would like the committee to take into account as they consider your application?

### **Personal Statement Examples**

Note: the italics indicates the specific “type” of essay that was requested in the application and, if applicable, any additional information about this essay. These essays are not perfect, and some parts are actually not great at all, but the idea is for you to go through them, recognize how individuals talked about parts of his/her application and his/her research

*Statement of Goals:*

My passion for research is rooted in the inquisitive nature I’ve had since I was young. I am constantly trying to make sense of the world around me, and if no one else knows the answer, I will find it for myself. My natural curiosity has found its home within the world of research. I have watched my mother struggle with clinical depression, my grandparents succumb to the memory loss of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease, a family friend suffer with Parkinson’s disease, and my step-brother die as a result of traumatic brain injury. While it is, and continues to be, challenging to watch this suffering, these experiences have fueled my enthusiasm for research and neuroscience. As a Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology major at Emory University, I have studied many neuroscience topics, but I am continuously drawn to areas of neuroscience that relate to the neurological disorders and challenges I have witnessed. These prominent research disciplines include traumatic brain injury, aging, affective disorders, and neurodegenerative diseases. While my research as an undergraduate has related to neurodegenerative and affective disorders, I have neuroscience interests that I have not had the opportunity to explore. The numerous faculty with diverse research interests offered by the Center for Neuroscience gives me an unparalleled opportunity to satiate my constant appetite for research and explore my neuroscience interests in greater detail.

My interest in affective disorders began when my mother was diagnosed with clinical depression and has continued through college where I used a mouse model of Parkinson's Disease to study resilience to pharmacologically induced stress. This interest and research experience provides a foundation for me to continue research on affective behavior at the graduate level. I am interested in Dr. Susanne Ahmari's research on psychiatric disorders, anxiety, compulsive disorders, and neural plasticity. Working with Dr. Ahmari would allow me to use cutting edge neuroscience techniques to study affective disorders, a core catalyst for my enthusiasm for research and neuroscience. I am also interested in traumatic brain injury. This interest began during my freshmen year of college when my step-brother died from traumatic brain injury after four months in a comatose state. Those four months were filled with the hope that he would regain function. I want to be a part of the effort to make this hope a reality for others by working in the Safar Center for Resuscitation Research. Dr. Anthony Kline's research on the development of treatments to help restore function after traumatic brain injury addresses this goal. If I were to work with Dr. Anthony Kline, I would apply my drive to improve outcomes for patients with traumatic brain injury. Working in these laboratories would also utilize the skills I have gained in rodent handling and behavior as an undergraduate.

Although my main academic focus at Emory has been neuroscience, I also completed a minor in sociology. Through sociology classes such as "Aging in Society" and "Comparative Health Systems," I became engrossed in the concept of "successful aging." While in class I studied this idea from a sociological perspective, I am excited by the work of Dr. Kirk Erickson to study this notion from a neurobiological perspective. Working with Dr. Erickson would afford me the unique opportunity to combine this concept with my fascination with cognition, plasticity, and neuroimaging. This fascination has been nurtured thus far by my research experience in the Center for Human Development at University of California, San Diego, and classes such as "Introduction to Neurobiology," "Behavioral Neuroscience," and "Conceptual Foundations of Functional Neuroimaging." I am also interested in exploring the research of other faculty members such as, Dr. Judy Cameron's work on everyday stress, Dr. C. Edward Dixon's research on memory deficits and brain injury, Dr. Anthony Grace's research on the dopaminergic system, and Dr. Linda Rinaman's work on the neural mechanisms of stress responses.

The structure and faculty of the Center for Neuroscience PhD program caters to my passion for research, my diverse neuroscience interests, and the possibilities for my future career. As the aforementioned researchers represent only a small sample of the training faculty whose research I would like to explore further, the rotations offered during my first year will allow me to experience new laboratory settings in novel domains of neuroscience and ultimately help me to solidify my research interests. The predominant focus on research and the structure of the advisory committee system and the University of Pittsburgh offers a distinctive opportunity for me to grow to be a more rounded neuroscientist as I receive feedback from multiple training faculty. Ultimately, this unique graduate training program, more research experience, and a greater network of professional connections will help me to develop my scientific thinking, look at problems from new angles, become an expert in my field of interest, and refine my career options. While I do not know my exact career goals at this time, I foresee myself continuing to work in academia. This setting would allow me to do research while also employing my skills in writing, mentoring, and organization. As I work towards a PhD at the University of Pittsburgh Center for Neuroscience, I will know that I will gain valuable experience that will direct me towards my career. My experiences in graduate school and my subsequent career will be testament to my constant drive for knowledge.

*Previous Research Experience (including publications):*

In my sophomore year, I began volunteering in the neuropharmacology lab of Dr. Gary Miller. I worked diligently to make an impact on the lab as a whole. At first, I was given routine tasks to complete around the lab. I sliced mouse brains, pulled electrodes, washed dishes, and set up an organizational system for the secondary antibodies. I started to ask more questions. By the end of my first semester in the lab, I was entrusted with performing experiments under the instruction of my graduate student advisor. At the start of my junior

year, I was trained in mouse handling techniques and learned about the ethics of using animal models and additional factors that can affect mouse behavior.

Since then, my independent research has primarily focused on characterizing sensory, affective, and social behavior in transgenic mice that over- or under- express vesicular monoamine transporter 2 (VMAT2), a synaptic vesicle protein found in the central nervous system that packages monoamines (dopamine, serotonin, norepinephrine, and histamine) into vesicles. I performed a series of tests that included a visual cliff assay to measure visual acuity, a buried food assay, an olfactory habituation/dishabituation assay to characterize olfactory ability, a sucrose preference assay to measure both taste abilities and anhedonic-like behavior, and a hot plate assay to measure nociception. The absence of significant differences between groups in most of the assays helped to validate previous and inform future research wherein sensory differences could confound the results. I also characterized the effects of VMAT2 overexpression in providing resilience to pharmacologically induced stress. The hypothesis was that the VMAT2 overexpressing mice that previously had reduced depressive- and anxiety-like behavior would show no significant change in depressive- and anxiety-like behavior whereas the wild-type would show increased affective behavior. Currently, I am using tests of social approach, interaction, odor habituation/dishabituation, memory, and empathy-related behavior to help determine if VMAT2 has an effect on social impairments or social memory. The hypothesis is that VMAT2-underexpressing mice will display decreased social behavior and VMAT2-overexpressing mice will show no difference from the wild-type. Since VMAT2 is a promising pharmacological target for a variety of diseases, it's critical to understand the effect of VMAT2 on behavioral functioning.

Last year I presented my findings at an exclusive dinner and showcase for college deans and recipients of the Scholarly Inquiry and Research (SIRE) grant through Emory College and the Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology research symposium at the end of the year. Furthermore, I am currently working on an honors thesis to be completed in the second semester this year. As my research adds to the larger research theme of the Miller lab, I have contributed to a publication on VMAT2 characterization, and I'm thrilled that my data will contribute to an upcoming publication on VMAT2 and behavior that I'm co-authoring with my graduate student advisor. Information regarding the publications are as follows:

R. A. Cliburn, A.R. Dunn, K.A. Stout, C.A. Hoffman, K.M. Lohr, A.I. Bernstein, **E.J. Winokur**, Y. Shmitz, J.P. Burkett, W.M. Caudle, G.W. Miller. Immunochemical localization of vesicular monoamine transporter 2 (VMAT2) in mouse brain. *Journal of Chemical Neuroanatomy*. [in press]

R.A. Cliburn, J.P. Burkett, **E.J. Winokur**, W. Elsworth, J.S. Schroeder, D. Weinshenker, G.W. Miller. Underexpression of VMAT2 produces altered fear responsiveness and fear learning in mice. *Genes, Brain, and Behavior*. [in preparation]

I was fortunate to have another significant research experience in the summer entering my junior year when I participated in the Summer Training Academy for Research Success (STARS program) at University of California, San Diego. I worked in the lab of Dr. Terry Jernigan at the Center for Human Development in the Cognitive Science Department. During my summer in the lab, I helped collect data on children aged 5-16 by administering cognitive tests such as the Test of Early Mathematic Abilities and the Woodcock Johnson Test of Achievement. I also completed an independent project that focused on using cross-sectional data to examine the correlation between self and parent reports of child anxiety phenotypes and math performance. My hypothesis was that trait anxiety would be correlated with decreased mathematic performance when controlling for sex and age. My motivation for this research was to gain a better understanding of the factors that can influence math performance and contribute to a larger effort to effectively structure mathematical testing such that differences in affective states do not have an effect on performance. This was my first experience delving into scientific literature in order to find questions that had not yet been answered, writing a concise abstract, and developing a focused research question. I presented my findings at the San Diego Summer Research Conference at the end of the summer. My research experiences have been an integral part of my undergraduate experience. I am confident that the love of research and skills I have cultivated will follow me through my career.

*Generic statement of purpose example to be adapted for other schools:*



As a fledgling scientist, I continually re-discover what I love about science. I can spend indefinite periods of time watching my pet fish, campus' squirrels, and classmates in awe that I know *how they work*. I have handled their species' brains, skeletons, hearts and lungs, and I know what they feel like, how they function and why the organisms they act the way they do. More fascinating to me, though, is how much we do *not* know and what is left to discover, especially regarding the nervous system. I have chosen to pursue graduate school because I am not done learning and I am eager to contribute to man's continually-growing, collective knowledge base. I look forward to the challenge and rewards of conducting my own research, and of earning a degree that goes far beyond routine coursework and memorizing already-established facts. While I'm sure that the life of a scientist is not as glamorous as I envisioned as an elementary-school student, I am hopeful that it will be no less satisfying.

I first became interested in neuroscience accidentally; in middle and high school, I had family members and a friend diagnosed with various neurological disorders--dementia, stroke, and a brain tumor. Seeing each of their behaviors, motor and intellectual capacities, and personalities change as a result of their diseases compelled me consider the importance of the convoluted mass of tissue that I had been told was housed inside each of our crania. As an initial step to satisfy this curiosity, I took my first general psychology course in high school. While much of the information interesting, the short blurbs at the end of each textbook section headed "Neuroscience" contained most intriguing gems. The connection between anatomy, biology, and behavior has fascinated me ever since.

The research opportunities I have had have been valuable and enjoyable. The project with which I have worked the longest, the Maine-Syracuse Longitudinal Study, is a 35-year-long project which studies the relationship between cardiovascular disease risk factors, quality of life and cognitive function. As an undergraduate in this lab, I have learned the importance of meticulous data-processing and analysis, and have been able to conduct a few independent investigations using the study's wealth of data under the direction of Dr. Michael Robbins. The data with which I dealt daily inspired me to look more closely at certain relationships. For example, I noticed certain patterns of cognitive deficit--participants who seemed dysphoric oftentimes seemed to perform more poorly on neuropsychological tests. As I researched the literature, I found that this pattern was not unique; in my junior year, I confirmed that a significant, negative relationship between anxiety, depression, and cognitive function was indeed present in our cohort. I conducted another project the same year, this time looking more closely at hypercholesterolemia and cognition. As a result of these projects, I presented two posters highlighting my findings with the study. While I was initially hesitant at the prospect of presenting scientific findings to an audience of professionals, I grew to recognize that they would share my fascination (and maybe even my excitement) with this new information. I have since come to appreciate and even look forward to the opportunity to share my research findings with others.

Currently, I am writing a research paper as a senior project summarizing my most interesting findings regarding hypercholesterolemia. I found that, in our cohort, higher serum cholesterol levels are related to better performance on a variety of neuropsychological exams. I am researching possible explanations for this relationship; I believe it is due, at least in part, to the altered metabolism of cholesterol in the beginning stages of dementia--specifically Alzheimer's Disease. However, further work is required to fully understand the relationship.

Another research experience I was fortunate enough to have was a 10-week Maine INBRE research fellowship that I was awarded the summer before my senior year of college. Under the direction of Dr. Rick Thompson at Bowdoin College, I conducted behavioral and molecular experiments to study the influence of steroid hormones in visually-guided sexual approach behavior in goldfish. Additionally, I investigated sex differences in ultraviolet light reflection and its potential role in sex discrimination in the same species. While 10 weeks is not nearly long enough to delve into the topic as thoroughly as I would have liked, the fellowship was exceedingly valuable: I learned crucial lab methods, techniques and procedures that will certainly be useful in my future as a graduate student and eventually as an independent scientist.

I am grateful for these experiences, and I look forward to expanding my own knowledge base and having a more independent role in future research. I still have questions to answer and curiosity to sate, and I

believe that the research opportunities available at XXX would help to accomplish that. As a graduate student at XXX, I would hope to delve further into one of my interests in neuroscience--interests which are reflected by my previous research projects.

I am interested in how the brain and our neural circuitry changes (normally, pathologically, or due to factors such as aging), and how these events affect behavior; neurogenesis, neural plasticity, and neurodegeneration are all particularly fascinating to me.

I also have an interest in the neurobiological bases social behavior. In my INBRE fellowship with Dr. Thompson, I became intimate with the fact that even relatively straight-forward behaviors (such as sexually-motivated social approach) are extremely complex, and manipulating them for the purpose of research must be done elegantly and precisely--a general skill that I hope to hone in the coming years. This is an area that I would love to be involved in, and the work of XXXXX and XXXXX is particularly fascinating to me.

Because my research interests are somewhat varied, and since I suspect that I have yet-untapped interests, I would hope to conduct laboratory rotations in order to solidify my long-term research goals. XXX's interdisciplinary and diverse research areas, Xunique medical settingX, and the opportunity for access to facilities such as the XXX are incredibly appealing to me as a prospective graduate student. I believe that an education at XXX would help to shape me into an effective and capable independent scientist.

## **References**

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