

Episode 22 – Judge Me! Your Grad School Application Personal Statement

Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

I'm fascinated by the "Don't Judge Me!" memes. I get that people don't want to be stereotyped and no one wants to be demeaned or condescended to, but human beings are judging by their very nature. Judging is part of the decision-making process, and even a specific trait in many personality profiles. It goes to the very core of our "fight or flight" instinct – we have to decide which one to do based on our judgment of the situation. So, a lot of times what I want to say in response to "Don't Judge Me!" is "But you're judging ME!" There's a difference, of course, between judging and being judgmental. What most people are trying to say is "Don't be judgmental!" and that's a fair request. But I reserve the right to judge you. How else will I know how great a person you are? That's the way you should approach your personal statement for your graduate school application. It's an opportunity for the admissions committee to find out who you really are. Invite them to judge you.

Before we delve into the nuts and bolts of how to lay out your personal narrative, let's agree on what we're talking about. The personal statement is often a required component of a graduate school application. Some applications require TWO statements – a personal statement and a statement of purpose. [Cornell](#) does this, for example. In that instance, the academic component of your story is often coupled with your reasoning for selecting a certain school or program in the statement of purpose. But I'm going to talk about a single document that conveys all of this plus your personal story and call that a personal statement. Be sure to look at the required documents for each application you fill out and be prepared to write more than one version of your personal statement. More on that in a moment.

Let's start with how you should approach your personal statement. It should be a story: a story about you. Not the whole story, but it should read like an engaging short story. Not a corny dramatic short story like "The rain fell gently as I trudged up the steps to Abbott Elementary School for the very first time, filled with expectation and apprehension." Just a well-written, factual stroll through your academic and personal journey. Balance the necessary self-promotion with honesty. Use writing techniques like [hook-and-eye construction](#), transitional sentences between paragraphs, and an overall arch that brings back your opening statements at the end. Avoid humor and self-deprecation, and certainly don't demean anyone else or another institution. Academic circles are small.

Your statement should be necessarily autobiographical but not necessarily chronological. Start with when you first thought about obtaining an advanced degree. That's even more important than when you became interested in your discipline. Sure, someone will want to know why you love being a writer, but what they really want to know is why you want to go to journalism school. Sometimes those two things go together, like deciding to go to law school late in your undergraduate career, but assuming your graduate degree is an extension of your undergraduate degree, lead with your interest in grad school. If you are changing disciplines – got your BFA in percussion but are trying to get into a public health master's program – be sure to connect the dots.

Which leads to another important purpose of your personal statement. Explain the gaps, bumps, bruises, and warts in your resume. Why did you change undergraduate institutions three times? Why is there an 18-month gap between those two five-year jobs you had? Why was your GPA a 2.4 your freshman year and a 3.9 your senior year? View these as opportunities to show your perseverance and grit. Show how you overcame obstacles. Show how you worked in diverse groups. You don't have to conform to the

stereotype of the “traditional” graduate student – there’s no such thing anymore. But you do have to explain why graduate school is right for you and why now is the right time.

As for mandatory elements, the biggest one is why you are interested in THIS graduate school. That will probably go somewhere towards the end or the closing paragraph, after you’ve explained why you want to go to grad school in general. This is where you tailor your letter to the program and institution you are applying to. Maybe there are geographic reasons. Maybe you have to stay in state. Maybe there is a program specialty or someone there you specifically want to work with. More on that in a minute.

At the very minimum, state the institution and program name you are applying to. Some of this will be cut and replace. **Danger Will Robinson!** You have to be very careful replacing one institution with another in your letters! Make sure you get all the instances and try not to move the location around too much. My advice is to create a template with the program name, institution name, potential research mentors, and any other specific information left blank and highlighted. Leave that template unaltered, tailor it for an application, then save the file under another name. It’s better to accidentally save your template with institutional information in it – that can be fixed – than to leave “University of North Carolina” in one place and “Duke University” in another in a statement that gets uploaded. Families don’t speak to each other over such things.

It is generally a good idea to mention your potential areas of interest – particularly if you are applying for a research or performance degree – and even faculty members who you would like to have as a mentor. But be careful. Is that person still at that institution? If so, are they still advising students? Websites are not always up to date and you don’t want to put yourself in the embarrassing situation of naming a potential mentor that isn’t even active any more or worse yet – dead. This desire to know who is taking advisees and who isn’t is what leads to those [cold unsolicited emails of Episode 17](#) that I told you not to send. So, what do you do? Contact the department or program through their graduate information email which should be on the website, or call the department directly and simply ask whoever answers the phone if professor so-and-so is still there. This person won’t know if they are taking students or not (even the professor may not know that) but go ahead and mention them anyway if that is the area you want to work in. Things can change and even faculty who have not been active scholars for a while can re-activate their careers. It’s not common, so be sure to mention two or three faculty that you might be willing to work with, or just your research specialties within the discipline. But be flexible. It’s more important that you want to go to that program or university than it is to work with a specific person or go into a research area that you may know little about. These personalized statements take time, so plan accordingly. And if you don’t have enough time to personalize each personal statement then you’re probably sending out too many applications.

Be sure to close with an impactful statement that will leave a positive impression. Recapitulate your interest in graduate school and connect that to why this institution and program is the best fit for yourself and how you can contribute to making the program even better.

Finally, proofread, proofread, and proofread again. Yes, three times. All the way through. Look at those little red and blue underlined words and phrases and find out why they are highlighted in your word processor. Have someone else read it for clarity, grammar, and conciseness. Yes, conciseness. One or two pages at most should do the trick in most cases. Any longer and you are racking up negative points. You don’t want to be judged negatively!

Thank you for joining me today. All of the links provided in my podcasts are available at grad-post.com. There, you’ll find additional resources and information to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree.

Go ahead! Judge me! I own every word I say and every degree counts!

Links

<https://gradschool.cornell.edu/admissions/prepare/personal-statements/>

https://cbs.umn.edu/sites/cbs.umn.edu/files/migrated-files/downloads/The_Hook_and_Eye_Technique_copy.pdf