

Academic Advancement Programs:

Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy of Graduate School Applications.

This is one of the most intimidating pieces of the graduate school application- personal statements and statements of purpose. It is where you will show admissions committee members that you are not a robot that pumps out great test scores, grade point averages and research publications. You will have to show them in 1,000 words that you are a human being with a great character and ability. So much so that you are a great fit for their program.

You aren't the first person to fear personal statements and statements of purpose. Common fears include:

- ✓ I am not comfortable talking about myself. I will sound pretentious.
- ✓ How will I discuss and analyze my life story in just 1,000 words?
- ✓ I don't know where to start. What are personal statements and statements of purpose? And, how are they different- they both include the word statement?
- ✓ There is so much resting on this!
- ✓ If you are a STEM major, you may wish that statements consisted of an equation rather than prose.

Me + Good Grades + Research Skills = The Perfect Student for Your Graduate Program

At this point feel free to circle the concerns you relate with. But, have no fear, AAP is here to help. This step by step guide will help you get started. Buckle in!

Step 1: Find out what a personal statement and statement of purpose are and learn the differences between them. For a breakdown look at *Appendix A*.

Step 2: Obtain the specific personal statement and statement of purpose prompts for each school you are interested in applying to.

It is important that you understand what the prompts ask for; don't provide admissions committees with information they didn't request. Show them you can follow directions and don't waste your energy unnecessarily.

Know the department's research agenda, specialties and mission statements so your response demonstrates you match what they are looking for in a candidate.

Note: If applications have not been released yet respond to generalized prompts in *Appendix B*.

Step 3: Self-Reflect. Analyze your academic, research, extracurricular and life experiences for valuable skills and abilities you gained through them that ensure your success in the program of interest.

Reply to questions listed below. These will be the content, puzzle pieces, you will use in later steps to construct a rough draft of your personal statements and statements of purpose.

Reflection Category: Field of Interest

- ✓ Type of graduate program you are interested in pursuing (ex: I'm pursuing a PhD in Organic Chemistry)
- ✓ When/How did you become interested in this field? Any specific experiences that led you to discover this was the field you would like to continue pursuing?
- ✓ What do you find most interesting/fascinating about your field?
- ✓ How do you feel your field/research you are interested in contributes to society?
- ✓ Anything else you would like to share about your passion for the field
- ✓ Type of graduate program you are interested in pursuing (ex: I'm pursuing a PhD in Organic Chemistry)
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- ✓ Anything else you would like to share about your passion for the field

Reflection Category: Educational Journey

What have you done in order to prepare to pursue graduate school? Institutions you have attended; majors you have selected or switched; rigorous courses you have taken, experiences you have pursued to become competitive for graduate school.

Reflection Category: Research Experiences

- ✓ Where was the research located (institution)?
- ✓ How did you go about identifying and joining this research?
- ✓ Who is your research mentor?
- ✓ What is the name of the lab (if any)?
- ✓ What tasks did you perform in the lab (think about everything that you do in the lab)
- ✓ Discuss the research you conduct. What is it? What is the purpose of the research?
- ✓ Have you been progressively been given more responsibilities? what are those?
- ✓ What have you learned (hard and soft skills) from conducting this research?
- ✓ What challenges have you encountered and how have you learned from those challenges in ways you can benefit in the future?
- ✓ What do you enjoy most about the research you are conducting?
- ✓ How (if at all) does your research contribute to society?

Note: Discuss your research experiences (if more than one, discuss separately -- if none, discuss your research interests in what you are doing in order to secure research experiences as well as any related experience in the field you are interested in).

Reflection Category: Graduate Schools of Interest

- ✓ Which graduate programs will you apply to (Master/Doctoral) and in which field?
- ✓ Which schools are you interested in?
- ✓ What type of research do these departments specialize in?
- ✓ How do your research interests align with theirs?
- ✓ What are some potential faculty mentors at these institutions?
- ✓ Have you interacted with anyone in the department?
- ✓ Are there any resources (book collections, equipment, consortiums, etc.) you will benefit from?

Reflection Category: Future

- ✓ What types of skills have you not yet obtained that you would like to obtain?
- ✓ What other areas of research would you like to explore - why?
- ✓ What do you want to do with your PhD after you graduate?

Step 4: How do you want the reader to view you?– after the reader finishes reading your statement, what is the impression the reader should have of you when they finish the statement?

Think about the characteristics you feel make you a strong candidate for graduate school that you want to communicate – and make sure you **SHOW** these to the reader, instead of telling them:

Example of characteristics:

- Self-directed
- Hard working
- Persevering
- Insightful
- Committed to pursuing research
- Committed to a specific type of research or population
- Committed to my goal to _____ by utilizing my PhD
- Committed to making a difference in my community

As you are writing your statement and after you finish, take each one of the characteristics you noted, and make sure that you are showing the reader how you embody that characteristic through your academic pursuits. You should not write “I am very self directed” or “I am hardworking”...instead you should illustrate an instance when you were self-directed or where you demonstrate you are hardworking.

Step 5: Formulate a thesis statement for your opening paragraph. In statements you are making a core argument about yourself that you then support with evidence from your personal and academic life.

Your thesis statement look something like this.....

“I am a person who contributes to and is shaped by their life experiences in society and academia. My life experiences shaped my research interests because I see research as a tool to explain elements of my lived experience and/or address an issue/need, in society. Your graduate school program will help me prepare to confront this challenge as a researcher. I am a great fit for your graduate school program.”

Look at your responses to questions posed in **step 3**. Think about how these puzzle pieces fit together into one grand narrative about your character, what you want to achieve and your preparedness. Then write a three-four sentence thesis. In other words, create a sales pitch about how great you are for a graduate school program.

Your thesis should include (in no particular order):

- Research Interests
- PhD Program you plan to pursue
- Career Goals
- The impact you plan to make in society
- Personalize the Program

Make sure your thesis is concise and answers the prompt you found in **step 2**.

Step 6: Armed with your thesis statement and puzzle pieces construct a concept map or general bullet outline. This will help you organize your thoughts, so you can write a coherent piece later. Consult *Appendix D* for examples of concept maps.

Make sure the puzzle pieces you chose from **part 3** support the central thesis you formulated in **step 4**. Think of it this way the central thesis is the picture in front of the box you want your puzzle pieces to resemble once you put them together.

Step 7: Start writing. For a breakdown of the general flow of a statement of purpose consult *Appendix C*.

In this step the hardest thing is precisely the starting part, especially if you expect your first draft to be perfect. News flash- it won't!

Accept that you will need to construct multiple drafts before you reach the golden version of your statement.

At this step the most important thing is to just get something on paper!

Step 8: Seek reviewers. Schedule an appointment with AAP or the UCF writing center. Faculty mentors in your field are also great resources. Get someone to provide feedback regarding grammar and general flow. Ask them if you are making a clear and logical argument about yourself.

Be willing to place yourself in this vulnerable position so you can improve!

If you are a perfectionist, you may never be satisfied with your draft. You will probably only settle once your advisors and family members stage an intervention. Learn when to stop and just submit!

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Differences between Personal Statements and Statements of Purpose

Statement of Purpose/Intent:

This is an amplified, more detailed, version of your curriculum vitae. Applicants construct a picture of their academic selves. Here applicants write about particular classes, internships, research skills and experiences that will assure individual success in the program. Applicants outline what they will research within the program and highlight particular reasons for choosing the program and mentors.

Personal Statement:

Applicants get personal, as the name states, and construct a picture of their place in society. Detail significant experiences that led you to choose your field and other aspects of your life that demonstrate your potential. You must demonstrate readiness for a graduate program both in terms of personal life skills and character. Express your passion for your chosen field and particular graduate program. Include pertinent information about your personal background, employment and volunteer services.

Appendix B: Sample Prompts for Personal Statements and Statements of Purpose

Statement of Purpose Sample Prompts:

Outline the key experiences that prepared you for graduate level studies.

Of the 2 areas of study available, provide a rationale for your selection, your key qualifications and the professors with whom you would like to study.

Personal Statement Sample Prompts

Discuss your motivation to pursue a career as a _____.

Discuss your career goals and the attributes that you will bring to the XYZ program.

Describe key experiences that have influenced your decision to pursue a career as a _____.

Appendix C: General Flow of a Statement of Purpose

Paragraph I: Introduction

_____ Memorable Opening Sentence (make them remember you and your interests) 1 – 2

In no particular order

_____ Mention PhD Program you Plan to Pursue

_____ Career Goals

_____ Research Interests and What you Plan to do With that

_____ Personalize to the program you are applying to

Thesis about myself as a strong graduate candidate for the program and contributing member of society

Paragraph II: Body #1 (Freshman Year)

_____ Sentence outlining the paragraph's main topic (sub thesis).

_____ State why research is important to you.

_____ Outline what made you decide to pursue research (personal or academic life event).

_____ Describe first research experience.

_____ State research topic and central questions.

_____ Mentors.

_____ State your role and achievements.

_____ Outline hard skills gained.

_____ Outline soft skills gained.

_____ State main life lesson from experience.

Paragraph III: Body #2 (Sophomore Year/ Summer Research Experience)

_____ Sentence outlining the paragraph's main topic (sub thesis)

_____ Describe second or continuing research experience.

_____ State research topic and central questions.

_____ Mentors.

_____ State your role and achievements.

_____ Outline hard skills gained.

_____ Outline soft skills gained.

_____ State main life lesson from experience.

_____ Describe summer research experience.

_____ State research topic and central questions.

_____ Mentors.

_____ State your role and achievements.

_____ Outline hard skills gained.

_____ Outline soft skills gained.

_____ State main life lesson from experience.

Paragraph IV: Body #3 (Junior Year/ Summer Research Experience)

_____ Sentence outlining the paragraph's main topic (sub thesis)

_____ Describe third or continuing research experience.

_____ State research topic and central questions.

_____ Mentors.

_____ State your role and achievements.

_____ Outline hard skills gained.

_____ Outline soft skills gained.

_____ State main life lesson from experience.

_____ Describe summer research experience.

_____ State research topic and central questions.

_____ Mentors.

_____ State your role and achievements.

_____ Outline hard skills gained.

_____ Outline soft skills gained.

_____ State main life lesson from experience.

Paragraph V: Body #4 (Senior Year)

_____ Sentence outlining the paragraph's main topic (sub thesis)

_____ Describe fourth or continuing research experience.

_____ State research topic and central questions.

_____ Mentors.

_____ State your role and achievements.

_____ Outline hard skills gained.

_____ Outline soft skills gained.

_____ State main life lesson from experience.

Paragraph VI: Body #5 (Program Customization)

_____ State your future goals (Ph.D., societal contributions and academic job).

_____ State your research topic of interest.

_____ Express that you want to add to the department's legacy and that you will benefit greatly from the department's guidance. In other words, a symbiotic relationship.

_____ Mention the departmental research specialty that matches your interest.

_____ Name potential faculty mentors.

_____ Mention any pleasant encounters you had with faculty members in the department.

_____ Mention resources you will benefit from inside and outside the department.

Paragraph VII: Conclusion

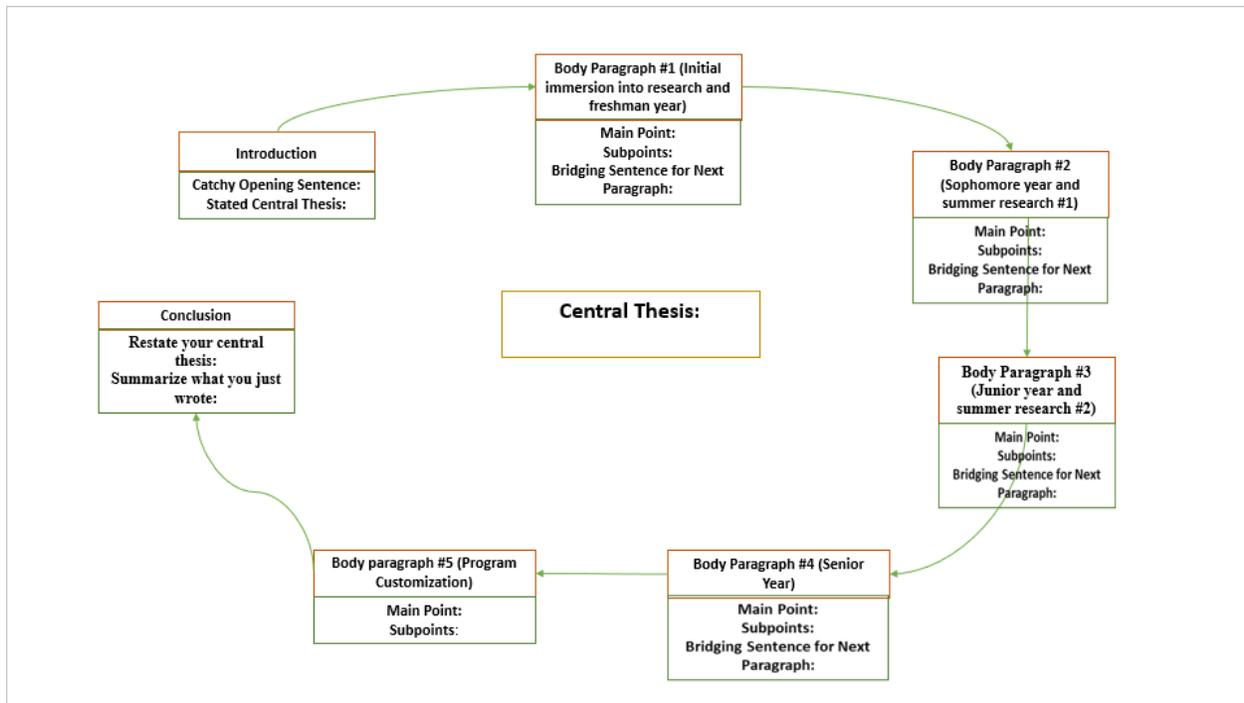
_____ Restate central thesis

_____ Catchy closing sentence

Appendix D: Examples of Concept Maps

Concept maps are a great tool for creating outlines. Do this before you actually start writing and it will help you visualize the shape your written work will take.

Find below an example of a typical concept map, but do not feel restricted by it. For example, if you a chemistry major you may want to create an outline that looks like a series of chemical reactions. Be creative, but make sure it makes the subsequent writing process easier for you.



Appendix E: The Art of Maintaining Active Voice

Effective writing is clear, concise and gives the impression of a writer's authoritativeness. Effective writing practices depend on the strategic use and arrangement of words- the adoption of active voice.

What is Active Voice?

Active voice is a writing style in which writers frame sentences so the subject of the sentences is doing something. The subject is the main focus.

For example:

Over one-third of the applicants to the school failed the entrance exam.

Timidity often leads to the opposite approach. Novices that are uncomfortable with writing, adopt passive voice as their writing style. In passive voice sentences are framed so something is being done to the subject of the sentence. The subject is just letting things happen to them.

For example:

The entrance exam was failed by over one-third of applicants to the school.

Adopters of passive voice use a surplus of words and convoluted arrangements to overcompensate for a perceived lack of skill. In other words, novices utilize more words and overcomplicated words than necessary to state what they could have with far fewer and simpler words.

Effective writing through active voice follows the mantra of "less is more." Let's be honest! Most readers have short attention spans. Keep it sweet and to the point.