

Personal Statements



October 2020

This month's goals will focus on improving your personal statement. Your mentor will help by giving feedback and suggestions, but you can read the following guidelines as you develop your own personal statement. Good luck!

General Guidelines on Personal Statements

A [study that surveyed 88 graduate admissions chairs](#) identified "Kisses of Death" in personal statements for graduate school applications. This identified the following as **4 major things to avoid** in personal statements:

1. Discussion of personal mental health

Examples include any indicators of untreated mental illness, emotional instability, or any indication that the student is drawn to graduate school due to significant personal problems/trauma.

2. Excessive altruism

This is when the major reasons for pursuing graduate school are for helping people or saving the world. It is assumed by graduate committees that every student wants to help people. A personal statement should instead focus on the student's professional activities, research interests, academic strengths, and professional experiences rather than purely personal characteristics and motives. It is better to include descriptions of strong personal qualities in letters of recommendation (LOR).

3. Excessive self-disclosure

Examples include long stories about how the student had finished school over incredible odds. It is much better to have references who write LORs to allude to this. Any personal information must be written in a professional manner that is appropriate for a formal application.

4. Professional inappropriateness

Unprofessional gimmicks such as excessive humor, "cutesy/clever stuff", and religious references are typically perceived negatively by graduate admission committees.

Instead, the study outlined that graduate committees look for fundamentally positive personal characteristics like intelligence, motivation, responsibility, agreeableness, and the ability to work independently.

Admissions committees are interested in knowing what experiences led you to develop your skill set and passions. They want to know you've demonstrated accomplishment, leadership, and collaboration.

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Remember that committees are unaware of the contexts of your accomplishments (e.g. they don't know how competitive Oblation Scholarships or DOST scholarships are). It's important that you communicate the impact concretely, and that you describe what these experiences mean.

Whenever possible, quantify your accomplishments. How many people were in competition for an award? What % of your graduating class graduated with honors? How many people were on your team? How many protocols did you develop? As a TA, how often did you meet with your students?

Some examples of how to describe your experiences, [From the MIT Communication lab](#):

Vague experience	Concrete experience
I showed initiative in my second project in the lab.	Frustrated with the direction of my first project, I consulted with other faculty and proposed an entirely new project.
During my first year, I became a more curious and capable scientist.	I explored the literature and proposed two alternative procedures to make the experiment efficient.
I won the physic department's Laser Focus prize.	I won the physics department's prize for top student among my cohort of 20 students.
I learned about the role of enzymes in cancer.	I quantified the kinetics of three enzymes implicated in cancer onset.

Experience only	Experience and Meaning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First year, I was vice-president. • Second year, I founded a new organization. • Third year, I partnered my organization with other ones. • Fourth year, I led a collaboration between 10 student groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During my undergraduate career, I developed strong leadership skills. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ First year... ○ Second year... ○ Third year... ○ Fourth year... • I look forward to new leadership challenges as a graduate student.

Further Reading

- Full study: [Kisses of Death in the Graduate School Application Process](#)
- [MIT CommLab full article](#)
- [MIT CommLab annotated example statement](#)
- [Comprehensive guide on applications, including emailing professors, statements, recommendation letters](#)