

## PhDs Applications in Psychology: Tips for Writing a Good Personal Statement

So you're planning to apply to a PhD program in psychology? Congratulations! This is a big step on your personal and professional journey. One of the major components of a PhD application is a *personal statement*.

A PhD personal statement is meant to showcase your interest in a specific field, your goals during the PhD, and relevant prior experience that led you to your current research interests and perspectives, while also conveying to readers *why* you are choosing a specific mentor or mentors and a specific program and/or department. As such, these statements tend to be (on average) about 1-2 pages long and can vary anywhere between 750-1500 words.

But writing personal statements can be complicated, and the goals or purpose of them are not always transparent. To support applicants to our laboratory (and more generally in psychology and beyond), we have put together a guide and resources meant to help demystify writing a personal statement. **Please note that this guide is not meant to be prescriptive in telling applicants what they should or shouldn't do.** There are lots of pathways and approaches to writing a personal statement that are effective and successful. However, we hope that guides such as this can help level the playing field and improve accessibility, transparency, and equity across applicants.

### **Getting help with your statement ...**

Applicants who are from underrepresented groups (e.g., racial or ethnic minority, low income background, first generation undergraduate, minority sexual orientation or gender identity, immigrant or international student) OR who do not have access to a close mentor should consider submitting their draft personal statement to the free Application Statement Feedback Program (ASFP), which provides free feedback on Psychology PhD personal statements in the autumn months (e.g., October) leading up to the Psychology PhD application cycle.

<https://www.asfp.io/>

### **Below you will find suggestions on ....**

- Defining your goals for the PhD and your personal statement
- Structure and content of your personal statement
- Pitfalls to avoid
- Additional resources

### **The Goals of a PhD Personal Statement**

A personal statement (or statement of purpose) for a PhD program is not the same as writing a personal statement for college or university as an undergraduate. When writing your personal statement, you should keep in mind your professional goals as well as the goals of the personal statement itself.

**Consider your professional goals.** Before you write your personal statement, take some time to consider your intentions. You won't be doing a PhD forever (hopefully!), so what are your end goals? Sure, maybe you want to become a professor—and there are many other career options too. But take a moment to get more specific. Think about: what is the *training* you want? What are the tangible areas of knowledge and skillsets you want to have in your professional “toolkit” once you graduate?

- **What are the research topics or questions that you are most excited to pursue?** Consider what “content” or topic area(s) you want to become an expert or specialist in. It's okay if these ideas change and grow across your PhD! But it's important to identify your “core” research questions or areas of interest, as this will help you figure out which lab/mentor and PhD program are the best fits for you. It's ok if you have more than one area of interest. For example, maybe you are passionate about understanding the role of emotions in social dynamics, aging processes in emotion, how physiology influences cognition, or the intersections between health and well-being. *These are just examples. Topics will depend on you and the lab/mentor you are applying to.*
- **What are the specific research methods or skills you want to become expert in?** What skills do you want to take away from your PhD training? Often these are skills that you need in order to address your research topics or questions identified above. In many ways, the skills you gain will depend on the lab/mentor you work with and the resources, courses, and collaborations you can build at a given department and university. Example method areas include things such as: psychophysiology, human neuroimaging methods, experience sampling methods, emotion induction techniques, stress induction techniques, dyadic interaction methods, continuous flash suppression, eye tracking, network analyses, advanced statistics, etc. *These are just examples. Skills you hope to obtain will depend on your research topics above and the lab/mentor you are applying to.*
- **What is the area of psychology wherein you want to receive general training?** Finally, part of your PhD training will likely involve taking classes in a specific area of psychology (e.g., Cognitive, Social, Developmental, Clinical, etc.), attending a regular talk series in your PhD program, and attending area-specific academic conferences. Faculty in your program will also be possible sources of additional training or collaboration. So it's helpful to consider whether you want training and a professional network in, say, Social Psychology vs. another area. However, one label does not fit all. Every program is unique depending on the faculty and culture there. This means that if you find a good PhD mentor whom you are excited to work with, then it's worth checking out their affiliated program. Keep in mind that in psychology, it's generally recommended to pick schools/programs based on an ideal mentor—rather than picking a mentor based on a school or program.

**Consider the goals of the statement.** *Ultimately, a PhD personal statement is an argument for why you are an ideal candidate for the mentor/lab and program you are applying to train with.* Personal statements can convey many things about a candidate, but here are some things that may be helpful to focus on conveying to your readers, in line with the goals you identified above.

- **Your motivations for why you want to pursue this PhD.** Lead with your research ideas or questions. Often when writing a personal statement, people reach first for a personal story, and that's ok. But consider instead situating your research interests. If this is a non-clinical psychology PhD, what is the big research question or set of ideas guiding your pursuit of a PhD? How does this question or idea matter for

the real world? Ultimately, here you want to illustrate your curiosity, passion or drive, and your capacity to engage with ideas.

- **Your prior experiences, skills, and training.** Integrate and tell a story with your prior experiences, skills, or training. What research (and maybe even real life) experiences led you to your current research interests and PhD goals? Did you work in a lab? Do you have other training, skills, or life experiences that are relevant? Really, the goal here is to *show* readers that you have the capacity and motivation to learn and persist, illustrated through tangible examples. As a bonus, it's nice if you have relevant skills that you can already build upon in your PhD training. Rather than describing past experiences in a resume or CV fashion, instead narrate your prior research journey and what skills and experiences you gained along the way.
- **Why you want to work with a specific mentor or mentors and be trained in a specific program.** This is one of the most important parts in many ways. Personal statements should be tailored in each application to a specific mentor or mentors and the specific program of interest. You don't have to write a brand-new / different statement for every school. But you do want to rewrite parts of the statement and maybe the opening and ending parts of the statement so that it is tailored to a specific mentor(s) and program.

### **Personal Statement Content and Structure**

PhDs in Psychology are, in essence, apprenticeships. As a PhD student in a research-intensive Psychology PhD program, you will be an apprentice scientist learning the practices, culture, and knowledge of your mentor. Over time, you will grow in skill and expertise to become your own independent scientist. For better or worse, the mentor/PI and lab “family” you “grow up” in can have a big impact on your learning opportunities and experiences during grad school as well as your mental health. Thus, you want to find a PhD experience that will match you with a mentor and program that are good fits for you on multiple levels.

This “goodness of fit” is often one of the most important arguments or messages to get across in your personal statement. What do you want out of this specific PhD path at this specific university and program with these specific mentors that other paths, places, and people might not be able to offer you in terms of training, skills, and experience? For this reason, every personal statement will ideally be tailored to the specific mentor/school.

Second, you want to convey that you are *ready* to pursue your PhD. This could be in more concrete forms of readiness such as the experience, skills, and knowledge you’ve acquired. But don’t forget more hidden forms of readiness that you might want to convey such as your maturity, determination, passion, etc.

There are many ways you could structure a strong personal statement, but there is often a formula that many statements follow. This formula provides some common information that helps readers better understand your professional goals, research interests, relevant experience, and fit with mentor and program.

1. **Opening: Research interests and professional goals.** Orient readers to who you are and what you want to study. Forefront your motivations and research interests behind applying for grad school.
  - a. This can include discussing your deeper motivations, your professional (and maybe personal) reasons why you want to pursue this path, your long-term goals (e.g., are you aiming to become a tenure-track professor? Or a policy maker, data scientist, etc.?), or the real-world consequences or relevance of your research interests. There are lots of ways you could write this opening section. **But aim to keep at the forefront your research interests and professional goals.**
2. **Middle: Relevant experience.** Summarize *relevant* prior experiences in the lab, classroom, or real world across your undergraduate, postbacc (if this applies), and current experiences and positions.
  - a. This should provide an organized, logical narrative describing your relevant past experiences in concrete, specific detail.
    - i. Use this space to showcase any relevant skills you’ve gained that help highlight your (1) readiness and (2) trainability or ability to learn, as well as your (3) strong intrinsic motivation to pursue your research questions and path of training.
  - b. If relevant, weave in any achievements, posters, manuscripts (even if in prep, unpublished), senior or honor theses, etc. It’s okay if you don’t have these – don’t despair!
3. **Conclusion: Fit.** Tie together relevant experiences and emphasize your PhD readiness and fit with the specific mentor and program. Consider discussing:
  - a. What do you want out of this specific PhD path at this specific university and program with these specific mentors that other paths, places, and people might not be able to offer you in terms of training, skills, and experience? Demonstrate alignment with potential mentor or mentors, the specific area or program you are applying to (e.g., Social Psychology), and even with the broader department or university.
    - i. What are specific strengths of that potential mentor or mentors that makes them compatible for your training and research? For example, what are recent research papers they have published or methods they have used that make them a good fit? If relevant,

- what lab culture or lab values do they convey that make this mentor & lab particularly appealing (if this is true)?
- ii. What are the specific strengths of the specific area or program that you are applying to? For example, are you excited about other faculty in the area/program, coursework, resources, or opportunities offered by that area or program? If relevant, what culture or values do they convey that make this program particularly appealing (if this is true)?
  - iii. What are the specific strengths of the specific department that you are applying to? For example, if offered at the department, is there a quantitative or other such concentration or minor you would value obtaining? What other resources are there the department and/or university that would be well-aligned with your training goals and research interests? If relevant, what departmental or university culture or values do they convey that make this place overall appealing (if this is true)?
- b. Summarize by reiterating how completing your PhD at this particular place/program with this particular mentor(s) will help you achieve your future career goals or life aims.

### Common structure and content pitfalls to avoid ...

- **Problem: Lacking a clear narrative, flow, or organization; reads like a CV or resume without sharing enough about interests, values, goals, big picture, or sense of you as a person.**
  - **Solutions:**
    - **Start first with an outline** similar to the one above but filled in with the points you want to make and the details you want to be sure to highlight.
    - **Organize your middle section narrative** either *chronologically* (e.g., undergrad research, then postbacc research) or by *theme* (e.g., health research experience, emotion research experience, etc.). Chronological order is the most common choice.
    - **Use topic sentences and/or bridging or transition sentences and language** to help make the point of each paragraph clear while bridging ideas from one paragraph to the next.
    - **Keep in mind the big picture** (your career or PhD goals; the big question or interest you're pursuing) and aim to echo and reiterate that vision throughout; use your interests and prior experiences as evidence to validate and explain your vision.
    - **Give a sense of the person behind the statement** – use a genuine narrative voice with active (rather than passive) tenses. Even if focusing on your research interests and PhD goals, what are the values and hopes behind that? Find ways to note or weave in your excitement, passion, curiosity, optimism, confidence, competence, etc.
- **Problem: Too vague, general, or generic; doesn't provide enough details to help readers evaluate fit or readiness.**
  - **Solutions:**
    - **Use specific examples and details** about your research interests, goals, and experiences. For example, don't just say you ran "basic statistics" for a research project. Give the specifics of what you did such as examining descriptives and correlations. Or don't just say you helped collect psychophysiology or neuroimaging data. Give the specific methods or modalities of data collection you learned and assisted with. You want to use prior experiences to *demonstrate* your readiness, relevant skills, or attributes/traits. BUT avoid just listing things you learned—always show how those specific details link to or support your interests and work. *Details sell, lists do not!*

- **Be sure to mention the primary mentor and lab you are applying to.** Don't just repeat or echo quotes from the PI's website. Talk about how their work or lab relates to you, your values, training goals, research interests, etc. You want to convey that you have engaged with the PI's work (e.g., read some of the papers) and that you have your own deeper understanding of those research topics—not that you skimmed their website and are parroting back key phrases.
  - **Avoid using jargon and vague language** – you want to convey precision and clarity of thought and that you can take complex or abstract ideas and explain them in simple terms, as this reveals your deeper understanding.
- **Problem: Overly specific and concrete, doesn't leave space for growth, includes irrelevant details.**
    - **Solutions:**
      - **Highlight room for growth**, in terms of next steps for you. You don't want to come across as unteachable or a know-it-all. Even if you already have a lot of experience, there are always more skills and training you need to become better, which is (presumably) the goal of you doing this PhD.
        - **If you have weaknesses in your application package** that the application committee will see—such as test scores, coursework, or research experience (e.g., you didn't do well in your statistics course), you may need to address this directly in your personal statement. Remain positive and avoid providing excuses. Instead, briefly address how you plan to work on or improve this area of struggle or difficulty in your training and experiences during the PhD. For example, if you struggled with stats, maybe you plan to attend extra statistics workshops and work towards a quantitative concentration. Show that you have a *growth mindset* and plan to take proactive steps to grow and improve.
      - **Aim to show that you are flexible** and able to learn/adapt to new ideas and projects. Usually faculty/mentors already have a set of upcoming studies, current research focus, or grant funding that they need help with. So if you are too overly specific, you may then seem like a poor fit, even if that area or work might end up being a good fit of interest for you.
      - **Avoid discussing irrelevant life details or extracurricular activities** that don't help demonstrate your fit and readiness or your motivations. Readers probably don't need to know about how you were raised or your life story. Stay on message: focus on your PhD motivations, your research interests, your existing skills and experiences, and your fit with the mentor and area.
        - Don't say anything that isn't directly relevant to helping the mentor(s) and admissions committee make their decision about your merit. We don't need quotes from famous figures, cute stories, etc.

### **Special note for interdisciplinary applicants applying to different subdisciplines in Psychology:**

If you are applying to more than one area or subdiscipline across universities—such as applying to Social Psychology PhD programs at XXXX University and XXXX University but then Biological and Health Psychology PhD programs at XXXX University and XXXX University, consider writing separate “core” or “base” personal statements for each subdiscipline, that you then tailor to the mentor/program at each school. So for example, write one core/base personal statement for Social Psychology programs that you then tailor to specific mentors but also write a separate core/base personal statement for Bio/Health Psychology programs that you then tailor, etc. For each subdiscipline, highlight different research interests/directions and emphasize different skillsets and training goals as relevant to the subdiscipline.

### **Additional Resources**

In sum, there are many ways to write a strong personal statement! We hope this guide has been helpful but please see other resources and examples below that can help *you* find the best way to write your own personal statement. Don't be afraid to outline and try out different versions and drafts. If you have friends or mentors who can give feedback or share examples, be sure to reach out to them for advice and help too. And don't forget that Google is a great resource for writing tips and tricks + finding additional resources, examples, and guides. **We wish you the best of luck in your personal statement writing and application submissions!**

#### **Guides to Writing a Personal Statement**

- **Application Statement Feedback Program (ASFP):** <https://www.asfp.io/>
- **American Psychological Association's guide:** <https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/psn/2016/09/graduate-school-applications>
- **Excellent thoughts on writing a personal statement for a research-oriented graduate program:** <https://psychology.uga.edu/sites/default/files/StatementofPurpose1.pdf>
- **Writing in Psychology guide to writing a personal statement:** [http://users.clas.ufl.edu/msscha/psych/personal\\_statement.html](http://users.clas.ufl.edu/msscha/psych/personal_statement.html)
- **Dos & don'ts plus writing tips for a personal statement:** [http://www.tamupsychclub.com/uploads/7/1/6/2/71624333/sop\\_tips\\_2\\_.pdf](http://www.tamupsychclub.com/uploads/7/1/6/2/71624333/sop_tips_2_.pdf)
- **Guide to organizing your personal statement:** [https://psychology.asu.edu/sites/default/files/personal\\_statement\\_outline.pdf](https://psychology.asu.edu/sites/default/files/personal_statement_outline.pdf)
- **Writing statements of purpose with many resources and tips:** <https://psychology.ucsd.edu/undergraduate-program/undergraduate-resources/graduate-career-resources/applying-grad-school/application-essays.html>
- **Excellent writing tips with specific examples for writing a strong personal statement:** [https://psych.uw.edu/storage/writing\\_center/personal.pdf](https://psych.uw.edu/storage/writing_center/personal.pdf)
- **More general guide to Social Psychology PhD programs:** <https://spsp.org/sites/default/files/Student%20Guide%20to%20Applying%20to%20Graduate%20School.pdf>

#### **Example Personal Statements**

- [https://www.wlc.edu/uploadedFiles/Content/Academics/Programs\\_of\\_Study/Undergraduate\\_Programs/Psychology/Psychology-Graduate-Schools-Personal-Statement.pdf](https://www.wlc.edu/uploadedFiles/Content/Academics/Programs_of_Study/Undergraduate_Programs/Psychology/Psychology-Graduate-Schools-Personal-Statement.pdf)
- [https://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/psychology/\\_pdfs/undergraduate/sample%20personal%20statements.pdf](https://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/psychology/_pdfs/undergraduate/sample%20personal%20statements.pdf)
- <https://www.shsu.edu/mcnair-scholars-program/documents/ExamplesofPersonalStatement.pdf>
- <https://psychology.olemiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/176/2017/07/ExamplePersonal-Statements.pdf>