

NORTHEAST Alliance

The Personal Statement for Science and Engineering Graduate School Applications.

We have tried to distill the most important and most relevant information from the overload of advice on the web and in print. These pages were adapted from the excellent website for the freshman essay available at UC-Berkeley <http://students.berkeley.edu/files/Admissions/FreshmanPersonalStatement04.pdf> In addition we polled NEAGEP faculty admissions committees for what they found the most and least effective strategies for students. Sample essays are from a handout prepared by Michael Alderman of the UMass Graduate School. He was a helpful advisor in the process.

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Why is the personal statement so important?

As an important part of your application, the personal statement is reviewed by the Admissions and Scholarship offices. NEAGEP professors use the Personal Statement to:

- Learn what interests you about the field, the school, and the program you have chosen;
- Find out information that may not be evident in other parts of the application (for example, persistence, motivation);
- Discover and evaluate distinctions among applicants whose academic records are often very similar.

What do NEAGEP schools look for in my personal statement?

We consider:

- Your research experience! Your realistic knowledge of what it is like to do research;
- Your ideas for the future: your career goals and aspirations;
- Any unusual circumstances or hardships you have faced and the ways in which you have responded to them;
- Your initiative, motivation, leadership; special potential; service to others; substantial experience with other cultures; the ability to overcome or manage significant challenge.

What is different in applying to a professional school or college (like the College of Engineering, or Life Sciences)?

At a minimum, you should discuss:

- Your intended field of study;
- Your interest in your specific major;
- Any school or work-related experience.

How can I write an effective personal statement?

- Be simple and straightforward. (You are not English majors.)
- Allow sufficient time for:
 - ❖ Reflection
 - ❖ Thoughtful preparation;
 - ❖ Several revisions (three at least), and
 - ❖ Careful composition. Correct grammar, spelling, and sentence structure will enhance your personal statement's effectiveness.

After we have read your personal statement, we will ask the question, "What do we know about this individual?" If we have learned very little about you, your personal statement is not successful.

Do I have a better chance of being admitted if I write about unusual circumstances or hardship?

Not necessarily; having a hardship is no guarantee of admission. If you choose to write about difficulties you have experienced, you should describe:

- How you confronted and overcame your challenges, rather than describing a hardship just for the sake of including it in your application.
- What you learned or achieved in spite of these circumstances.

HELPFUL TIPS BEFORE YOU BEGIN WRITING

Read all instructions carefully.

The most common mistake applicants make is to skim the instructions or to rely on information received from others. Check and double-check the directions the department publishes. Before you begin, call the department to confirm their requirements.

The statement is open-ended, but really has two parts at a minimum:

1. Why you want to join the program (and why you are a good candidate for them), and
2. A statement of your research interests (so potential mentors can be identified for you).

You want to show how you will fit in to the program you are applying for. The first question requires a longer answer than the second.

Think about what graduate schools are looking for:

- Strong undergraduate academic performance;
- Good preparation in the discipline you are applying for;
- Strongly motivated students who understand why they are applying;
- Students who can express themselves clearly;
- Research experience. **

Think about your accomplishments and what you have gained from them. You may:

- Write about the way in which an activity or experience changed an attitude, crystallized a conviction, or helped you establish a goal;
- Focus on your life as a student, your participation in an outreach program or internship, or the hours you must work in order to help your family.
- If there are gaps in your transcript, or poor performance early on, the Personal Statement is the place to explain it. Be straightforward, but put a positive spin on it. Not, "I did a really lousy job my freshman year because I had a bad teacher," but "The difficulties I experienced in my freshman year resulted in poor grades, but on the positive side they also showed me I needed to change the way I studied so that it wasn't repeated."

Plan for prep time

- Begin writing early enough so that you can refine and improve your personal statement, allowing one or two days between drafts.

Write your own personal statement!

- Write a personal statement that reflects your original thoughts. Ask advice of whomever you'd like, but DO NOT USE ANYONE'S PUBLISHED WORDS BUT YOUR OWN. This includes "internet" essays.

- Write in your own voice. Use vocabulary and phrasing that are comfortable for you. Try not to consult a thesaurus too often; trust your own words to convey your message.
- Use a short anecdote, if you can, to make your statement easy to read. Don't mistake a list of accomplishments for an essay. Most of that information will already be covered in other parts of the application.

Proof, edit and share your personal statement.

- Ask a mentor, a near-peer mentor, a trusted friend, or a teacher for comments. Ask this person: "What works? What doesn't? What sounds like me? What doesn't? If you didn't know me, would this personal statement tell you enough about me? Is it clear and understandable?"
- Get help from someone who has not previously read your personal statement and who pays attention to detail. Remember, a carelessly written essay makes a poor first impression.
- PLEASE MAKE SURE THIS PERSON DOESN'T TRY TO REWRITE THE STATEMENT FOR YOU. The person should point out to you what she or he thinks needs to be changed.

How long should the personal statement be? Each school, and sometimes each department within the same school, has slightly different requirements. Of the NEAGEP schools, many have no length advice, but others say, "more than 200 words," "about a page," or "300

to 500 words." 300 to 500 words looks like an average, but you should always check first with the department you are applying to.

Some DOs and DON'Ts

- Don't try to be a comedian or wildly creative. It is difficult to do and may not achieve the effect you are seeking. Straightforward and simple works, especially for the sciences and engineering.
- Don't experiment with varied fonts and formats—keep your personal statement easy to read.
- Don't submit the exact same essay for each school.
- Don't write an autobiography. Focus on your interest and experience relevant to the program you are applying to.
- DO show knowledge of the field (ex. don't say "cooking" or "clinical nutrition" in a Food Science application; also don't tell the biology department you're waiting to get into med-school).
- DO read your statement out loud and slowly.
- DO be sure your name appears on your statement. It may be read by others, separately from the main application.

EXCERPTS: Opening and concluding paragraphs from essays of successful graduate applicants:

Student A – Opening Paragraph

University X has long been considered one of the elite schools of engineering in the world and is always among the top Graduate School rankings. The quality of ... graduates more than speaks for itself. This alone might be enough to convince anybody, but what makes (University) an overwhelmingly easy choice for me is that it fits perfectly with my interest and long-term professional objectives.

<body paragraphs discussed such things as academic preparation, work experience, cultural background, and accomplishments unique to this applicant.>

Concluding Paragraph Student A: Making such an impact at University X represents a great challenge. X is the kind of challenge that demands the best that people have to offer. This drive to make me the best that I can be is exactly what I am looking for. Being able to hold a diploma from University X is something that few people can do. I would like the opportunity to be one of those people

Student B – Opening Paragraph

My study of the attachment literature and its relation to people's attitudes and behaviors in close relationships began in fall 2000. My reading focused on the effect of attachment styles on personality traits expressed in intimate relationships, and I completed a project under the supervision of Professor X. Motivated by my interest in X theory, I proceeded in spring 2000 to work with Professor X on research focusing on the structural and neurocognitive aspects of mental representations. Working with Professor X allowed me an opportunity to enhance my skills in conducting research and in working effectively as a member of a research team.

<body paragraphs discussed such things as academic preparation, work experience, cultural background, and accomplishments unique to this applicant.>

Concluding Paragraph Student B: I am applying for admission into the doctoral program in xxxx with a specialization in bbb at the University of X because of the excellence and depth of the faculty and the quality of the university's libraries and facilities. In particular, I would like to work with Professor Moon Rocket and his collaborators, whose research interests closely align with my own. Upon earning the doctorate, I plan to conduct research at the university level and teach the next generation of students. I feel confident that I can meet the requirements for completing the doctorate in a timely manner and hope to join you in the fall.