

## Student Forum

# Applying to Doctoral Training Programs in Clinical Psychology: Writing an Effective Personal Statement

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### EDITOR'S NOTE:

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Applying to graduate school in clinical psychology can be daunting, time consuming, and stressful. Admissions committees typically require information from multiple sources including transcripts, letters of reference, scores on standardized tests, curriculum vitae, and a personal statement, also called statement of interest or purpose. Admission into a doctoral program in clinical psychology is highly competitive, and it is not at all uncommon that 150 to 200 students apply for 8 to 10 openings in a given program. Therefore, preparing a compelling application is of utmost importance and requires careful planning and attention to detail. (For a better understanding of the general admissions process, we recommend that you read the guidelines on how to apply to graduate school by Hayes and Hayes, 1989).

Your personal statement constitutes an important part of your application as it leaves the reader with a "first impression" of who you are as a person. Unfortunately, in our experience this first impression is all too often a negative one. After reading countless personal statements from students applying to our Ph.D. training program in clinical psychology, we have come to the conclusion that many applicants have either been ill-advised or they have been well-advised but have not heeded their mentors' recommendations. How else could we explain why so many students struggle when addressing key questions such as why they are interested in clinical psychology, what they wish to accomplish with a doctoral degree, and how our program can help them to achieve their professional aspirations? An unsophisticated approach to such questions is likely to harm an applicant. Therefore, our intent here is to offer you some suggestions for preparing an effective personal statement. This should maximize your chances of getting into graduate school, provided that your background and general accomplishments qualify you for admission.

### What Is a Personal Statement?

A personal statement is like the abstract of a paper. Its purpose is for you to provide a succinct overview of your interests, talents, skills, and relevant experiences, discuss your short- and long-range career goals, and make a compelling case for how you fit with the training program to which you are applying. As an abstract, it should be brief (maximally 2 single-spaced pages, using a standard 12-point typeface) and contain all pertinent information in concise form. You definitely want faculty on the admissions committee to read your statement, and you will increase your chances if your statement is short, focused, and to the point.

Remember, with your personal statement you are introducing yourself to faculty who are selecting from a large pool of applicants. You are competing with other applicants, many of whom may have GPAs and GRE scores equal to, or better than, yours. Your personal statement affords you the opportunity to distinguish yourself from the bulk of applicants. Use it to present yourself as an individual who is determined and confident, but humble. Highlight your assets without misrepresenting facts or exaggerating your talents. Use it also to acknowledge and convincingly dispel any liability in your application such as an uncharacteristically low grade or GRE score. You will maximize your chances of admission if you can convince the readers of your statement that you have what it takes to successfully perform in a clinical graduate program, that your aspirations fit well with the goals of the program, and that any experiences and skills you have previously acquired are relevant to the research interests of faculty with whom you would like to work.

### Know Your Audience and Keep Them in Mind

Your application will be reviewed by Ph.D.-level academicians whose main pursuits are research, scholarship, and teaching. These faculty members, with

too much to do and too little time to do it, often must review the materials of 150 to 200 applicants in a very short period to narrow down the pool to a handful of promising candidates. Their main concern is to identify students with outstanding qualifications, a solid academic background, and research interests that match their own and that are compatible with the philosophy of their training program. In other words, if you want to "join the club," you must fit in.

"Fit" is very important because many programs operate according to an "apprenticeship model": They admit students to work with a *specific* faculty member who will function as their advisor and research mentor. Before applying, it is therefore essential that you do your homework and learn as much as you can about faculty interests and the general theoretical orientation of a given program. This will prevent you from making common mistakes such as applying to a psychoanalytic program when you are interested in behaviorism, or expressing a desire to conduct research in schizophrenia when no one on the faculty has any interest in this area. Mistakes of that kind make you appear as if you applied haphazardly or are woefully uninformed about the admission process.

Another common mistake is when students "tailor" their personal statement to fit a specific program when in reality they neither share the research interests of the faculty nor the philosophical orientation of the program. Although this strategy may be successful, it is risky because it may land you in a program in which you will not be happy. Imagine that you were admitted to a program with a strong commitment to research when your true interests lie in conducting psychotherapy. You may find the research requirements insurmountable, feel disillusioned, and eventually even drop out. The net result would be a lot of unnecessary cost and wasted effort both on your part as well as on the part of faculty who were eager to train you.

### Basic Structure of an Effective Personal Statement

In a personal statement you are usually asked to address three questions. First, why are you interested in clinical psychology and what is your motivation to pursue graduate-level training? Second, what goals do you intend to accomplish with a doctoral degree in clinical psychology? Third, how do you think the program to which you are applying will allow you to achieve your goals? Before dealing with each of these questions more specifically, let us hasten to add that you should not interpret the following guidelines as hard

and fast rules. They are simply meant as suggestions to help you to compose an effective statement of interest.

#### *I Became Interested in Psychology Because...*

Many applicants misinterpret this questions as a request for some kind of justification: "I need to find a reason for why I want to become a clinical psychologist." In their search for reasons, it is not uncommon for students to resort to some profound personal experience. We have read statements where applicants recounted their own battles with addiction and recovery, their struggles with manic-depressive disorder, or the effects of witnessing a parent's mental illness as reasons for wanting to pursue a career in clinical psychology. While such life experiences may well have influenced your decision to pursue a Ph.D., the personal statement is not the time or place to recount them. Remember your audience! Your statement will be read by academicians who are scholars and, as such, are interested in recruiting students with an intrinsic curiosity about psychology. They want to train psychologists who hold promise of advancing the field by emulating the scholarly endeavors of the faculty. Needless to say, they are skeptical of individuals whose main motivation for entering the field is gaining a perspective on some painful personal experiences.

In describing how you became interested in clinical psychology, concentrate on specific professional experiences. Summarize relevant research, teaching, and human services experiences. Mention faculty with whom you have worked or had meaningful contact at your undergraduate institution. In other words, cite any pertinent contacts and academic or research endeavors that aroused your interest in clinical psychology and instilled the desire in you to pursue graduate-level training. Let us illustrate this point with an excerpt from an actual statement of interest:

*I graduated with high honors from — where I double-majored in Psychology and English. During my undergraduate studies, I had several opportunities to become involved in conceptualizing, conducting, and publishing psychological research. I also served as a teaching assistant to the instructor of two introductory psychology courses. . . .*

The applicant then described her participation in several research projects that culminated in presentations at scientific meetings and publications:

*Under the supervision of Dr. X, I was involved in research on child witness testimony. I co-authored a study evaluating lawyer-child communication which found*

*that certain forms of interrogation typically used by lawyers significantly obfuscate courtroom communication. Preliminary results from this study were presented at the 1994 meeting of the — Society and a manuscript describing this study was recently accepted for publication in the Journal . . .*

The applicant also had acquired human services experiences and succinctly described her experience as a summer camp counselor for disadvantaged inner-city children and her training as a crisis counselor for a university hotline. Finally, she briefly elaborated on her responsibilities as a teaching assistant and highlighted her skills in preparing lecture materials, administering tests, conducting exam review sessions, and helping students with writing assignments. This introduction created a very favorable impression of the applicant as an intelligent, well-rounded young woman. She had obviously taken care to prepare herself well for doctoral studies and had acquired experiences in a number of pertinent areas that would facilitate her transition from undergraduate to graduate school.

#### *I Am Pursuing a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology Because . . .*

A second important part of a personal statement is comprised of a discussion of your goals. When describing future career plans, be specific and avoid clichés. It is probably unwise to say that you want an advanced degree in psychology to be able "to help people" or "to open a private practice." These statements are unlikely to impress academic psychologists, not because there is anything intrinsically wrong with wanting to help people but because they are platitudes and reflect either that you have not thought much about your future career plans or that you have little ambition. A Ph.D. in clinical psychology is an advanced social science degree. Overemphasizing your applied rather than scientific interests in the profession will minimize your chances.

Another common mistake is a vague statement such as, "I have very broad interests and would like to study many different aspects of psychology before deciding on a career goal." Here the reader is left with the impression that you have not given sufficient thought as to why you would like to pursue a doctoral degree.

The best strategy is to appear focused and to link your current interests in some way to your long-range career plans. At the same time, you should convey that you are open to learning more and developing additional interests. The applicant cited above was able to achieve this very successfully:

*I am interested in improving the quality of services provided to children who fall within the interface of law and mental health. Continuing my research on child witness testimony is one means to this end. I am, however, open to gaining clinical and research experience involving adult populations, especially in the areas of domestic violence and child abuse. My ultimate goal is to attain an academic position, as this would allow me to continue to pursue my research interests while also teaching students about the interface of psychology and the legal system. Alternatively, I might consider a non-academic policy-making position that would allow me more directly to improve policymaking and client services. In either case, I would want to remain involved in service delivery (e.g., by working with children who are victims of abuse) as I believe that client contact teamed with active research involvement will best enable me to be successful in my chosen profession.*

#### *I Have Chosen Your Program Because . . .*

Last, but not least, you need to establish a link between your experience and interests and why you would like to pursue Ph.D. training in the program to which you are applying. We strongly advise you against a generic statement that fit all programs. At the very least, you should tailor the last part of your statement to each individual program and show how this particular program fit with your training experiences and future goals. In the age of the Internet, there is no excuse for not knowing details about program, faculty research interests, and the like, given that most Ph.D. programs have web sites with large amounts of relevant information available. (For Internet addresses of specific universities try <http://www.psych-web.com/resource/deplist.htm>).

As many programs recruit students from individual labs, it is appropriate to mention faculty with whom you would like to work. This requires that you have carefully investigated Dr. Smith's and Dr. Jones research programs and show how your background and research interests fit with theirs. If you mention specific faculty members, make sure they work in the area to which you are applying. Requesting admission to a clinical program and citing that you would like to work with Dr. X who is a social psychologist will make you look uninformed and naive. See how eloquently our previously cited applicant addressed the question of why she chose a given program:

*For several reasons, I would be strongly interested in graduate study in your Ph.D. program. First, given the breadth of faculty interests and training opportunities,*

your program offers the broad-based training I consider necessary for the development of effective psychologists. Second, with its strong emphasis on research, your program would afford me the intensive research training I am seeking and teach me how to utilize my research skills to promote social and legal policy reform. Finally, I would relish the opportunity to collaborate in research such as Dr. X's child eyewitness testimony and Dr. Y's jury decision making projects as this research corresponds to my own background and interests.

### Dos and Don'ts of an Effective Personal Statement

Aside from addressing the three specific questions discussed previously, there are some general guidelines of what to do and what to avoid in order to increase the effectiveness of your personal statement.

#### Some General Dos

1. Use active voice.
2. Use a spell checker. If need be, have a qualified person read your statement to ensure that it is written in grammatically and stylistically proper English.
3. Drop names, but do not overdo it. Mention faculty and professionals who have mentored you or with whom you have had meaningful professional contacts (e.g., research or human services supervision).
4. Highlight relevant skills and experiences from your vita, but do so humbly.
5. Show not only what you expect from, but also what you can contribute to a graduate program. Faculty are likely to be willing to invest in training you to the degree that you look like a good investment.
6. Edit, and edit again.

#### Some General Don'ts

1. Avoid being long-winded.
2. Avoid highlighting "red flags" (i.e., personal liabilities that may lead committee members to question your ability to handle the rigors of graduate training).
3. Avoid being flashy or overly dramatic. With advances in computerized desktop publishing, it is easy to get carried away. For instance, we recently had one applicant prepare her personal statement as a newsletter, with columns titled, "Who Is Mary Jane?" "Why Did Mary Jane Choose Albany?" "What Does Mary Jane Like to Do With Her Free Time?", and so on. Similarly, avoid favorite personal quotes or phrases

designed to catch the reader's attention. The best way to get attention is by showing that you have relevant skills, experiences, and interests.

As we stated in the beginning, your personal statement is but one element in your overall dossier. By itself, it will neither make nor break you because the main determinant of being admitted to graduate school is the quality of your undergraduate training and background experiences. However, everything else being equal, a well-composed personal statement may well give you the edge over other candidates and maximize your

chances of getting admitted into the program of your choice. We hope that our suggestions are helpful and wish you good luck in your application process.

### Reference

- Hayes, L. J., & Hayes, S. C. (1989). How to apply to graduate school. *APS Observer*, 2(5), 18-19.

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