

Statements of Intent: Overview

Though there are two different genres of written statements, both share a common goal and an audience. The goal is to convince an audience of your qualifications: for graduate school, for law school, for financial support, or for post-doc positions. The key to writing a strong statement is to understand what you should be demonstrating and how it connects to the evaluation process. These tasks often require you to link abstract qualities to your experience or research. In other words, you are making an implicit argument. Why are you prepared for this task? How will you contribute to the organization? Why do you stand out from other candidates? Think of these statements as functional documents, presenting why you should get the money, acceptance or position.

Both forms share a similar presentation, organization, and style. Eaton (2009) summarizes the challenges of these statements as “rhetorically complex, demanding at least a minimum knowledge of the field, either through coursework or through experiences.”¹

Personal Statements demonstrate your desire and preparation. Eaton (2009) suggests that your personal statement should demonstrate your written skills, as well as the seriousness of your application. It should show that you are invested in this field and are aware of the new challenges ahead.

Letters of Intent present your research project, demonstrate your preparedness, and argue the significance of it to the academic field. Its purpose is to demonstrate your scholarly accomplishments or your new research. It needs to be accessible to a wide audience and explain the significance of the work you are doing. Argow and Beane (2009) suggest answering these questions: What have you done? Why should the committee care? What will you do in the future? ²

Presentation: How to Sell Yourself

Read the Instructions

One of the best ways to figure out what you should be doing is to read the instructions. Failing to follow the instructions is one of the most common complaints of committees. Faced with a stack of applications, committees quickly eliminate those who don't follow the instructions. By not following the guidelines for the application, you have just demonstrated to the committee that you lack attention to detail. Make sure you submit the statement in the right format, the appropriate length, and before the deadline. Don't be afraid of white space. White space is comforting to the reader, because it suggests that you can sort out the relevant information; however, too much white space implies that you haven't sufficiently developed your thoughts.

Audience

Though the audience of the application varies, most audiences will be busy facing the daunting task of dealing with a pile of applications. Your statement is one of many. What can you get across in three minutes? You need to present the key information to the reader at the beginning of the statement. Get them engaged, so they will continue to read. Do not assume that your audience is an expert in your field. You need to present your statement in a way that is understandable for all members of a committee. Being able to talk about your project and its significance to a wider audience is one of the skills you need to demonstrate.

¹ Eaton, A. (2009). Applying to graduate school in technical communication. *Technical Communication*, 56(2), 149-171.

² Argow, B, & Beane, R. (2009). Developing your research statement. Retrieved November 6, 2011 from http://serc.carleton.edu/NAGTWorkshops/careerprep/jobsearch/research_statement.html

The Friend Test

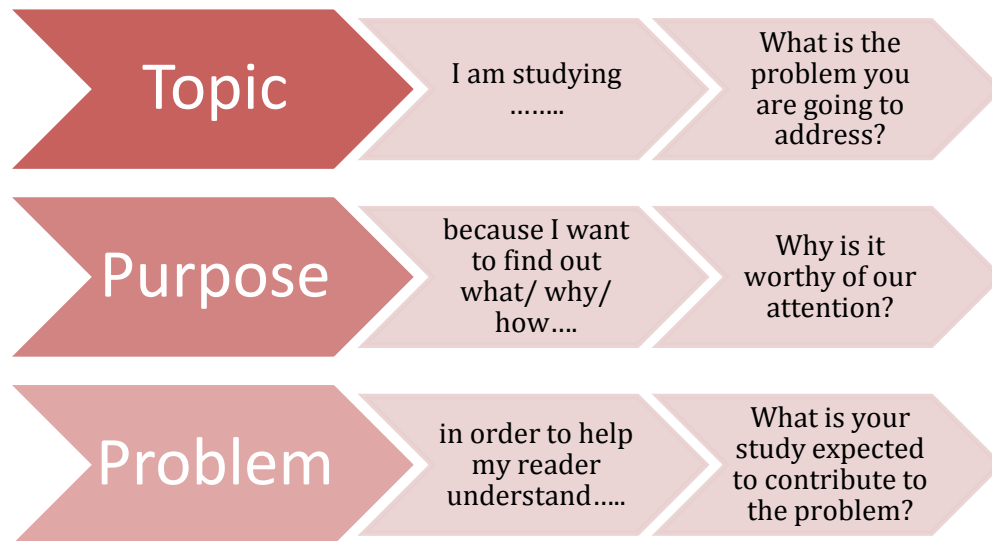
Imagine that your friend is reading your statement. Would they be able to understand the general idea? Would they be able to tell you why it would be important? Your statement should be able to pass this test.

One Size does Not Fit All

Putting together an application takes time. It can be tempting to create one application and slightly change it for each school or position. However, this approach will undermine your argument. You are expected to demonstrate a familiarity with the program, but don't tell the university or program of its own importance. Have specific evidence. What can you add to the university? Readers will be able to tell when your application is a generic model. Spend time demonstrating a strong engagement with their school or program.

Organization

*The Craft of Research (2008)*³ suggests this process for developing a research question:



You are working on a particular question, but what will make you successful? In other words, what is your secret weapon? Is it a technology, approach, or theory that will distinguish your work from others? Do you have results to support these claims?⁴ To demonstrate the importance of your research, you may need to discuss previous research. It should be framed in terms of your question. We have a habit of spending too much time on the background. Your aim should always be clear. Make sure that you have a reasonable plan that could be done in the time frame available. Does your method or approach fit your questions?

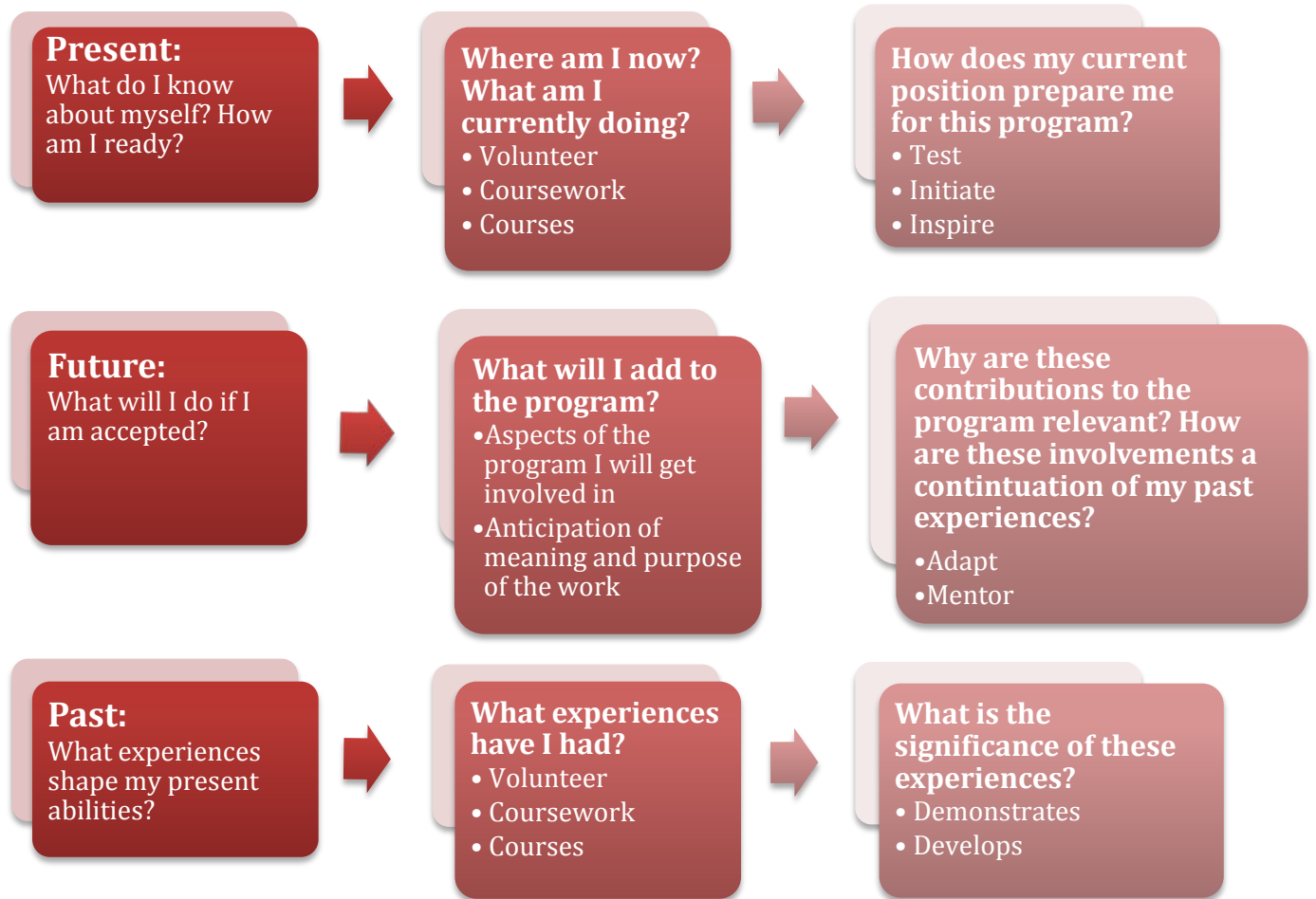
Personal Statements

Start thinking about your personal statement by creating an inventory of your skills and experiences. One way to organize this reflection is to think about the importance of what is demonstrated by these

³ Booth, W., Colomb, G., & Williams, J. (2008). *The craft of research*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

⁴ Bridewell, W. (2008). One strategy for writing a research statement. Retrieved November 7, 2011 from http://ccl.stanford.edu/~willb/research_statement.php

experiences. The following chart is a potential starting point.⁵



Balance Abstractions with Examples

It is one thing to say that you pay attention to detail, but it's another to demonstrate it. Can you give specific examples that demonstrate a quality? Similarly, your research statement should also demonstrate its significance to the field of study.

Don't Just State It; Explain It!

Each claim you make about your ability or the significance of your project should be followed by a reason or example. You may end up making fewer claims, but they will be stronger. Don't assume the reader will know why something is important. If it is important, explain it. In a short document, like a statement, the focus should be on the quality of what you present, not the quantity.

Not a Place for Narratives

Personal statements can turn into life stories: "Since I was a child, I wanted to be a doctor." Similarly, a statement of intent can become the history of how you got to this point in your research. A story is not appropriate for these genres. Why? These stories tend to distract the reader from the key parts of your statement. Your childhood dreams are not relevant to your current application. Your recent volunteer work is applicable. Starting with all the previous work on your research topic will drown out

⁵ Adapted from: White, J., Lemay, J., Brownell, K., & Lockyer, J. (2011). "A chance to show yourself" – how do applicants approach medical school admission essays. *Medical Teacher*, 33, 541-548.

your research question. When citing references (literature), only include those that are crucial to your work. Don't lose your message in a list of references.

The structure of these statements should be tied to your arguments. What aspects of your past experience demonstrate your preparation for medical school? Though there is prior work on your topic, what makes your project different? A personal statement can address past hardships, but only as a gateway to your new goals. Remember your personal statement is not a mystery novel. Don't leave the key information to the end, as the reader may have already stopped reading. Be concise and get to the point.

Monitoring Your Self-Presentation

It is important to consider all possible ways a reader might interpret the information presented. Appleby and Appleby (2006) describe misinterpretations as kisses of death.⁶ Personal information may be too personal for the genre of the statement. Explaining your interest in law by discussing your parents' legal career may be misinterpreted as nepotism.

Similarly, unfocused research statements can present more questions than answers. Introducing a new idea without a connection to your topic could suggest that you haven't thought out your project. Making a statement about a lack of literature in a field may suggest that you haven't properly researched it. One of your jobs is to understand how you are presenting yourself.

Style

Avoiding Negative Statements

If your goal is to have a favourable response, build towards it in your style. You want to ensure that your statement is constructed with positive assertions. Writing a statement with "not" or "never" may be longer and more complicated than needed. Focus on removing "not" for a more direct statement. In other words, tell the reader what it is, rather than what it is not. Highlight your skills, not your weaknesses.

The Cheese Factor

Many students will write about wanting to help others. Many research projects are called ground-breaking. Because certain tropes are used over and over, their meaning has changed. You may genuinely be committed to helping others, but will the reader interpret it this way?

When including conventional phrases or examples in your statement, ask yourself "is it cliché?" Will the reader think I mean it? Is it cheesy? Sometimes your evidence will suggest that it is a genuine intention; however, these cases are rare.

Rather than trying to save the world, make more limited claims. You want to work with X group of people because of your experience with them. Detail can fight the cheese factor. Demonstrate the importance of your work, rather than just stating it.

Writing is All About Verbs

You want to present yourself as someone who is active, in research, or education. You can't achieve this by using verbs like "am," "are," and "have." You need to focus on active verbs. Implicitly, these verbs will suggest that you are engaged. The following is a list of verbs from *Advanced Techniques for Work Search*.⁷ Use these verbs to describe your accomplishments.

⁶ Appleby, D., & Appleby, K. (2006). Kisses of death in the graduate application process. *Teaching of Psychology*, 33(1), 19-24.

⁷ Alberta Employment and Immigration, Government of Alberta (2008) *Advanced technique for work search*. Retrieved November 7, 2011 from alis.alberta.ca/publications

Achieved	Analyzed	Arranged	Assessed	Clarified
Collected	Conducted	Determined	Discovered	Enforced
Established	Handled	Initiated	Modeled	Piloted
Predicted	Proposed	Screened	Simplified	Tested
Translated	Unified	Widened		

You need to develop a confident voice that suggests you are aware of the obstacles in the future. Active verbs will build towards this confident voice by describing past accomplishments through the actions you took.

Just Read It: Best Ways to Revise Your Statement

No matter how brilliant the content, all statements are judged, implicitly or explicitly, in terms of quality of writing. For many programs, the personal statement is a way to judge the applicant's written communication. Since we can't avoid it, let's embrace it.

Full Sentences

Most ideas are constructed at the sentence level. Clearly constructed sentences are crucial for a reader to understand your claims. Hence, instructors tend to comment on unnecessarily long sentences.⁸ To find these sentences, read your paper backwards. Start with the last sentence of your statement. You will be able to see the long sentences. Additionally, you will be able to see short sentences, or possible sentence fragments. When revising, keep in mind your own ability to understand the sentence. If you can't easily understand the sentence, your reader will be confused.

Word Choice

Sometimes we can't find the right word. We may compromise by using an inferior choice.

Avoid words which do not add to the meaning of your sentence: good, very, bad, great, this, these, it, thing, well, said, interesting, and big.⁹

Remove redundant words: end result, particular interest, close proximity, and circle around.¹⁰

When discussing skills, avoid these overused words: extensive experience, innovative, motivated, results-oriented, dynamic, proven track record, team player, fast-paced, problem solver, and entrepreneurial¹¹

Agreement and Number

One of the most common mistakes students make is not matching their verb with their subject.

Make sure that the verb you use matches (in number) with who is doing the action.

For example, the child is at home or the children are at home.

⁸ For more information see: Centre for the Study and Teaching of Writing, Ohio State University (n.d.) correcting common errors in sentence structure. Retrieve November 7, 2011 from <http://cstw.osu.edu/writingcenter/handouts/commonerrors>

⁹ For more words see: Plague words and phrases (n.d.) Retrieved November 7, 2010 from <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/plague.htm>

¹⁰ For a longer list see: Writing concise sentences (n.d.) Retrieved November 7, 2010 from <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/concise.htm> OR Nichol, M. (n.d.) 50 redundant phrases to avoid, Retrieved November 7, 2010, from <http://www.dailywritings.com/50-redundant-phrases-to-avoid/>

¹¹ Torabi, F. (2010). LinkedIn: Top 10 Resume Words to Avoid. Retrieved November 7, 2011 from http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505144_162-41541186/linkedin-top-10-resume-words-to-avoid/?tag=mwuser

Make sure that the number also matches any pronoun.
For example, the children are at their homes.

Voice

In a personal statement, you will use the word “I”. However, it is important to try to keep the same voice throughout the statement. If you use “I”, don’t switch to “one.” Similarly, don’t use “us” or “we” unless you are suggesting that the audience is already in agreement. Using “us” or “we” can be off-putting to readers as it suggests their pre-existing involvement or agreement.

How to Find These Errors

Writing Support Services has an extensive handout on revision that can help you with your statements: Strategies for Revising Essays and Research Papers.

- 1. Look for one problem at a time:** You can’t find everything at one, so focus on your most common errors.
- 2. Start with the revision that will require the most rewriting:** Focus on paragraphs, sentences and clarity of content before looking for smaller errors or typos.
- 3. Print it out:** You will find more errors on the printed page than on the computer screen.
- 4. Read it aloud:** You may feel silly, but it will force you to concentrate on what you actually wrote.
- 5. Have someone else read it aloud:** Having another reader is a great idea. Working in-person and together can help make sure your reader is paying attention. If the reader mumbles or has trouble reading, there is likely an error. If the reader gets confused, you need to clarify. Make sure to ask the reader what he/she remembers from the statement. What is remembered is likely what the committee will remember.