The Personal Statement

Most graduate schools require a personal statement as part of your application. This statement is centered around your interest in psychology, your personal background, the reasons you are applying to that particular graduate program, and your career and personal objectives. Although a well-written statement will not overcome poor grades or low GRE scores, a poor one will surely hurt your chances of acceptance. Fretz and Stang (1988, p. 45) cite the following example.

Take the case of the student with a competitive grade point average and good references who was not accepted to any of the 11 programs he applied for. One cannot be sure, but the biographical statement included with his applications is the suspected reason. First, it was poorly typed, with many smears and crossed-out words. The spelling and grammar were both appalling. Finally, the content left much to be desired. It was far too long—about 15 pages—and went into detail about his philosophy of life (which was far from the establishment viewpoint). It also stressed emotional agonies and turning points in his life. Hoping to cure the world of all its evils, this person tried to indicate how a Ph.D. in psychology was necessary to fulfill that end. In short, it was an overstated, ill-conceived essay that may have been received so badly that it overshadowed his other attributes and data.

Plan and produce your personal statement as carefully as you would a crucial term paper. The six following tips (including quotes taken from Fretz & Stang, 1988, pp. 45–46) will help you produce a personal statement as impressive and effective as the sample on the following page from one of my students who was applying to a doctoral program in clinical psychology.

1. Before you begin your statement for each school, read as much about their program as possible so you can tailor your statement to the program and convince the admissions committee that you will fit their program like a glove. "Each year many applicants will write, for example, that they want to attend the counseling psychology program at University X because they want to learn how to counsel emotionally handicapped children, even though the program specifies in its brochure that is does not provide training for work with young children. The selection committee immediately rejects those candidates."

Sample Graduate School Essays

SJ Ball

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