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Your personal statement is all about you.

Your graduate school personal statement may initially get only five minutes of an admissions officer's attention. In those five minutes you have to show that you are a good pick for the school. What will you say? How will you catch and hold the reader's interest?

Schools aren't interested in hearing about how your dog ran away or about the time you met a famous movie star, but they do want to know why you want to study the field you've chosen, and why you want to study it at their school. Storytelling is an effective way to convey your motivation and commitment and the experiences that drive you. A brief anecdote about some event that exposed you to your chosen field can be effective as long as you make it interesting and you don't stray too far. Don't write in clichés, though, by starting off with something like "I knew I wanted to study _____ when"

You want your story to have a point, a reason for being told that relates to why you're applying to a particular school. Develop a nice segue from your story to a description of your goals and what you hope to achieve personally and professionally by pursuing your degree. Read your story over and over and make sure it flows smoothly and makes sense. Sometimes it helps to read it aloud so you can "hear" the words and decide if they sound right.

Personal statements are also about the school.

When reading a personal statement, graduate school admission committees enjoy a great story that focuses on the applicant. But you want to be a memorable applicant, **so your statement also needs to let the school know why you've chosen them.** Avoid discussing any rankings, gushing about how prestigious the school is, or even tossing in generic praise. Admission committees see right through such tactics.

Your graduate school personal statement will be more impressive when you make relevant mention of a faculty member or two and some of their work. That shows you've taken some time to research the school a little further than the average applicant. You want to effectively demonstrate that you know the school, that the school is the right place for you, and that you're the right student for the school.

A graduate school personal statement ultimately focuses on the "personal".

This does not mean you should list all of your positive attributes and accomplishments. Stick with concrete experiences that demonstrate your leadership capabilities and positive qualities. Don't get bogged down in too many details. You don't need to list all of your accomplishments and activities because they are summarized elsewhere on your application. Your grad school essay needs to communicate your motivation and some of your more intrinsic qualities that make you a highly qualified candidate for the school you've chosen to apply to.

For example, since research will be a mainstay of this next phase of your student life, you might be able to do this by focusing on a research experience you had. Be specific! If you worked for a year under a professor, you might emphasize one particular project and explore that in depth. It doesn't need to have been a major life-changing undertaking—any practical experience can be used as long as you demonstrate your enthusiasm and aptitude for the field you've chosen to study.

Graduate school personal statements are also about paying attention!

Of course, you should always read the application instructions carefully. Some graduate school essays ask for statements of purpose describing specific research interests in lieu of, or in addition to, personal statements that emphasize character and qualities. You might write a beautiful graduate school essay, but if you don't meet the expectations of the application, you haven't done yourself any favors!