Personal statements for postgraduate courses

Postgraduate study at any level (Diploma, teacher training, Master’s, PhD) will require a personal statement explaining your reasons for applying. Here are some ideas to help you, taken from successful personal statements. Choose the bullet points that are applicable to you and expand on them, adding details relating to your own skills and experiences.

Many universities give clear guidance about what they want you to cover in the personal statement. In this case, make sure you follow the instructions carefully. Others are less directive. If this is the case, we suggest you structure your statement around the following six elements:

1. **Get the basics right**
   - You are selling yourself on paper in your personal statement, so you need to stand out.
     - Be concise: somewhere between one and two pages of text is generally enough. Some institutions may give you a word limit.
     - Many statements open with some variation on “From a very young age, I have had a burning interest in...”. Try something more memorable – launch into your most inspiring experience with the subject, or your finest hour as a researcher.
     - Be positive when discussing your experiences, academic and work-related.
     - Don’t be afraid to include journal references, bibliography or links to your own work online, provided they are relevant to the application.
     - You don’t need to stick to a rigid timeline of events – the order below is for guidance.
     - Sketch a short plan before you begin writing the statement.
     - Ask academic staff for their opinion of what makes a good personal statement – they probably see a lot of them.

2. **Why enrol into a postgraduate course?**
   - Which gap in knowledge and/or experience will it fill that relates to your specific career plans? eg Academia, Banking, Psychology, Journalism, Museum & Gallery Studies, Advertising, etc.
   - If you are considering an academic career, avoid stating simply that this is the first step to realising this ambition. Back it up by showing an understanding of the academic career ladder.
   - Equally, if you intend to pursue a career outside academia, show an understanding of the sector you are interested in and how the skills acquired through the postgraduate course will facilitate access to that sector.

3. **Why you want to study the particular course you’ve chosen**
   - Convey your enthusiasm and motivation by covering some of the points below:
     - How you first became interested in this field: eg at secondary school or during a particular module in your undergraduate degree.
     - How you have learned about it: eg through lectures, tutorials, projects, work experience, personal research, dissertation, conversations with academic staff.
     - What you particularly enjoy about the subject.
     - How work experience or an internship has inspired you to learn more about the subject.

4. **Why you want to study at the institution you’ve selected**
   - Research the course you are applying to and use to your advantage the information available on the university department website. Things you could write about in this paragraph include:
     - The reputation of the particular course.
     - How your interests align with those who already work in that department. For example, the academics there who are well-known in the field you’re interested in - mention if you’ve read any of their work, and cite your sources.
• Specific academic staff there that you want to do research with, if applicable
• Academic staff teaching on the course that you’re keen to study with
• How the institution offers the right course content and structure for you: eg modules, projects, dissertations, placements, fieldwork
• How the institution would provide a contrast to where you did your undergraduate degree: eg larger, more specialised
• Networks of contacts that the institution can provide including those related to employment opportunities for the future
• Facilities and resources that the institution offers eg research equipment, libraries
• Specific training opportunities and support e.g. for early career researchers

5. Why they should select you
Consider including information about:
• Your academic strengths and interests
• High grades you’ve received for specific modules, essays, projects and dissertations
• Academic prizes or bursaries you’ve received eg Deans’ List, academic scholarships.
• Experience of successfully attracting research and/or travel funding
• Specific work experience that has prepared you for the course
• Research activities you’ve been involved in: eg working alongside academic staff during the vacations, your dissertation, a work-based survey
• Any extra-curricular activities which demonstrate an interest in the area you plan to study
• How you can successfully balance academic study with other commitments

6. Mention specific skills that you have that relate to the course
These could include:
• IT skills and knowledge of particular software packages
• An understanding/experience of relevant research methods or scientific techniques
• Experience of multidisciplinary research collaborations
• International experience and high level of competence in particular languages

And finally …. the importance of proof-reading!
Postgraduate admission tutors do not look favourably on applications with poor spelling or grammar. Be sure to check your application thoroughly prior to submission.

Links:
➢ PROSPECTS – Teacher Training – Personal Statements
   http://www.prospects.ac.uk/applying_for_teacher_training.htm
➢ TARGETJobs – How to write a winning application for your postgraduate course
   http://targetpostgrad.com/advice/choosing-a-postgraduate-course/how-write-a-winning-application-your-postgraduate-course
➢ The Student Room – Sample Personal Statements
   http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/Postgraduate_study

September 2018

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