Applying to Graduate School

Writing the Personal Statement

Sherry F. Queener, Ph.D.
Director of the Graduate Office, IUPUI
Associate Dean of the Graduate School, Indiana University
Parts of a Graduate School Application

- The application form
  - Online or, rarely, paper
- Academic record
  - Transcripts of all undergraduate work
- Admissions test scores
  - GRE, MCAT, LSAT, DAT, GMAT, ....
- Letters of recommendation
- Personal statement
What is a Personal Statement?

- Also called other things
  - Letter of intent
  - Statement of purpose
  - Autobiographical statement
  - Personal narrative

- How do I know what “they” want?
  - Look for guidelines specific to program
The Hidden Agenda

- How well do you follow instructions?
  - If the instructions give a word limit, stay within the limit
  - If you are instructed to use a form, use it
  - If you are given questions to answer, answer them

- How well do you craft an argument?
  - You are marshalling evidence that you are a good fit for the program, i.e. you are presenting a thesis and defending it. Sound familiar?

- How well do you write?
  - You must not make grammatical mistakes or errors of syntax
What is Your Agenda?

- Convince program you are well-prepared
  - Your good grades did not happen by accident. Why did you take those hard courses and study so hard?

- Convince program you have “the right stuff”
  - Use examples to show you have the will and determination to succeed in graduate school

- Convince program you have a life plan
  - Be open with your career aspirations and be convincing about how the graduate program fits with your plan
Preparing to Write the Statement

- Think honestly about yourself
  - Why do I want this degree?
  - What am I good at and what do I love?
  - What makes me better than other applicants?

- Take advantage of online advice
  - http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/FS/essays.html
  - http://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/GradStatement.stm
  - http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/pw/p_perstate.html
The Outline

- First paragraph
  - You need a “grabber”

- Middle paragraphs
  - Address your reasons for wanting to be in the field
  - Be specific about your level of knowledge
  - Address any gaps or problems in your record

- Last paragraph
  - Draw the threads of your argument together to lead to the inevitable conclusion that you are right for this program
The First Draft

- Get your ideas on paper
  - Write it quickly; don’t be a perfectionist
- Get away from the internet
  - You have read other peoples ideas; now put them away and work from your own head
- Never, ever cut & paste from someone else’s work
  - “I’ll just put this in place until I can figure out how to say it” is a recipe for disgrace and disaster
Evaluate Your First Draft

- Let the first draft cool off before you evaluate it
  - Good writing takes time and part of that time is just getting fresh eyes

- Read it for content
  - Have you covered everything you think is necessary?
  - Have you left out critical information?

- Read it for style
  - Is my writing clear?
  - Am I getting my points across?

- Read it for the intangibles
  - Is my own personal voice coming through?
The Second Draft

- Edit ruthlessly
  - Dull, boring or irrelevant material must go
  - Sometimes interesting material must go to make way for better material

- Keep to your revision plan
  - If you decided your statement needed a more personal voice, then make those changes all the way through

- Work on your transitions
  - A revised document can sometimes be patchy
  - Make sure you have a consistent style and smooth transitions to connect the parts
Evaluate the Second Draft

- Have I improved the statement?
- Does it convey the message I intend?
- Does it speak in my voice?

- If the answer to any of these questions is no, then REVISE AGAIN
- If you think the answer is yes, do you really think the statement is good enough?
The Penultimate Draft

- Let the prior draft cool off
  - Does the document still hold up? Are you happy with it?
- Edit for grammar, syntax, spelling
  - Now you can, and should, be a perfectionist
- Choose a trusted external reader to give feedback
  - A good reader will give you useful feedback that may make you want to change things. That’s why we called this the penultimate draft.
This document should meet all guidelines in the instructions you received
  - My statement is perfect but it is too long
    - Remember the “edit ruthlessly” rule? Apply it.

Your voice should be clearly heard

The writing should be clear, error-free, and professional in tone without being stuffy

This document should not contain cliches
  - Edit ruthlessly