PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Whether you are applying for graduate school or a summer research experience, you will probably have to write one or more essays, called a statement of purpose or personal statement. This essay is different from the one you wrote to apply to college as an undergraduate.

An effective personal statement:

- demonstrates your knowledge of your field of study, of the specific program and the institution to which you are applying,

- allows the readers to get a feel for you as a person and a student, which illustrates your potential to conduct research and contribute to the field, and

- highlights your writing skills in a cohesive essay, not a chronological list of your accomplishments or an autobiography

PERSONAL STATEMENT DO'S AND DON'TS

DO

✓ Demonstrate knowledge of the university/faculty, & your reasons for applying to this particular program

✓ Address the questions in the prompt with specific examples from your past experience

✓ Use clear, concise, professional language and vocabulary relevant to the field

✓ Reference industry and academic sources

✓ Use a positive tone when describing how you've overcome adversity

✓ Let your personality show in your writing

✓ Proofread your essay and have it critiqued by at least one other person

DON'T

✕ Copy and paste from someone else's essay, or from a previous statement you have written

✕ Exaggerate your accomplishments (This is considered lying)

✕ Throw in jargon to sound smarter (you won't) or include clichés like, "I am a lifelong learner."

✕ Base your essay just on your individual opinion

✕ Dwell on negative aspects of your experience, or your lack of experience

✕ Incorporate humor or address controversial topics

✕ Submit an essay with errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation

THE WRITING PROCESS

1. READ THE PROMPT

Prompts for personal statements can be general, essentially asking you to make the case for why you should be admitted to the program. Some applications will require you to answer a series of short essay questions. Jot down some notes about the questions you will need to answer.

INSTITUTION/PROGRAM	WHAT IS THE PROMPT ASKING?
(Example) NIST SURF	*(Example) What motivates me (in STEM)? Which NIST lab and why? Research experience and interests. Current long term career goals (related to NIST SURF projects).*

2. RESEARCH THE INSTITUTION AND PROGRAM

Look up information about the facilities, support and opportunities to interact with faculty and other influencers. How will you use the tools provided by this institution to achieve your goals? What specific topics or methodologies do you hope to learn about or use?

3. REFLECT ON YOUR SKILLS & MOTIVATION

Grab pen and paper, or open a blank document. Brainstorm your answers to some of these questions:

- How did you first become interested in this field and what have you done since that has further stimulated your interest and/or reinforced your conviction that you would like to pursue a career in this area?
- What skills (analytical, technical, interpersonal) will help you be successful in this program and beyond? What concrete examples can you provide for how you have polished these skills (from classes, work or other experiences)?
- How have life (non-academic) experiences influenced your professional and academic choice? Where are you coming from? Where are you going?
- Are there any gaps/discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre GRE scores)? Note particular challenges that you have overcome (ex. needed to work full time to support family while in school).

BRAINSTORMING WORKSHEET	
Technical & Other Skills	
Research Experience	
Motivation/ Influences	
Challenges	
Goals (long & short term)	

4. NEXT, CREATE AN OUTLINE

No writing yet! What themes emerged during your brainstorming? Make an outline to help you structure your essay. Here is a suggested format to get you started:

I. **Introduction**
   A. Introduce a central theme. Can take the form of an anecdote but no clichés!
   B. Include a strong thesis statement about your interest in and qualifications for this program.

II. **Relevant Academic Accomplishments**
   A. Select just one or two experiences from your resume that best highlight skills and background knowledge.
   B. Refer to professional literature, seminars or conferences you have attended that are related to the field.

III. **Research Experience and Potential**
   A. How have you engaged with a research process and team, contributed to experiments and write-ups?
   B. Highlight challenges that you overcame in your research, or the impact of your work on the project.

IV. **Additional Information**
   A. Has a particular work, volunteer, or leadership experience shaped you? What skills did you gain?
   B. Address gaps in your experience or academic performance.

V. **Goals and Future Plans**
   A. Discuss your specific and realistic learning goals for this graduate school program.
   B. Are there certain faculty or labs that interest you? What will you contribute to this institution/program?

VI. **Conclusion**
   A. Relate back to your opening theme. Complete the story for your reader.
   B. Give the reader a lasting impression of your motivation and suitability for this graduate program.

5. WRITE A DRAFT - AND THEN REVISE IT

Using the outline, write a draft essay. Put it away for a day, then read it again, editing for clarity and content. Fix any errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation before you give it to someone else to critique.

6. PROOFREADING & CRITIQUES

Have your essay critiqued by at least one other person before you make final edits and submit it with your application.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html	**Purdue Online Writing Lab:** Search "Personal Statement"
http://www.getting-in.com/personal_statement_taxonomy/ personal-statement-samples/	**Getting In.com:** Sample Personal Statements
https://www.nist.gov/surf/surf-gaithersburg/application	**NIST SURF Application**
https://www.nsf.gov/crssprgm/reu/	**NSF Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU)**
http://www.english.umd.edu/academics/writingcenter	**University of Maryland Writing Center**

If you would like an Engineering Career Services advisor to proofread a personal statement for content and form,
- Email it to us at careerengr@umd.edu **at least seven (7) business days before you wish to submit it.**
- In your email, include the prompt, and list 2–3 weekdays and times that you can be available to discuss edits.
- Outside of peak recruiting season (September–October, February–March), we generally respond within two (2) business days.