



Personal Statement Guide

Graduate School Edition



This is an interactive workbook;
access the corresponding **Google Doc [HERE](#)**



Lyman Briggs College
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

PERSONAL STATEMENT GUIDE

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STEP ONE: THE BASICS YOU SHOULD...

- **Answer the prompt:** When it comes to applying to graduate school, you may find that there are several different types of essays you may be asked to write.
 - **Personal Statement:** Who are you? What led you to this work?
 - **Research/Academic Statement:** What are your research goals? What questions do you want to explore in graduate school?
 - **Statement of Purpose:** What led you to this work? Why do you want to pursue this work? What are your goals in pursuing this work?
- **Make meaning of your experiences:** Tell specific stories that highlight your skills, especially as they relate to the skills needed for your profession.
- **Maintain your voice:** Outside opinions can be helpful, but at the end of the day your personal statement needs to sound like YOU.
- **Say what needs to be said:** Had a tough semester? Encountered adversity personally or academically? Your personal statement is the perfect place to address any discrepancies in your application.
- **Write well and proofread:** Your personal statement helps admissions committees to see how well you can communicate.



MOTIVATION

Why this work?
How has your motivation
matured over time?



FIT & CAPACITY

What experiences have you had?
What skills have you developed?
What are your values?



VISION

What kind of impact do you
want to make?
How will you live your values?

AVOID THESE COMMON MISTAKES:

- **Don't speak in clichés/ generalities:** Let's be realistic, everyone who is applying to a graduate program in the sciences "likes science and wants to help people". While this is a good basic tenet to start with, your essays needs to go well beyond this.
- **Your trauma won't get you into grad school:** While personal stories are an important component of your essays, you shouldn't feel pressured into talking about traumatic events. Remember, anything you talk about in essays is fair game for interview conversation!
- **Avoid repeating info from your resume:** You've probably heard the phrase "show, don't tell" when it comes to these essays. To do this, we want to tell stories, explain thought processes and make meaning of our experiences, as opposed to just listing tasks you completed.



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STEP TWO: LET'S TALK ABOUT YOU.

Personal statements can often feel uncomfortable because we have to talk about ourselves. But the only way for the committee to get to know **YOU** is for **YOU** to tell them all of the amazing things that **YOU** have done.

Are **YOU** sensing a theme?

In the table on the [Google doc](#), tell us about the activities/experiences that you have had that have motivated you to go to graduate school.

These experiences could include:

- **Research:** Working through the scientific process in or out of the classroom
- **Volunteer:** Anything involving serving others; think about purpose
- **Leadership:** Student organizations, teaching roles, etc.
- **Work/Internships:** Non-research work, summer jobs, on-campus jobs
- **Personal experiences:** Close connections to science/the work

NOTE: Fill out only the LEFT SIDE of the table for now.

STEP THREE: TELL ME ALL ABOUT IT!

You're still not done talking about yourself. I know, I know, I know.
But this part is important.

Being able to talk about **WHAT** you did is a good start. But in order to **REALLY** convey your story, we need to talk about **WHAT YOU LEARNED**.

Consider the following:

- What skills did you develop?
 - What values did you embody?
 - If you were shadowing, what did you observe?
 - Think about the skills you've developed while preparing for this work; what specific instances can you think of that help to demonstrate how you developed these skills/values throughout your experiences?
 - What stories might you be able to share that **SHOW** (not just tell) others that you have developed these skills/values?
 - What did you learn from your experience?
 - How will you use this skill as a grad student/future professional?
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STEP FOUR: TELL A STORY.

Review the lessons learned on the chart; reflect on what has been most important, particularly in the context of your intended career. We're looking to develop a statement that highlights your top skills by drawing upon experiences that demonstrate the depth and breadth of your preparation for graduate school and the profession.

Choose 3-6 experiences that (1) feel like the strongest demonstration of your skills and (2) broadly highlight your skills and interests; try not to repeat! Then, use the second page in the [Google doc](#) to begin outlining the stories you might want to share using the structure and prompts provided.

STEP FIVE: START DRAFTING!

Once you've honed in on the stories you want to tell, it's time to start writing! Remember: you don't have to write your essay in any particular order. It may be helpful to start with your body paragraphs, selecting 3 stories to tell that highlight your depth and breadth, and then circling back to your introduction.

Now is a great time to [book an appointment on Handshake](#) with the LBC Career team, but if you want to keep going and write your first draft before meeting with a career advisor, use the third page on the [Google doc](#) to begin freewriting/outlining, using the tips/prompts provided.

FINAL TIPS

We know that writing your personal statement can come with a lot of anxiety; remember, you don't have to tackle it alone! As you continue to work on your drafts with the LBC Career team, keep these things in mind:

- **Get into the details.** In the beginning of your writing process, don't be afraid to include all of the details! The most important thing you can do is to put as much information into your statement as possible at this stage; we will work on refining it and adhering to the word count later.
- **Your only competition is YOU.** Don't compare yourself to other applicants; Focus on putting your best foot forward and forget the rest!
- **Check your sources.** While online spaces like Reddit and TikTok can be helpful early on in your journey, you should NOT use them for questions about your application process/personal statement.
- **Use your resources.** On that note, the LBC Career team is here to support you every step of the way. Have a question? Email us at LBcareer@msu.edu.

