



# THE PSYCHOLOGY PHD APPLICATION STATEMENT OVERVIEW

## WHAT IS IT

- A (usually) single-spaced, **2 page document** (ALWAYS check specific program requirements).
- It is **not** just a longer version of your CV!
- A platform to share your background and interests to **convince** a potential advisor to interview and accept you into their PhD program.
- An essay that shares your **reasons** for pursuing graduate study, describes how your experiences **motivated** your reasons and **shaped** your professional interests, and highlights what you have **learned** from these experiences.

## WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

- The statement conveys to potential advisors your **professional interests**, **reasons**, and **preparedness** for graduate study.
- This is your chance to go into detail about your previous experiences and establish yourself as someone with **talent**, a **capacity for growth**, **persistence**, **maturity**, and **aligned interests** with the potential advisor reading the statement.

## TIPS FOR WRITING IT

- Use an **attention-grabbing** starter and closer that is interesting and relevant to the rest of your statement; bring the reader in!
- Read examples of other statements (see [here](#)).
- Early on, establish your **reasons** for applying and your **passion** about your given field and/or area.
- Highlight your **strengths** and relevant experiences!
- Be **specific** about who you would like to work with and how you could contribute to their overall research program.
- Describe how graduate school fits into your overall **career goals**.
- If there's something in your CV you're worried about (e.g., bad grades), this is your chance to help readers **understand** it.
- Don't just focus on what you did – highlight what you **learned**, why that **mattered**, and how that **motivated** your next step.
- **Get editing help**, including from ASFP!



# THE PSYCHOLOGY PHD

## APPLICATION STATEMENT DETAILS

### STATEMENT GOALS, GETTING STARTED, AND WRITING TIPS

Are you struggling to write your application statement? Do you feel like you don't really know what admissions committees are looking for, or how to start? The research/personal statement is unique, and very different from other things you may have written. We've put together a brief guide, below, to help you get started. We cover the [goal of your statement](#), how it [differs from other statements](#) you may have written, some [ideas about how to get started](#), and share a whole bunch of [tips](#).

### GOALS OF YOUR STATEMENT

**Main Goal:** To convince a potential advisor to interview and accept you to their PhD program.

**Supporting Goals:** To clearly articulate...

- What you hope to achieve in grad school and in your future career.
- Why you are passionate about this field/topic area.
- What you hope to get out of the program.
- What previous experiences (e.g., research, collaboration, projects, work) you have had.
- What you can bring to the program (e.g., research questions, interest in collaborations, skills, etc.).
- To establish yourself as someone with...
  - Ability and talent.
  - Capacity for growth.
  - Persistence.
  - Maturity/self-knowledge.
  - Interests aligned with the potential advisor who is reading it.

**Typical Length:** 2 pages (single spaced) (NOTE: statement length can vary by program! *Always* check specific requirements.)

### HOW DOES THIS STATEMENT DIFFER FROM OTHERS?

**College admissions essay/statement** → Essays for undergraduate applications typically provide the school you are applying to with more information about who you are *as a person, i.e., your character* - beyond simply your grades in high school and your test scores.

*If you have more time, read the rest!*

- There are elements of this present in the goal of the research/personal statement for graduate school, but...
- The grad school statement's primary goal is to identify who you are *as a hopeful future professional* of your chosen field.
- The graduate school application statement is more professional than a college admissions essay.
- You are communicating to potential advisors and programs what your professional interests and goals are and how this school/these faculty can help you in your pursuit of those goals.

**Papers/essays for class** → Papers/essays for coursework are designed to help you engage with and understand the course material at a deeper level. They are often grounded in existing knowledge, and may include citations.

- Research/Personal statements for graduate school are designed to sell your merits as an applicant and potential graduate student to the program to which you are applying.
- Because the focus is on you and your interests, these statements do not typically include citations or even a heavy emphasis on knowledge, facts, or events themselves, but rather information that sheds light on...
  - Your thought processes during your experiences.
  - Why you are interested in pursuing the questions/topics you would like to pursue in graduate school.

**Curriculum Vitae (CV)** → The CV (a longer version of a resume) serves as a factual, bullet point history of your professional roles and achievements. For example, it will include your educational background, any research experience, and service or volunteering that you may have done.

- The research/personal statement **is not** just a longer version of the CV.
- Though some of these pieces may be mentioned in the statement, it is important to provide context for them.
  - How do the experiences that appear in the CV contribute to your *reasons* for pursuing graduate study?
  - What *motivated you* to seek out some of those experiences and *what did you learn* from those experiences?
  - How have those experiences *shaped and motivated who you are becoming* as a scientist?
  - What aspects of those experiences do you think will *help you as a graduate student/beyond* graduate school?

## HOW DO I GET STARTED?

Great question. Just starting can be among the hardest parts of writing a statement!

**Write down your answers/thoughts about the following questions:**

- What experiences have you had that have shaped your desire to get a PhD in psychology?

*If you have more time, read the rest!*

- What did you learn about what you do and do not want to do from those experiences?
- What are your goals after graduate school and how does graduate school help you achieve those goals?
  - You may want to note what roles previous graduates of the program go on to do, and make sure these roles align with your goals. Potential advisors may feel they are not able to support goals that widely vary from those that previous students have attained.
- What do you bring to a potential advisor's lab/department? (skills, knowledge, interests, motivation, ambition)
- What do you want to focus on in research? Why is it important to you?
  - You need to strike a balance between being specific and general. You may not know exactly what you want to study (many of us still don't!) but you need to say more than "I am generally interested in XYZ."
  - What specific questions make you want to become a scientist?
  - Can you confidently state your interests, and then offer examples of how that interest might manifest in one or more specific research questions?
  - Are there any particular methods that you want to use / learn more about?

### **Do your research**

- Look into the program/area specifics - what is unique about this program?
- Who are the other faculty in this department/program you could see yourself working with? What is some of their research, how might your core questions/research connect to theirs?
  - Some programs may ask you to name second or even third choices of potential advisors, directly in the program application and/or in your Research/Personal Statement. Learning more about what other faculty in the department study will be helpful in identifying these choices and sharing how your research interests connect to the department more broadly.
- What aspects of the program excite you? Perhaps they have a culture you are looking for, or a specialty you are excited about. Grad school is about more than just your specific research interests, so it's important to figure out what about the place and program will excite and sustain you through what can often be a very intense 4-6 years.

### **Attention grabbing starter/closer**

- You want this brief piece to be interesting and relevant to the rest of the statement. Don't manufacture drama, but instead think about how directly, plainly, and strongly you can state something about you, your interests, your experiences, your goals, etc.
- Think through what important experiences/stories/aspects of you might be particularly appealing to start with - this should be something that brings your reader in, tells them (briefly) what your research interests are, and gives some context for who you are as a person and future scientist.

## STRUCTURE OF A GOOD STATEMENT

Here you can find a variety of tips, about the structure of your statement, its content, other sources of information and inspiration, and even some ASFP-specific framing that might help you think about your statement in a different, more effective way.

### **Introduction**

- Tell a story here but make it relevant.
  - Does the introduction **creatively engage interest**? Does it welcome the reader to get to know you?
- If there is a specific reason you are applying to the field that you are, make that clear at the beginning of your statement.
- Because these statements focus a lot on your research it can be hard to fit in what YOUR story is.
- Mention why you are passionate about your field or what motivated you to get there and then explain your goal for the rest of the statement.
- From there, if you can, try and relate your experiences in research to your story you mentioned briefly in the beginning.
- This allows you to highlight your experience but also make it more personable rather than saying you are applying because a school is convenient or has a good program.

### **Statement Body**

- Describe your previous experiences.
  - What research have you done / why did you do it / how will it help you as a graduate student?
  - Does the program you're applying to mention certain skills that it hopes to train students in? Do you have the basics of some of these skills already?
- How did your experiences motivate you to complete further research in this field?
- What are your strengths? Demonstrate how you stand out!
  - Highlight relevant projects/thesis.
  - If it makes sense, include specific skills or awards, but make sure you're not just writing out your CV!
    - Ensure your statement complements your CV and vice versa.
- Be specific about the program and faculty you would like to be a part of / work with.
  - How do you think you could contribute to the faculty's research program?
  - This portion should vary a bit from program to program! Try to include specifics about each program that may not exist elsewhere.
    - Is there a concentration or opportunity that appeals to you?
  - **Do you make a strong, clear case for how you fit the program?**
- Why/how does graduate school fit into your overall career goals (even though it may likely change and advisors/programs know that)?

- Being able to articulate this piece signals to potential advisors that you've thought carefully about where you want to go in life after graduate school
- If there are things in your CV that you are worried about (for example, maybe you had time between undergrad and grad applications, or you had some bad grades during your undergraduate), **this is your time to talk about it.**
  - They *will* notice – so what can you tell them about it to help them understand and stop worrying about it?
  - If you struggled in a class, talk about how you learned from that experience and used what you learned to do better in a different class.
  - If you took a gap year, talk about how the things you did during that time helped you narrow your research focus or be clearer on your goals, and discuss how graduate school can further contribute to them.
  - It is better to talk about these things directly than to hope readers won't notice – because they will!
- Try not to write too much about what you did. Focus more on what you learned, why that mattered, and how that motivated your next step.
  - This piece is often something that comes with revision. It is very common in earlier drafts to focus more on what you did.
- Convey your scientific thinking/questioning/curiosity. Include research questions and topics that you feel excited about studying yourself.

## **Conclusion**

- Bring it back to your introductory story but really drive home the following points:
  - Why *this* program/topic?
    - Many application statements end with a straightforward paragraph describing the reason the applicant is excited about this specific program, and some of the faculty in that program that they would like to work with and why.
  - Why should they pick you?
  - What motivates you?

## **Things our editors (and potential advisors) look for**

- *Introduction*: Does it creatively engage interest? Does it welcome the reader to get to know you?
- *Style*: Personal statements demonstrate your writing ability and style.
  - Try to avoid cliches, generic/vague or impersonal language.
  - Avoid the passive voice (is, were, was, could have, would have) and instead use active verbs and voice.
  - Keep adjectives to a minimum. Trust your story, your content! It can be counterintuitive, but if you speak plainly and directly, the strength of your story will almost surely come through more clearly.
  - Whenever possible, show, don't tell (e.g., don't say "I'm dedicated," show the reader that you're dedicated by relating an experience in which you were dedicated).

*If you have more time, read the rest!*

- Humor can be OK, but be sure it's well-considered, genuine, and professionally appropriate. If there's *any* doubt, leave it out.
- **Authenticity:** Does the statement sound like a real person wrote it?
  - Not overly formal or "trying to sound smart" with word choice.
    - You **are** smart - you should write like you!
  - Include reflection/memorable details.
  - Try to provide some answers to the questions "who am I?" and "who do I want to be?"
- **Fit:** Do you make a strong, clear case for how you fit the program?
- **Capacity:** Do you demonstrate your capacity to become an excellent PhD student?
- **Maturity and Readiness for a PhD:**
  - Do you seem to know yourself/what you like/what you don't like/what you're unsure about?
    - This doesn't mean you have to seem like you have all the answers! Do you know your own capacity for growth and change?
  - Do you seem to know your strengths and areas for improvements?
  - Do you demonstrate resilience/persistence and/or discuss experiences that helped you grow?
- **Skills:** Communicate your skills, techniques, or talents concretely and thoroughly enough for the reader to assess them accurately.

## OTHER TIPS

### **Ask for help!**

- **Ask others to read over your statement:** When you read some of your own work over and over again it can become easier to miss little mistakes. Even if not through the ASFP, use tools like Grammarly or your institution's writing center or even just have a friend read over your statement to catch possible small mistakes that you may not have noticed. It's always beneficial to have a second pair of eyes look over your statement, and even better if there's a third and fourth pair of eyes as well.
- **Read, re-read, and re-re-read your statement:** Whenever you make changes/edits to your statement (based on feedback etc.) make sure that you re-read for new mistakes/errors that may have popped up within those changes.

**Read examples:** This can help demonstrate the variety of forms these statements can take. See [here](#) for some examples.

## FEEDBACK?

*Could something in this guide be better? If you have feedback, please share it with us at [team@asfp.io](mailto:team@asfp.io)!*