



APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL IN THE HUMANITIES



Considering your Plans

- What is your goal? Why do you want to apply to graduate school?
- What programs make the most sense?
- What do those programs require to be accepted?

The Four Components of the Graduate Application

1. CV (Curriculum Vitae): academic resume
2. Statement of Purpose vs. Personal Statement: sometimes you are asked to only submit one of these. Statement of Purpose is more research oriented (what you plan to research in grad school) and the Personal Statement is more of your personal journey that led you to wanting to go to grad school.
 - Sometimes programs will ask for both, but more frequently they only ask for a single “Statement of Intent,” so it is necessary to weave elements of each into a single statement.
3. Writing Sample: 10-20 page paper from your undergraduate senior seminar or capstone class
4. GRE exam: Many schools no longer require this exam, BUT... You can take it a few times (\$200) <https://www.ets.org/gre.html>

The CV (curriculum vita)

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PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

2024-present Associate Professor, Department of History, California State University-Dominguez Hills

2018-2024 Assistant Professor, Department of History, California State University-Dominguez Hills

2015-2018 Full-Time Lecturer, Department of History, Middle Tennessee State University

EDUCATION

Ph.D., History, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, 2014

M.A., History, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, 2009

B.A., History, Ohio State University, Columbus, 2006

EDITORIAL POSITIONS

2021-present Co-editor, H-AmIndian, H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences

2020-present Faculty Advisor, *The Toro Historical Review*, history department journal of undergraduate research

2017-2020 Book Review Editor, H-Early America, H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences

SELECT PUBLICATIONS

2025 "Native History, Popular Memory, and the New Midwestern Historiography," in *Between Loving and Leaving: Essays on the New Midwestern History*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

SELECT RECENT CONFERENCE ACTIVITY

2024 "Building Community and Empowering Students through Embedded Tutoring," *CSU Symposium on Teaching and Learning* CSU-San Bernardino, San Bernardino, CA. Feb. 23-24.

2023 "The Many Paths to Ohio Country: Power and Place-Making in a Shattered World, 1690-1750" *Displaced Indigeneity, Unsettling Histories: Forced Migration, Kinship and Belonging* University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland. June 27-28.

RECENT GRANTS, SYMPOSIUMS, WORKSHOPS, AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES

2023-present *Projects to Enhance Student Success* grant, co-authored with Dr. Laura Talamante, funding for Embedded Tutor program (~\$76,000)

2023-2024 History Faculty Liaison to the Toro Learning and Testing Center pursuant to the *Projects to Enhance Student Success* grant

REFERENCES

Dr. Jane Q. Awesomeprofessor, Krypton University, College of Superheroes, contact info.



Statements of Purpose vs. Personal Statements vs Diversity Statements

	Statement of Purpose	Diversity Statement
Other names:	Personal statement, research statement, letter of intent	Personal statement, personal history statement, biographical statement
Program's goal in having you write it:	To figure out if you're a good fit for the program in terms of your preparation, research interests, and intended specialty.	To figure out whether you'll contribute to the university's campus culture and positive image (e.g., in society and the media) by: (1) being "diverse" yourself or (2) having experience working with diverse populations.



First, let's talk about audience

For any text you write, ask yourself 2 questions:

1. Who's reading it?
2. Why are they reading it?

Answers

1. Who's reading it? **The admissions committee: tenure-track professors from the department you're applying to.**
2. Why are they reading it? **To figure out if you're a "good fit" for their program. Do your research interests and preparation match well with the focus, mission, specialties, and culture of the program?**

How NOT to write to your audience

- “I want to help all people.”
- “I think I am a strong candidate for a PhD in psychology because people have always come to me with their problems; I am viewed as a warm, empathetic, and caring person.”

Or (my personal favorite)

- “I feel a thrill of excitement every time I step into a morgue.”

“Kisses of death” (KODs) for your application

- The preceding examples come from this very-entertaining and informative study:

Appleby, D. C. & Appleby, K. M. (2006). Kisses of death in the graduate school application process. *Teaching of Psychology*, 33(1), 19-24.

- The authors define “kisses of death (KODs)” as “aberrant types of information that cause graduate admissions committees to reject otherwise strong applicants.”

Types of KODs

- There are 5 major categories:
 1. Damaging personal statements (*e.g. disclosing mental health or substance abuse issues*)
 2. Harmful letters of recommendation (*usually the result of asking the wrong person*)
 3. Lack of program information (*i.e. a generic approach, or saying you're a perfect fit without showing why/how*)
 4. Poor writing skills (*obvious*)
 5. Misfired attempts to impress (*or what I like to call "they know that they're awesome—you don't need to tell them"*).
- Notice that all but #2 directly relate to the personal statement/statement of purpose.

How to avoid KODs

- Avoid references to your mental health and/or irrelevant personal problems. Don't let them think that you'll have trouble in, or drop out of, grad school.
- Avoid excessively altruistic statements ("I'm going to save the world"). Don't make it seem like your need to help others is greater than your desire to do research and engage in academic/professional activities.
- Avoid excessively self-revealing information ("TMI"). Don't make it seem like you're unaware of professional boundaries.
- Avoid humor, attempts to appear cute or clever, and references to God/religion (unless these are directly related to your field of study – and even then, proceed with caution). Don't let them think that you're unaware of the formal culture of grad studies or that you don't take your own application seriously.
- Avoid generic statements that make you seem unfamiliar with the program. Don't let them think you're lazy or unprepared.

How to avoid KODs (continued)

- Avoid saying that you're the perfect fit for the program without providing evidence (this relates to **“showing, rather than telling”** —see next slide).
- Avoid attempts to praise or flatter the university or its faculty, or inappropriate attempts to impress the admissions people. They know they're awesome – you don't need to tell them (or even worse, bribe them).
- Avoid putting other people/institutions down (e.g. “I didn't learn anything in undergrad, so I'm applying to your program so that I can actually learn something”).
- (Obviously) Avoid sending in a sloppy first draft that you wrote the night before. Grammar and usage issues are an especially deadly KOD.

Showing vs. Telling (from Karen Kelsky's "A+ Admissions Essays")

1. "I am passionate about Philosophy." – **Anyone can say this. There is no way to prove or disprove this statement.**
2. "I took all of the courses in Philosophy that my undergraduate institution offered, served as the president of our local Society for Philosophy Students chapter, and am currently involved in a summer research project under the mentorship of Professor *** of the Philosophy Department, which looks at...." – **This statement is specific, unique to the writer's experience, and shows evidence that the writer is passionate about Philosophy without even having to say it.**

So what SHOULD you do for your audience (admissions readers)?

- Use evidence to back up your claims, as you would in any essay (that's another way of thinking about showing vs. telling.)
- Be clear and direct. Don't use overly complex language just to "sound smart" or appear "scholarly." Remember that these essays are not vocab or IQ tests.
- Give yourself time to write multiple drafts/revisions.
- Do your homework and be specific. Tailor your essay to each program. You can recycle parts, but don't just send 10 programs the same essay with the names of the schools swapped out – generally, this doesn't work.
- As Karen Kelsky says, "take your ego out of it": "You may not be the best judge of what elements speak effectively to other people. Your readers, editors, advisors, professors, & TAs may have a more hard-eyed insight into what works and what doesn't. Listen to them."

One possible way to structure your statement

- Paragraph 1: Introduction

Tell an anecdote (option 1) or just dive right in (option 2)...

For example:

1. A student applying to physical therapy programs (PT) could write an anecdote something like this: “When I first started volunteering at X hospital, my assignment was to assist the lead therapist with Y. My first patient, call her Maria, came in with a leg that had been badly injured in a car accident. Over the next several months, I helped the therapist walk Maria through various exercises... When I finally saw her walk up the stairs unassisted, I felt so proud of the small but important role I played in her recovery. This is when I knew for sure that PT was the right career for me.”
2. “I am applying to the master’s program in Y at X university to prepare me for a career in counseling students in higher education settings...”

One possible way to structure your statement (continued)

- Paragraph 2: Education

For example:

“To prepare myself for graduate study in W field, I have taken courses in X, Y, and Z...”

“X professor or Y course first exposed me to...”

“I am interested in exploring X question...”

“I learned about X technique or theory which deepened my understanding of...”

One possible way to structure your statement (continued)

- Paragraphs 3-4 (1 or 2 paragraphs): Practical Experience

For example:

“To gain practical experience, I interned at X (place) under the supervision of Dr. Y. I performed Z duties...”

“At my job at X, I learned to apply Y theories in a real-life setting...”

“As a Research Assistant for Prof. Z, I was involved in Y studies of...”

Tell – Show – Lesson Learned

The following structure is great for writing anecdotes/stories about experiences:

1. **Tell** what you did: “In my sophomore year, I worked in Dr. Abdullah’s zebrafish lab researching the topic of... My duties included...”
2. **Show** some particular aspect of the experience that highlights your strengths or technical skills that you developed: “The next year, I was third author on a paper reporting our findings on...”
3. Describe the **Lesson (you) Learned** and/or how this experience has prepared you for graduate school: “This experience taught me the importance of...” OR “I learned valuable skills/techniques, including... This knowledge is essential for an aspiring..., and I look forward to continuing to develop my skills in graduate school” OR “These skills will serve me well in my future role as a...”

One possible way to structure your statement (continued)

- Paragraph 4 or 5: Why you Chose that Graduate Program

For example:

“The program at X university suits me perfectly because...”

“This program aligns perfectly with my interests because...”

“The work of Professor X on Y topic is highly relevant to my research topic of Z because...”

“What attracts me the most to this program is...”

Make sure to show how you intend to build on, and contribute to, work that is already going on at that university.

One possible way to structure your statement (continued)

- Paragraph 5 or 6: Goals (often combined w/ the conclusion paragraph)

For example:

“My short-term goal is to earn my certification in...”

“My ultimate goal is to work in X area as a Y.”

“Upon completing this program, I wish to obtain a job in X industry...”

One possible way to structure your statement (continued)

- Final Paragraph: Conclusion + Statement of Confidence (may be combined with previous paragraph or could be a separate short paragraph).

For example:

“I look forward to my career as a Y OR in Z field, and I am convinced that my experiences and training so far have prepared me to succeed in graduate school and beyond.”

“I am confident that my preparation, experiences, and academic achievements have prepared me to succeed in graduate school, and I hope that W university is the place where I will complete my education.”

OR

“...and W university is the perfect place to prepare me for the next steps in my education.”

One possible way to structure your statement (continued)

- The statement of confidence is important for a couple of reasons.
- First, it counteracts the natural tendency that many of us have to be modest, or to avoid bragging. In a statement of purpose, you need to brag a little bit, and the statement of confidence helps accomplish that.
- Second, it tells the university what you'll offer them. If you were applying to a job, you'd tell them directly, e.g. "In my previous job, I helped reduce expenses by 20%, and I expect to be able to exceed that percentage in this position based on my increased knowledge and experience."
- For grad study, you want to tell them indirectly. In other words, by telling them that you have what it takes to succeed, you're indirectly telling them that you'll succeed in your studies, graduate, get rich & famous, and give gobs of money back to the school (more or less!).

How is Graduate School funded?

- Significant differences from how one pays for undergraduate education
- Teaching assistantships
- Fellowships
- One-time scholarships and fellowships
- Loans

Identifying Graduate Programs

- Think about where you are willing to go
- Consider the competitiveness of various programs
- What level of graduate student funding is available at various programs?
- Identify potential mentors by field of study and area of expertise
 - Research these people
- Reach out to these programs for more information