
Joseph L. Brown, Ph.D.
jlbrown@stanford.edu
Graduate Diversity Recruitment Officer
School of Humanities & Sciences

The undergraduate experience vs. The graduate experience

Undergraduate: Student “at a school”
- Courses and grades driven
- Objective criteria of performance
- Competition
- Individualism
- Perceived scarcity of resources

Graduate: Student “of so and so”
- Research focus…it’s about the work
- Non-objective criteria of performance
- Collaboration
- Relationship driven
  - Relationship to professor, peers
Admissions committees wrestle with the big question…

Which applicants will we choose to mentor?
Those with these attributes:

- Academic abilities (in particular ability to pursue sophisticated line of analysis in the discipline)
- Ability to collaborate productively with faculty and peers and subordinates (undergrads) on sophisticated research projects
- Research interests aligned with those of our faculty
- Writing ability
- Persistence/Motivation
- Creativity/Vision
- Ability to multitask (manage multiple activities, coursework, research program, writing)

Evidence of potential for productivity in the discipline…

What are faculty looking for in a personal statement?

- What are the attributes you possess that would make you a productive scholar in our program and in the discipline?
- Who are you? How can you be distinguished from the other applicants? Why should our program admit you over other applicants?
- What are your career plans?
- What experiences have led you to apply to our program?
- What are your research interests and how do they align with those of our faculty? Who do you want to work with?
- What can you tell us (explain) about blemishes in other parts of your application (low GPA, low GREs, lack of research experience…)?
Expectations

- Study the graduate programs (and NOT just what faculty are there and what do they do)! Understand what each program views as its strengths and the kind of students they seek.

- You will go through many drafts (at LEAST 10).

- You will seek feedback, from faculty, students, staff, but particularly from faculty or others who understand what faculty are looking for. Seek feedback from graduate school reps!

- You will need to keep in mind what faculty are looking for, but you are describing who YOU are, not what they want to read.

- The ‘you’ that you are crafting in your statement is one limited, incomplete version of ‘you’ (a certain ‘professional’ identity you are presenting). This ‘you’ will develop as you work through each draft.

How do you begin?

- Read the application instructions and follow them! Make sure you answer the question(s) that you are asked to answer!

- Skip the flashy opening…and the compelling close too! These distract more than they help!

- Work on the subcomponents of the statement:
  - Describe the research experiences/internships/jobs/coursework that have led you to apply.
  - What are your research interests?
  - What are your career goals?
  - Why you are applying to this graduate program?
    - What faculty do you want to work with?
    - Are there other things about the program that you like?
  - Explain any blemishes in your record (more on this later)
  - Describe how your diverse status has affected your academic interests and/or academic path and/or career interests

- Get it down on paper, more than will eventually go into your statement.
What to think about (and not to think about) as you write...

- Beware writing a statement that is just a list of your accomplishments, instead think about the questions you’ve been investigating, what you’ve found out, how they have influenced the questions you want to pursue in grad school.

- If you are about to write about what you were like as a child or adolescent or high school student, STOP! Or…write it down, in all its loving detail, take a look at it, then DELETE it.

- If you write about a research project or scholarly investigation, be sure to write about what you found out and what subsequent questions were sparked (that’s not an invitation to talk about p-values or significance levels!)

- Think about the transition from one project to the next, what led to the shift (the shift is OK, but be ready to explain it).

More on the parts...

- Use language and references of your discipline. Think of writing to someone in your discipline, but not in your specific sub-specialty.

- Write about your specific field of interest but don’t present a detailed dissertation proposal.

- Tell stories that illustrate how smart, creative, and persistent you are rather than simply asserting that you’re smart, creative, and persistent.

- Avoid overly emotional or enthusiastic language. Focus on the positive rather than the negative (don’t badmouth any experience OR person!). Be careful about arrogance (never appealing) or offensiveness (know your audience) on the page!

- But be honest, if you question a theory or line of research, do so, but be respectful.

- Avoid humor.

- No quotes! The faculty want to hear from YOU.
Putting the parts in order and building an overall narrative…

- Play with different narratives and orders…
  - Chronological from early to later (yes, go ahead and be like most other applicants…ugh)
  - Focus first on most advanced, sophisticated, and relevant research experience, then fill in any remaining blanks…or on experiences that relate to a specific theme
  - Brainstorm different approaches

- Ask programs for examples of past successful essays. Check out Don Asher’s book GRADUATE ADMISSIONS ESSAYS (4th ed.)

- Work to create an overall narrative or theme or idea that links up the different parts of the statement. Stay alert for a theme to emerge as you continue working on drafts

- Ask yourself how you can re-write each part so that it relates to that overall narrative.

Fine tuning

- Beware grammatical problems and spelling errors.
  - Read essay out loud (easier to catch errors)
  - Check for use of long convoluted sentences when more concise ones will do
  - Beware use of GRE words (loquacious vs. talkative)
  - Beware use of adjective pairs and triples (bright, energetic, and smart)

- Is your statement a plea for admission or a conversation with colleagues in your discipline? Get others to give you feedback

- The customizing of your statement will typically focus on one paragraph that will differ for each program…make sure you send the RIGHT essay to the right program!
Dealing with blemishes in your statement…

- First check with mentors to see if anything needs to be addressed, consider whether your closest recommender or two should do so.

- Craft your explanation and write as much as possible, using any available empirical evidence:
  - Consider if post-frosh, major, or upper-level GPA helps case.
  - Edit explanation down for concision, as few words as possible to present explanation, then move on!

- Get feedback…does it read like an explanation or an excuse?
- Have recommender read and provide feedback, and perhaps also ask a recommender to address the issue.
- Put explanation later in statement.

Diversity questions and diversity in the personal statement

- Consider how your gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, first generation college status, socioeconomic status, or disability status may have shaped your research interests, your academic path, and/or your career goals.

- It is appropriate to discuss these influences in your statement, but don’t linger on them. Be sure you relate these influences to the overall theme OR to how these influences will make you a stronger and more productive scholar.

- Beware the ‘sob story’ or the Oprah-esque ‘this is how I learned that you can achieve ANY dream’ stuff. Remember your audience!
Questions?

Joseph Brown
jlbrown@stanford.edu