

What makes an effective personal statement for graduate school application?

GRADUATE COMMITTEE PANEL

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Dr. Mike Ibba, Professor and Chair of the Department of Microbiology at The Ohio State University

HOSTS:

Dr. Amrit Singh, Assistant Professor in the Department of Molecular Genetics at The Ohio State University

Dr. Amanda Simcox, Professor in the Department of Molecular Genetics at The Ohio State University

Dr. Chris Manion, Associate Director, Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing

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Where do the statements come in the process in relation to other admissions materials?

All materials are looked at carefully (GRE, Recommendation, CV)

More detail--sophistication--than CV: Details

How think about science--what goals--paths toward graduate work

Spend time.

Tend to assume that metrics measure up

Why applied to our program: evidence chosen a program as a positive, not default step

Don't assume people know HOW will play out--"in for the ride"

Commitment and passion--and openness--to path

If unsure of qualifications: well written statement can make up for that

Excitement about the science and opportunity for further study

OSU formally look at GRE, Dept not anymore

What is it? Additional questions: diversity (incl. OSU); explain things about yourself that wouldn't come up about research statement; Diversity broadly defined; E.g. Effect of hurricane on education in Puerto Rico

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What do each of you look for individually when you read the personal statements?

Dr. Ibba: Microbiology--evidence that candidate is aware of what a microbio program is; fine to put names of faculty to work with, but can't hang on this; why 5 years of study worthwhile; significant commitment: sentence or something that talks about moment you decided to go forward with this career.

Dr. Amacher: genuine feel for what student is interested in; are those interests a good match for department; Specialty of department good; knowing something about department; style: one I remember long after read--personal, individual; mature in talking about research; know what graduate school about

Reading a department: applying to a program, not a lab; strong, well rounded program; Get more than just member of lab: curriculum, outside learning of classroom; professionalization--not a jr post-doc; there should be lots of options: feel like walking into a candy shop; might thrive in another lab than planned

Being excited in research described by 4-5 people; handful of labs; want to rotate--good place for you there; if not interested in research focus, avoid;

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What do committees discuss in relation to personal statements when they are deliberating about candidates?

Level of sophistication in statement of the kind of research; put it in big picture--not details of experiments: WHY important and significant; even if not published; engaged intellectually in work; opportunities to present: even UG research forums. Reasons coming to graduate school. Committee can tell if you are being honest or not. Don't have to be perfect: we're going to teach you! Committed, interested, engaged

Generic letters: program with same name, but faculty in different interests--shows not really interested in particular program; don't just change names; can be red flag for us; look for level of engagement and perseverance; don't make it up. Be honest. Rational self assessment of abilities. Success in grad program depends on that.

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What sets candidates apart in personal statements?

What can sink a candidate's prospects?

LETTERS OF APPLICATION: GENERAL PRINCIPLES AND HOW THEY APPLY TO GRADUATE APPLICATIONS IN BIOSCIENCES

YOUR QUALIFICATIONS ← → A PROGRAM'S INTERESTS AND STRENGTHS

- Articulate your qualifications
- Illustrate qualifications through concrete experiences and details
- Connect them: “Reading” a department’s interests and framing qualifications in that light
- Structure points in compelling, logical way
 - First paragraph establishes key themes and a hook for readers; individualized for student; avoid being general (always loved science); something that you can speak concretely about; stumbling on research--what has changed their thinking; Why excited about work--convince it just because of passing idea; why resonating--don't be timid; If you gave it to a friend or family member: should be able to recognize you.

- Next paragraphs illustrate themes as concretely as possible with details; describing moments; explaining WHY important; Dr. Ibba: mentor engaged my work, made me think differently about science;
- Conclusion drives home themes: tell you in the end: “I want this” (not “it would be great, other fish to fry”); not just say it: should be clear from what came before it. Avoid being general (“want to cure cancer”)--someone who will thrive in program; Want faculty to read letter and convince student to come

QUESTIONS FOR PANELISTS AND HOSTS?

Why too much specificity? Going through a protocol vs. wider challenge/significance: problem solving and challenge; stepping back and explaining process. Fine to name a handful of faculty--know that there are several people work with; how approach science, think about science; “The KIND of work that Dr. X does” Specific but not exclusionary. Don’t just fill in blanks: actually LOOKED at the program

Strengths, needs improvement? How frame it? Coming to graduate school to learn something; what do you want to come out of graduate school having mastered? E.g. talks, feedback on writing; Sense of self-assessment: a positive, maturity; knowing what good at and what less good add; emphasize strengths, but be honest about weaknesses; Writing, Teaching and Learning, Public Speaking opportunities.

Recognizing new fields I need?; identifying a weakness wanting to add to program; what do you want to improve?

Techniques worked on, excelled--or detailed; how work in? Fine to mention--don’t just list; use as a way to describe how approach a scientific problem; avoid “I know how to

do X Y Z”; work in “this is how I think”; looking for thinkers and colleagues, one day peers; technique used to illustrate something about yourself; demonstrating something that’s ill defined.

What if it’s an amazing new thing? Part of that is what you used for, excitement; how address outstanding problems or questions; the REASON for this there

Chemical sciences--interests have moved to microbio? Is this shift something to highlight? YES!!! Dr. Ibba is biochemist who got “sucked in” to microbio; shows you made a conscious decision; it’s a strength; trajectories of faculty are diverse. Can be assets.

WHAT TO DO BETWEEN NOW AND THE CONFERENCE WORKSHOP

- Pick two programs, note BROAD (i.e. not dependent on particular faculty or labs alone) strengths and interests of program
- Articulate 4-5 BROAD qualifications that match up with those programs
- Match up concrete experiences and achievements that demonstrate these qualifications
- Work toward a draft that articulates these and ties it together—get as far as you can
- **GO TO YOUR WRITING CENTER!**

MORE RESOURCES FOR WRITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS

<http://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2006/01/sell-yourself-guidance-developing-your-personal-statement-graduate-school-applications>

<http://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2014/10/sell-yourself-adding-substance-your-personal-statement>