
Personal Statement Workshop

Guidelines, Tips, & Suggestions

Diversifying Clinical Psychology Weekend
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Spring, 2014

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THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

Introduction: Personal Statement

- Function
 - Differentiate Yourself
 - Research Interests
 - What
 - Why
 - Faculty Member(s) / Program
 - Fit
 - Long Term Goals
 - Research and/or Clinical



General Guidelines

- Number 1:
 - Personal Statement is a MISNOMER!
 - Not too “personal”
 - Read “professional/research”



Examples: Balancing Personal and Professional

- **“As an immigrant from a working class family with a single father, I have rarely met other students with similar backgrounds.** While earning my B.A. at UNC-Chapel Hill, my awareness of being one of the few minorities in my classes only grew. As such, I realized not only the importance of graduate education in order to advance my own training, but to better serve the working class families in the communities in which I have lived, worked, and studied.”



Examples: Balancing Personal and Professional

- **“When my parents divorced when I was nine years old, my two sisters and I reacted differently.** My oldest sister felt like she had to be a parent; my middle sister felt accountable; and I felt like I missed out on having a father. This fascinated me. **Then, when my middle sister, Elizabeth, died, I began to think about resiliency.** Was Elizabeth less resilient than my oldest sister and me? If so, why? These questions, my personal experiences with changing family dynamics and loss, as well as my volunteer work, class work, and research provided me with a broader understanding of familial contexts and helped focus my interests in child clinical psychology and public policy.”



Examples: Balancing Personal and Professional

- **“My brother’s substance use disorder aroused my interest in addiction and spurred me to choose clinical psychology for my life’s work. My goal is to understand the initiation and maintenance of addiction, what makes an intervention effective and how addiction impacts family members. Dr. Hussong’s research parallels my interests and the University of North Carolina provides the most conducive environment for fostering my growth as a researcher of addictive behaviors.”**



Examples: Different Type of Personal

- **“I don’t know that you’ll really be able to get anything out of him, he’s very difficult and doesn’t like to cooperate.” A mother told us this as she dropped her 22 year-old son off for his first visit for one of our research studies.** She went on to say (without prompting) that she felt very disconnected from him and that he didn’t appreciate what she did for him. According to her, medication had helped him to an extent, but the one therapist they had tried working with couldn’t seem to do much for them, either. While she was giving all of this information, the son just sat in our waiting room and stared blankly ahead, waiting for her to finish. To me, this situation illustrated the very complicated issues that emotional problems such as deficits in social cognition and self-awareness can cause for the patient, his or her treatment, and the family. Through pursuing a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, I want to further investigate the unique emotional experience of people with schizophrenia, and how that impacts the efficiency of various forms of psychotherapy.



Examples: Does not have to be personal at all

- **Since I can remember, I have been motivated to understand human thought, feeling, and behavior.** I initially pursued a degree in Human Resources Management because of my fascination with people, and this experience solidified **my passion for understanding human behavior.** Although I enjoyed the program, I quickly realized that I was more interested in studying the intricacies of people's behavior itself, rather than its application to business. **This in turn led me to psychology, and it was here that I truly found my intellectual home.** When I declared psychology as my major, I knew that I would continue with graduate studies in this field, and specifically, in the application of psychological science to ameliorating human problems. I am excited to pursue a doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology and conduct research in the area of intimate relationships, and I am enthusiastic about the prospect of completing my graduate studies at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.



General Guidelines:

- Number 2:
 - Tailor your statement
 - What type of program are you applying to?
 - True Scientist-Practitioner? More research focused?
 - Tell them how/why you “match” with the program (don’t make them figure it out)!
 - Research experience may not match 100 %
 - Need to make case that’s ok



Examples: Tailor Your Statement

- **“At UNC Chapel Hill, Dr. Jones’ research on the family transmission of mental and physical health and health behavior in underserved families aligns with my interest in working with minority adolescents and their families. I am interested in both her basic research, as well as her growing focus on the development and implementation of intervention and prevention programs tailored to engage and retain underserved children and their parents.”**



Examples: Tailor Your Statement

- **“Dr. Hussong’s research with children of alcoholics parallels my interest in the effect of addiction on family members (Hussong et al., 2007). Her work with the role of emotions and internalizing symptoms on the development of substance use is an area of great interest to me. I seek to study addiction with a developmental perspective beside Dr. Hussong to understand the etiology of substance use, the maintenance of substance use disorders and the components of effective intervention.”**



Examples: Type & Match

- “The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill would be an ideal setting for me to continue my research in the area of intimate relationships as a graduate student. **I am interested in your program because of its excellent reputation in both research and clinical training.** In addition, I am seeking an environment where I will be intellectually challenged and encouraged to pursue scientific knowledge. **I would like to work under the supervision of Dr. Donald Baucom to be able to assist with his research on couple-based interventions for the treatment of psychological and health problems.** My ultimate goal of pursuing graduate studies is to work in an academic setting. **Because the Clinical Psychology program at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill has a clinical science approach to training its graduate students, this setting would best prepare me for an academic career involving research, but also teaching and providing clinical services.”**



Examples: How to include “Mismatch”

- “As a clinical research coordinator, **I developed skills that can be applied to a variety of research settings.** I oversee studies examining the efficacy of medication treatments and executive and social functioning in the ASD population. My responsibilities include maintaining IRB correspondence, patient recruitment, ensuring adherence to study protocols and administering study measures.
- “My research experiences as an undergraduate has served a solid foundation for my post graduate work as the Fragile X Research Registry Coordinator at the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities, **a position I accepted in order to further *develop* the foundation of my skills and training in preparation for graduate school.**”



General Guidelines:

■ Number 3:

- **Do not** minimize your accomplishments
 - (e.g., “My grades are not very good, but . . .”)
- **Do not** be too grandiose
 - (e.g., “My qualifications are far superior to other undergraduates”.)
- **Do** be straightforward about your +/- : They will figure them out!

e.g., As you will see, my GRE scores fall slightly below the mean for your program. However, as my letters of recommendation attest, I believe that my grades and my experiences outside the classroom, give a better indication of my preparedness for graduate school.



Examples: Emphasize Your Strengths

- “I have cultivated a wealth of research experiences over the last several years, and I believe I am now prepared to commence my graduate studies.”
- “I believe that my research experiences have prepared me for the challenges of graduate school and a career in an academic setting.”
- “By the end of my junior year, I became the first and only undergraduate at all three universities to be trained as an examiner. “
- “Building upon this work, I put forth the first ecological model of hopelessness in one of my most recent first-author projects, which examined the interconnectedness of both environmental *and* familial factors to explain the development of hopelessness (Refs).”



General Guidelines:

- Number 4:
 - Get examples (e.g., current graduate students)
 - Write (use spell-check, grammar-check)
 - Revise (clarity, impact etc.)
 - **Get feedback (friends, family, graduate students)!**



Example: UNC-CH Personal Statement Prompt

- On a separate page, write a personal statement that includes the following:
 - a. Description of any work experience relevant to psychology and research (bibliographic, laboratory or other) that you may have done (or are doing) either as part of employment or to complete your present program. (You may, if you wish, enclose copies of psychological papers you have written.)
 - b. Factors that have led you to choose psychology as a career.
 - c. Research interests you wish to pursue in graduate school.
 - Summarize personal statement



a. Description of Work Experience Relevant to Psychology and Research

- Research and clinical experiences you have done (or are doing)
 - Describe what you have done (responsibilities, accomplishments etc).

e.g., My first research opportunity involved working as an undergraduate research assistant on the _____ under the supervision of _____ from _____ to _____.
As an undergraduate research assistant on this project, I _____.

- Describe what you enjoyed about these experiences and how your experience will translate into your performance in graduate school.

e.g., Although I am not specifically interested in working with _____, I believe that my experiences with _____ will serve as a solid foundation for the _____ I will do as a graduate student.



b. Factors that have led you to choose a career in psychology.

- Do: Focus on your research and clinical experiences and/or courses (or other relevant professional experiences) and how they shaped your interests.
 - e.g., I first became interested in psychology _____. I decided to pursue my interests in psychology further by majoring in psychology at UNC-CH. Through my course work at UNC-CH I became familiar with the work of _____ and started to work in _____'s laboratory during my _____ year.
- Don't: Talk about your therapy, your parents' therapy, your siblings' therapy, or your friends' therapy!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
- i.e., Make it seem as though you have had a plan all along (even if it is a “retrospective” one!



c. Research Interests You Want to Pursue in Graduate School.

- State your interests clearly, concisely, and specifically and make sure “match” with program to which you are applying
e.g., Building on my research and clinical experiences to date, I am applying to graduate programs with a strong training focus in child/family psychology with the opportunity to work with a faculty member conducting research in the area of adolescent psychosocial adjustment.
- Identify a broad area (but don't get too specific) and one or two faculty members
e.g., I am applying to UNC-CH because of the strong child/family psychology track and my interest in the work of Dr. Andrea Hussong and Dr. Mitch Prinstein. Dr. Hussong's work in the areas of adolescent substance use is particularly interesting to me because _____. Additionally, Dr. Prinstein's work in the area of adolescent peer relations _____.



c. Summary paragraph

- Even if not explicitly stated, summarize your personal statement for reader



Examples: Part a (Research)

- **“Upon graduating, I became the Monitoring Project Coordinator for the project. In that role, I am now responsible** for coordinating data collection across sites, recruiting public school districts and schools, and scheduling and conducting observations. I work with 21 school districts, 7 of which I have recruited, and 88 schools, 46 of which I have recruited. As the only staff member trained on the coding system, I was responsible for scheduling and conducting all observations. Over the last two years, I conducted 232 out of 289 observations and built a team of coders. As a supervisor I interview, hire and train staff and undergraduates, meet with staff about performance, and conduct coder reliability checks. I gained invaluable supervisory and research experience and am excited to take the lessons I have learned and apply them to new work on familial contexts and child development.”



Examples: Part a (Volunteer)

- **“In college, I began working at a low-income daycare center. I was told not to hug or hold the children because their parents did not coddle them. I saw a teacher use the class hermit crab to discipline a child who feared the crab. I wondered why parents would send their children to this daycare. During my senior year, when I became head of the program, I found out the two other low-income daycares in the area, lacking proper funding, were shut down after failing to pass safety inspections. That experience demonstrated to me that parents’ decisions are sometimes influenced by factors that are out of their control. That inspired me to find other ways to provide support to low-income populations.”**



Examples: Part b

- **Since I can remember, I have been motivated to understand human thought, feeling, and behavior.** I initially pursued a degree in Human Resources Management because of my fascination with people, and this experience solidified my passion for understanding human behavior. Although I enjoyed the program, I quickly realized that I was more interested in studying the intricacies of people's behavior itself, rather than its application to business. **This in turn led me to psychology, and it was here that I truly found my intellectual home.** When I declared psychology as my major, I knew that I would continue with graduate studies in this field, and specifically, in the application of psychological science to ameliorating human problems. I am excited to pursue a doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology and conduct research in the area of intimate relationships, and I am enthusiastic about the prospect of completing my graduate studies at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.



Examples: Part c

- “My research interests include the etiology and manifestation of substance abuse and the effect addiction has on family members.”
- “I want to work with Dr. Ann Masten to expand my understanding of the influence of familial contexts on the prevention, maintenance, and treatment of psychopathology in children, with a particular interest in resiliency and underrepresented populations. I hope to gain a better understanding of how parenting can promote children’s socio-emotional development and functioning in the face of adversity.”



Examples: Part c

- “Through my training as a scientist-practitioner, it is my goal to focus my continuing work on underserved families with the aim of informing and developing culturally sensitive prevention and intervention programming tailored to the meet the contextual demands of low income and ethnic minority youth and their families.”



Examples: Part c (summary)

- “It is my aim to continue to develop my program of research during graduate school with the goal of conducting my own research in minority mental health concerns while working with families and their children. In applying to the University of North Carolina’s Clinical Psychology program, I take the next step in reaching my goal.”
- The University of North Carolina’s program will help me achieve my ultimate career goal to teach and conduct research that not only influences the field of child clinical psychology, but also influences how communities develop public policies that promote the healthy development of all children.



Examples: Part c (summary)

- In conclusion, my experiences up to now, both personally and professionally, have prepared me well for the next step in my pursuit of a doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology. I am excited about my academic endeavors and my future growth as a researcher and clinician. I hope to have the opportunity to pursue my passion, develop new skills, and continue to grow and learn in the Clinical Psychology program at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

