

# WRITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS

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# PERSONAL STATEMENT VS STATEMENT OF PURPOSE?

Features	Personal Statement	Statement of Purpose
Needed for graduate school and fellowship applications	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1 to 2 pages in length	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Vary by culture and country	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
(In the US) Evaluation of <b>personal</b> thoughts, feelings, and reflection (in relation to the application requirements)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
(In the US) Evaluation of what the applicant has done and plans to do <b>academically and/or professionally.</b>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

# PERSONAL STATEMENT VS STATEMENT OF PURPOSE?

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Main Points to Remember:

1. In some cases there might not be a difference between a **PS** and **SOP**.
2. For doctoral program applications, a **PS** or **SOP** is often a research statement.
3. In **ALL** cases, read the prompt carefully! Check out some sample prompts...

# FELLOWSHIP PROMPT

- **Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowship (open to immigrants or the children of immigrants)**
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- **Essay One** - maximum length 1000 words
- Tell us about your experiences as a New American. Whether as an immigrant yourself, or as a child of immigrants, how have your experiences as a New American informed and shaped who you are and your accomplishments?
- Feel free to discuss how individual people (such as family or teachers), institutions, aspects of law, culture, society or American governance made an impact on your life as an immigrant or child of immigrants. The program is interested in understanding the context of your personal, professional, and academic accomplishments.

Source: <https://www.pdsoros.org/>



# FELLOWSHIP PROMPT

- **Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowship (open to immigrants or the children of immigrants)**
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- **Essay Two** – maximum length 1000 words
  - Tell us about your current and near-term career-related activities and goals, as well as why you decided to pursue the specific graduate program(s) and school(s) that you have. How do you see your current work and study informing your early career goals? If you have not been accepted into a program yet, please tell us about why you selected the programs to which you are applying.

Source: <https://www.pdsoros.org/>



# GRAD SCHOOL APPLICATION PROMPT

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- Please tell us your reasons for wanting to do graduate work in this [your field] at [University X] and what your specific interests in the field are. Additionally, we want to know about your experiences in the field, any special skills that you may bring to the program, and your career plans after graduation.

# PREPARATION: RESEARCH THE PROGRAM

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## **What is the program looking for in ideal candidates?**

- Carefully read about the program's mission, vision, values, current research, faculty, curriculum, etc.

## **What is the school/committee specifically asking for?**

- READ the question prompts carefully and be sure to answer EVERY aspect of the prompt
- EXPLAIN how you meet the specified qualifications
- SHOW how your skills/goals/aspirations match those of the organization, program, and/or school

# PREPARATION: KNOW YOURSELF

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- Unique attributes of your story (personal and/or academic) ***as they relate to the award or program***
- Your field of interest, why you chose it
- Personal success factors
- Goals (short and long term)
- What are you hoping to do with your education/award and how might it help you achieve your goal?  
How will it achieve the organization's goal?
- Values, interests, and skills



# HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL WITH A PERSONAL STATEMENT

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- Align your story with the requirements of the application and the audience.
- Capture their attention with your introduction. This takes different forms.
- Show; don't tell.
- Explain how investing in you will pay off.
- Use the parts of the prompt to help you organize your paragraphs.
- Get the story, details, and organization of your statement first. Grammar and punctuation can be edited later.
- Give yourself lots of time, revise A LOT, get help!

# FIRST THINGS FIRST...

## ALIGNING YOURSELF: ARE YOU WORTHY?

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**As a human being, yes you are!**

For this organization or program? Maybe.

Choose a program or award that is appropriate for you.

Check with the Office of Graduate Fellowships and Awards.



# LET'S PRACTICE! FINDING YOUR STORY

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Your grades and test scores will show that you are a good student.

Let your personal statement show your persistence, diligence, effort, creativity, focus, and potential.

The questions on the next slide are a good way to discover the details of your story that you might want to include in your statement.



# LET'S PRACTICE! STORY QUESTIONS

Choose one of these questions and do a 3-minute free write (in any language), don't edit yourself.

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1. Why do you find your field interesting and/or exciting?
2. What was your favorite course? Why?
3. Describe a project or experience that was very difficult and maybe was not successful, but one in which you still learned a lot. What did you learn?
4. What do you do to work hard in your field? What are two examples of how you work hard?
5. What are some questions that you have about topics in your field? Why are these important questions to you?
6. When you feel tired or anxious about school, how do you motivate yourself to keep going?
7. What's your superpower?
8. What will your life be like in 3 years? In 10 years?
9. How can you help your field/the world?



# LET'S PRACTICE! FINDING YOUR STORY

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**EVERYONE HAS AN INTERESTING STORY!!!**

Typical sentence:

In 2013 I completed my B.S. in computer science and in 2018 I earned a master's degree in art therapy.

**Where's the story?**





# CAPTURING ATTENTION: THINK ABOUT THE PROMPT

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Which one of these three opening sentences for an application to a doctoral program in computer science seems most **focused**? Why? Prompt: What are your reasons for wanting to do graduate work in computer science and what are your specific interests in the field?

- I have always loved technology and computers ever since I was a young child. I first began coding when I was in eighth grade and won first prize in the technology fair for my school district.
- My aspiration is to spend the next several years pursuing a PhD in computer science in the field of human-computer interaction. I'm interested in online education systems, cybersecurity, and software engineering.
- My name is Lisa Allen. I am currently finishing my master's degree in Computer Science in the College of Arts and Sciences at Florida State University.

# CAPTURING ATTENTION: SHOW, DON'T TELL

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Which one of these two openings for an application for a Fulbright Student Grant seems more **compelling**? Note: The prompt asks about the applicant's service/volunteer background and personal values.

- I am applying for the Fulbright Student Grant because I have a passion for hard work and helping other people. I have done volunteer work for many organizations. When I am finished with my studies, I plan to do work that makes life better for others.
- My grandparents have touched many lives: former drug addicts, refugees, neighbors, and my own. They have an uncommon ability to build relationships; they are a paradigm of service— where service is more than what you do and is also defined by who you are. Their example has inspired me to do the same, and for two years I have volunteered at the homeless shelter in my town.

# SHOW, DON'T TELL: STRIKING THE RIGHT TONE

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That last thing about the grandparents was too poetic—no one in Chemical Engineering writes like that!

Good point!

A personal story is effective **ONLY** if you can relate it to the prompt and to your purpose.

If you use a story in a narrative form, be honest. Make the connection to your goal clear.

Take a look at the PS and SOP for a STEM student.





# PERSONAL STATEMENT: COMPUTER SCIENCE

I had the privilege of being raised in an especially information rich environment. Besides the towers of books that my parents and other relatives provided to me, both of my parents were medical professionals, so copies of The New England Journal of Medicine and other scientific periodicals were abundant at home. I remember opening up each issue as a child and examining the colorful charts, tables, and the occasional gory photograph of some surgical procedure. As a child I was of course ignorant of most of what was being discussed in these articles, but my biggest blessing might have been that my parents always seemed happy to answer my questions and to explain scientific concepts in terms I could understand. One of the biggest gifts I received growing up was the repeated encouragement from my parents to admit - and to not be ashamed of - my ignorance of a subject.

Source: <http://seankross.com/notes/grad-school-essays/>

# STATEMENT OF PURPOSE: COMPUTER SCIENCE

My aspiration is to spend the next several years pursuing a PhD in computer science in the field of human-computer interaction. I'm interested in online education systems, cybersecurity, and software engineering.

I've had the opportunity to participate in the development of several online courses and I've had the privilege of meeting students who were able to use their experience from a course in order to improve their lives and careers. My motivation stems from the exhilarating feeling of bringing knowledge and opportunities to these students. In addition, it's important to me to see that cybersecurity tools are accessible, easy to use, and distributed equitably as online interactions become ubiquitous in everyone's lives.

For the past two years I've worked with Professors Jeff Leek, Roger Peng, and Brian Caffo in the department of biostatistics in the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. I helped them develop the Data Science Specialization on Coursera.org, a series of nine month-long online courses which teach programming, statistics, and communication skills. Each course runs every month and since the courses were launched over four million students have enrolled. I coauthored a book called Developing Data Products for a course with the same name in the specialization. This book details how to implement web applications and data visualisations as interfaces for data analyses that students produce in earlier courses.



# YOUR WORTH: WHY ARE YOU A GREAT INVESTMENT?

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- Most of us feel uncomfortable writing personal statements because we feel like we're bragging about ourselves...even Americans are uncomfortable with this.
- Get beyond yourself: How can you help? (Your field? Others? The planet?)
- From this helping perspective: how do your skills benefit the organization? Investing in you is a good idea...why?
- When your confidence runs low, return to: How can I help?

# LET'S PRACTICE! HOW DO I SHOW I'M A GOOD INVESTMENT?

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Which one of these statements seems most **compelling**? Why?

- Given my own particular abilities with linguistics, English, and education, I plan to use the funding from this award to develop an after-school, English support program for English language learners. To that end, I will create a short training program for volunteer tutors, a packet of teaching resources for those tutors, and will conduct a six-week pilot program at a local middle school.
- The Smith Scholarship will benefit me because it will allow me to continue my research on climate change. Even though I won a scholarship of \$5,000 last year, and my parents have lent me some money, I still do not have enough funding.

# USE THE PROMPT FOR ORGANIZING PURPOSES

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Remember the grad school prompt? Break down the prompt to help you organize paragraphs.

Please tell us your reasons for wanting to do graduate work in [your field] at [University X] and what your specific interests in the field are.

Additionally, we want to know about your experiences in the field,  
any special skills that you may bring to the program,  
and your career plans after graduation.



# LET'S PRACTICE! JI-YOUNG'S FELLOWSHIP APPLICATION

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The Miller Fellowship:

- Annual award for Asian female graduate students from Turkey to Japan to facilitate field research in Asia.
- Provides 6 months' support, including travel, living, health insurance, research expenses.
- Requires CV, names of 2 referees, transcripts, proof of Asian nationality, and a statement of purpose. (Swales & Feak, 2011)



# LET'S PRACTICE! JI-YOUNG'S FELLOWSHIP APPLICATION

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**The statement of purpose:** No more than 250 words explaining how the fellowship would contribute to the applicant's academic development. The applicant must also clearly indicate how her work will further the position of Asian women in her country upon her return home.

**Kim Ji-Young:** is from Korea and is looking for funding for her research back home. She is working with her advisor, Susan Grant, who has given her feedback, but Ji-Young is feeling confused. Read the drafts and Dr. Grant's comments. (Swales & Feak, 2011)



# BREAKING DOWN THE SOP REQUIREMENTS

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- Is Ji-Young an appropriate candidate for this fellowship?
- No more than 250 words. Is that long or short?
- How will the fellowship contribute to the applicant's academic development? She wants to do research—what might the committee need to know about this?
- Clearly indicate how her work will further the position of Asian women in her country upon her return home. Is Ji-Young a good investment? (Swales & Feak, 2011)

# JI-YOUNG – VERSION A

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[1] My name is Ji-Young Kim and I am a beginning second-year female master's student of Korean nationality in the School of Social Work. [2] As you can see from my transcript, my grades for my first year's coursework are very encouraging. [3] This year I really need a Miller Fellowship so that I can go back to Korea to collect data for my thesis. [4] My main area of interest is in gerontology, particularly in the long term care provisions for elderly widows. [5] I could base my thesis on United States data and experiences, but both my advisor and I think it would be more useful for me to collect Korean data, especially since this issue has been little addressed by Korean social work researchers. [6] My own family experience demonstrates how real the problem is. [7] I have two elderly aunts (both in their 80s and widowed) who live in rural areas quite a long way for their relatives and who are virtual "shut-ins." [8] They are visited by an untrained church volunteer once a week, and by their families only once or twice a year. [9] As demonstrated by my aunts, this is a serious problem, and when I return to Korea I would like to do more for them and for elderly women in similar situations. [10] This is why a Miller Fellowship is very important for my future.

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# DR. GRANT'S COMMENTS

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- **Version A Comments:** Not bad, Ji-Young. I think you explain your need for the fellowship quite well—indeed you might overdo it a bit. However, the main problem is that the committee will likely conclude that you haven't thought through what data you will need and how you are going to collect it. Please try again, and try to write a bit more formally.



# JI-YOUNG – VERSION B

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[1] As can be seen from my supporting documentation, I am beginning my second year in the master's program in social work. [2] I plan to complete my degree in July 2021 after I have written and defended my master's thesis. [3] My primary professional interest is in the intersection between social work and gerontology, more specifically in the care of elderly women whose husbands have died and who have not cared for their family members. [4] Recent demographic data show that this at-risk group is growing rapidly in many parts of the world, including Korea. [5] My advisor, Dr. Susan Grant, has suggested that, since I plan to return to Korea on completing my degree, it would be advantageous if I could base my thesis on Korean data. Unfortunately, little information is available in this country, which is why I am applying for a Miller Fellowship. [7] If I am successful, I plan to spend 3 months in Korea, in my hometown of Kunsan. [8] There I will interview a stratified sample of 40 elderly widows in order to develop a profile of how well the municipality is coping with this growing problem. [9] Without a Miller Fellowship, I will not be able to carry out my plan.



# JI-YOUNG – VERSION B

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# DR. GRANT'S COMMENTS

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- **Version B Comments:** Well done! This is much more professional. I like the way you offer a coherent research plan toward the end of your text. But I don't think you should suggest that going to Korea is my idea. And maybe you should put in the action research issue first, rather than presenting your personal details? One more go perhaps? (Swales & Feak, 2011)

# FINAL TIPS

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- Do your research!
- Break down the prompt for the statement. Fully answer the prompt.
- Get your information on paper (in any language) and don't edit yourself. Don't worry about word count.
- Find the details of your story (academic and/or personal) that relate to the instructions/prompt.
- How will you help others and/or the organization with your work?
- Write a first draft. Don't worry about grammar or vocabulary—focus on the information and organization. Now you can worry about the word count.
- Write a second draft—and as many drafts as you need. Once you have your story, you can correct grammar, vocabulary, sentence variety.
- Ask for help! Have others read your work and give you feedback.

# FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS AT FSU

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- **FSU's Office of Graduate Fellowships and Awards:** <http://ogfa.fsu.edu/>
- Dr. Adrienne Stephenson: [apstephenson@admin.fsu.edu](mailto:apstephenson@admin.fsu.edu) from OGFA



# GENERAL RESOURCES FOR PERSONAL STATEMENTS

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- **FSU's Career Center Info on Personal Statements:**

[http://www.career.fsu.edu/sites/g/files/upcbnu746/files/Writing%20a%20Personal%20Statement\\_0.pdf](http://www.career.fsu.edu/sites/g/files/upcbnu746/files/Writing%20a%20Personal%20Statement_0.pdf)

- **Personal Statements for Fellowships from Profellow:**

<https://www.profellow.com/tips/5-powerful-personal-statement-openings-of-fellowship-winners/>

- **Chronicle of Higher Education (Lang, 2012):**

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Helping-Students-to-Tell-Their/134502>

# RESOURCES FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATIONS

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Applying for a PhD Program in Computer Science: this file contains information on the entire application process and has some very good points for students in STEM fields (not just computer science); this is a section of tips on statements of purpose:

<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~harchol/gradschooltalk.pdf>

Examples of SOPs and PSs in STEM all by the same person. These are great examples of giving details and telling a story about research. Excerpts from these essays were used earlier in this presentation.

<http://seankross.com/notes/grad-school-essays/>



# REFERENCE

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- Swales, J. M., & Feak, C. B. (2011). *Navigating academia: Writing supporting genres*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp 46-51.

Also see pp. 9-18 on “Getting into Grad School”

URL: [https://www.press.umich.edu/3073304/navigating\\_academia/?s=look\\_inside](https://www.press.umich.edu/3073304/navigating_academia/?s=look_inside)

# UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

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- **SPEAK Test Information Session**

Thursday, November 18, 2021 at 3:00 p.m.

REGISTER: <http://cies.fsu.edu/EAP-workshops>



# THANK YOU!

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If you have questions, feel free to contact the English for Academic Purposes Program or the Office of Graduate Fellowships and Awards:

- Dr. Maria Beatriz Mendoza: [mmendoza@admin.fsu.edu](mailto:mmendoza@admin.fsu.edu)
- Dr. Jennifer Grill: [jgrill@fsu.edu](mailto:jgrill@fsu.edu)
- Visit the EAP Program: <https://cies.fsu.edu/programs/eap>
- Dr. Adrienne Stephenson: [apstephenson@admin.fsu.edu](mailto:apstephenson@admin.fsu.edu) from OGFA