Writing the Grad School Personal Statement

Your statement of purpose for a grad school application tells a great story about wonderful YOU. But it doesn’t just tell any great story about wonderful you; rather, it tells the story about you and your growing, evolving, dynamic romance with the field in which you wish to become an academic professional. Thus, the purpose of the statement of purpose is only tangentially to show (not tell) the reader that you are generally wonderful: that you are smart, have a great work ethic, love your country, etc. All applicants to grad school have general virtues in large quantities, or they wouldn’t have such ambitions. The real purpose of the statement is to (help to) make at least one admissions committee member say, “hey! This person sounds REALLY interesting! I’d love to work with her!” Thus the statement of purpose is a form of argumentative writing: the thesis is, “this writer has an interesting, vital engagement with his chosen field of study and (oh, by the way) has the experience, skills, abilities, and ambition to succeed.”

A Few Dos and Don’ts

1. Do start with a catchy opening. A “catchy opening” can mean a lot of things: a concrete image; a brief story; a hard-hitting question; a simple, declarative statement. Great openings encapsulate all the elements of the argument of the whole statement in some pithy form.

2. Do name the specific position, admission, job(s), etc. you are applying for. Have a “Please consider my application for” paragraph or set of sentences.

3. Do talk about ideas in the field. Name theorists or ideas that have influenced you, do define some specific area(s) in the field you wish to continue to explore, and do stake your claim as a specific kind of academic (e.g., “I am deeply interested in ecological criticism of literature...”; “I have been deeply influenced by modern Marxist theory...”); “My reading in Mead and Durkheim challenged my assumptions in fundamental ways...”).

4. Do tell personal stories--but only as they matter to your intellectual development. Great: you made Eagle scout; you survived a horrific car wreck; you backpacked through Mongolia; you heaved yourself out of the wreckage of a failed home life / a morally impoverished culture / a morass of oppression. What the committee wants to know is how those life experiences shaped your engagement with the field of study, not simply that you have had the experiences. Marshall them in the service of your argument. Use these stories to enrich your argument about the kind of academic you wish to be (a la point 3).
5. Do show rather than tell. It is far more powerful to illustrate your fabulous work ethic by talking about the three internships you undertook, the undergraduate research you completed, the new learning you’ve attained by getting involved in your classes than it is to simply say “I have a great work ethic.”

6. Do use the word “I.” Of course. Frequently.

7. Do provide a “summative” paragraph somewhere that summarizes your educational background--i.e., “just facts.” This is not essential, but it can be helpful.

8. Do try to tailor your comments to the program you’re applying to. It is not too much to name specific faculty members, courses, or strands of study. It’s great to do this toward the end.

9. Do be sure to name, mention, or illustrate any particular skills or abilities you have that you think will make you enticing. (It never hurts to let admissions committees know that you have certification in copy-machine repair (just kidding)). Seriously, if you have special expertise in some research method / statistical analysis / critical approach, certainly strive to name and illustrate that expertise.

10. Do think about addressing “blemishes” in your record if you think they’re important--but don’t feel you have to do so. Address them if doing so makes you look even better (“my grades fell in fall 2005 because that term I had to take over for the coordinator of a social services agency who fell ill...”) or if you are certain that the issue is somehow inescapable (“I know it must seem strange for someone with a degree in English literature to be applying for a PhD program in chemistry...”).

11. Do close with another memorable idea, image, story, or otherwise impactful statement, but also summarize. Use your last paragraph to reiterate your argument--that you are a really interesting person who’s deeply engaged with your field of study, that you understand the program that you’re applying to and its requirements, and that you are ambitious, hardworking, etc.

...and because we have to have at least one “don’t”:

12. Don’t let anyone ever tell you you aren’t incredible.