

**Writing your Personal Statement or Statement of Intent: a step-by-step guide**  
**A RESOURCE CREATED BY Vidya Natarajan for The Write Place at King's**  
**Transcript of Voicethread Presentation**

1. Welcome to this Voicethread presentation on writing Personal Statements. My name is Vidya Natarajan, and I am the Writing Program Coordinator at King's. I am delighted that you are applying to graduate schools and my colleagues at The Write Place and I are eager to see you succeed.
2. Since you may have to write both a Personal Statement and a Statement of Interest for your applications, it is a good idea for you to understand how these two genres are distinct from each other. Basically, one is more research-focused, whereas the other is more person-focused. The Write Place has presentations on both!

**A Statement of Interest** allows **the graduate school** to assess your academic ability (your preparation, capacity for sustained research, awareness of current trends in the research field, an already clear focus that matches faculty interests in their department) and your personal qualities (grit, creativity, discipline, motivation). It allows **you** to show how you would be a unique contributor and a strong match to the specific program you are applying to. This can be expressed briefly through narrative, but you should focus on the study plan.

**A Personal Statement** adds to this mix the **story** of how you came to apply for the specific program at that school. It can be less formal, and more creative than a Statement of Interest. If it is the only document the school is requesting, it would be a wise move to also include information about your research skills and experience in it. The question or prompt on your graduate school's application page will indicate whether you should focus on the personal or the academic side of your study plans.

3. I'm going to talk a little about the process for writing a personal statement.
  - First of all--and I cannot emphasize this enough—**START EARLY!** You will need time to draft a statement that really reflects your strengths and ambitions; you also need time to get feedback from your professors or from The Write Place. When you seek feedback, expect it to be at the macro-level, since it is hard to achieve the right mix of self-promotion, interesting narrative, clarity about research goals, and knowledge of the target institution that makes the ideal Personal Statement, and you will need time to revise extensively as well as to polish the final version.
  - Before you begin drafting, **READ** the prompt and guidelines in your application website carefully. Note the word limit, the questions you have to answer, if any, and the suggested approach and tone. Read a few sample Personal Statements on writing centre web pages online. Avoid the temptation to use an online template; these will produce predictable statements that will not sound unique or reflective of your research on the target university.
  - Continuing with process, one of the most important early steps is to **RESEARCH** the university, department and program you are applying to, in as much detail as possible.

Identify scholars you have read, who have influenced the field in a way you find exciting, or who would like to work with. Make sure your style reflects your eagerness to engage with their ideas.

- Good personal writing arises from reflection. Take time to **REFLECT** on yourself, your path, your strengths, your influences and so on. This is especially important if you want **to open your essay compellingly**, and make your statement stand out from a few thousand others. Jot down evidence and examples for themes about yourself you want to focus on. Don't think of self-reflection as a prelude to writing your entire life-story—what you need to do is pick out a couple of (ideally recent) experiences that really stand out, and that say something unique about your ability to be a researcher, and your interest in your field.
- **You are now ready to DRAFT** your Personal Statement. Begin writing after identifying one or more key themes, and by creating an outline.

4. A common structure for Personal Statements is as follows:

- a. **A narrative** about your background to show why you are passionate about your study plan
  - write powerfully but avoid flowery language
  - don't ramble; make every word relevant to your goal
  - avoid clichés (don't, for instance, start with “As a child growing up...”)
- b. **Academic and/or professional preparation** related to your research interest (build this into your narrative in interesting ways—don't just list items); be very specific, mention outcomes, quantify if possible; if you mention a relevant job, for instance, say what you learned from it, and what special things you contributed. You could also mention
  - technical or other certifications or education (a computer skill, or SPSS skills)
  - mentors or influences that affected your intellectual path (what did you learn?)
  - previous related research (e.g., an Honors Thesis, a major term essay, a capstone project)
  - conference participation, publications (e.g., King's Undergrad Research Journal or professional journal submissions)
  - teaching or research assistantships (what did you achieve or learn?)
  - awards or other achievements (e.g., Dean's Honor Roll for 3 years)
  - leadership roles

**Tip: Don't mention grades or other information that can be gleaned from your transcript or your résumé: use the personal statement to showcase aspects of yourself not visible in the transcript.**

- c. **Your plan for research** or study within the program you are applying to
  - name any faculty member/s you are interested in working with
  - cite any research sources you name

**Tip: Avoid, explain or unpack technical jargon, since many admissions committees are multidisciplinary.**

**d. Career or further research plans** after completion of the program

**Tip: Don't mention making money; focus on social, intellectual, and other contributions you want to make to society.**

e. If relevant, an explanation for any **weaknesses** in your background /transcript.

**5. The next stage is revision. REVISE, REVISE, REVISE!**

- As you revise, use a checklist to ensure you've covered the necessary ground
  - Have you answered all the questions, if any?
  - Have you kept to the word count?
  - Have you gone beyond listing your experiences; have you **explained** their value?
  - Have you stayed on script, relating these explanations tightly to the program?
  - Have you structured your essay well, with something like an introduction, body and conclusion?
  - Have you used positive language to explain gaps or weaknesses?
  - Have you used language in an interesting and attention-getting way?
- Get feedback on your first or second draft (The Write Place will gladly help)
- Copy edit to remove repetition, to improve clarity, to fix clichés, to add flavour

**6. At the final stage, you should PROOFREAD your personal statement,** checking for

- grammar and sentence structure errors
- punctuation errors
- spelling (don't mis-spell the names of texts, theorists, faculty members, among other things!)
- offensive language or outdated or incomprehensible terminology
- slang or excessive informality
- citation errors.

7. The next slide shows you an example of a personal statement from OWL Purdue in the left-hand column, and, in the right-hand column, the Write Place's example of how even a good statement can be improved through careful revision. The revisions make the statement more effective by narrowing down the research focus, naming authors and theoretical frameworks that will be used, showing how a specific job experience links up with the applicant's research plans, and adding deeper personal interest to the narrative. The slide has only a short section of the statement examples; to read a fuller version, please go to the transcript.

OWL PURDUE EXAMPLE	THE WRITE PLACE'S REVISED EXAMPLE
<p>Having majored in literary studies (world literature) as an undergraduate, I would now like to concentrate on English and American literature.</p> <p>(criticism: not very interesting; opening point about Major already clear from transcript)</p>	<p>In Elizabeth Gaskell's <i>Cranford</i>, a character called Mr. Jenkyns gets killed by a train that he didn't notice coming towards him because he was so absorbed in a new novel by Dickens. That episode sums up two themes in my intellectual life: my lifelong passion for novels that has brought much reward and some trouble, and my intense curiosity about the literary craft of nineteenth-century women writers, who could be so ruthless and so sentimental at the same time. Their fiction resonated with my childhood memories of listening to bedtime stories told or sung by Lola, my Afro-Canadian maternal grandmother, in her powerful but soothing voice.</p>
<p>I am especially interested in nineteenth-century literature, women's literature, Anglo-Saxon poetry, and folklore and folk literature. My personal literary projects have involved some combination of these subjects. For the oral section of my comprehensive exams, I specialized in nineteenth century novels by and about women. The relationship between "high" and folk literature became the subject for my honors essay, which examined Toni Morrison's use of classical, biblical, African, and Afro-American folk tradition in her novel. I plan to work further on this essay, treating Morrison's other novels and perhaps preparing a paper suitable for publication.</p>	<p>Interpreting Gaskell's fiction in my undergraduate Honors thesis, I argued that her visualization of such brutal scenes drew upon a rich tradition of European folktales, which casually deployed graphic violence and death to bring home moral messages. My thesis project, which involved extensive research into recently digitized archives of European folk and fairy tales, resulted in an award-winning presentation at the Undergraduate Research Fair at Western University, as well as a hunger for more insight into the relationship between "high" and folk literature. In the meantime, my most influential academic mentor, Dr. Emily Pez, introduced me to the novels of Toni Morrison in her American Women's Literature course.</p>
<p>In my studies toward a doctoral degree, I hope to examine more closely the relationship between high and folk literature. My junior year and private studies of Anglo-Saxon language and literature have caused me to consider the question of where the divisions between folklore, folk literature, and high literature lie. Should I attend your school, I would like</p>	<p>In pursuing my Master's degree in English, I hope to bring together my deepening interest in my heritage of African and Afro-Canadian folk narratives, and my developing insights into Morrison's use of folk traditions in her early novels, including <i>Beloved</i>, <i>Sula</i>, and <i>The Bluest Eye</i>. Applying Vladimir Propp's theory to plot, and Judith Butler's idea of gender as performance to</p>

<p>to resume my studies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with special attention to its folk elements.</p>	<p>language, I propose to investigate how Morrison's work functions as a brilliant example of female occupation of the space in-between creativity or world-building, and rage or world-destruction.</p>
<p>Writing poetry also figures prominently in my academic and professional goals. I have just begun submitting to the smaller journals with some success and am gradually building a working manuscript for a collection. The dominant theme of this collection relies on poems that draw from classical, biblical, and folk traditions, as well as everyday experience, in order to celebrate the process of giving and taking life, whether literal or figurative. My poetry draws from and influences my academic studies. Much of what I read and study finds a place in my creative work as subject. At the same time, I study the art of literature by taking part in the creative process, experimenting with the tools used by other authors in the past.</p>	<p>My own poetry—a prominent element in my academic and career plans--touches on the themes of cyclical creation and destruction, and incorporates folktale motifs. I have submitted poems to <i>The Malahat Review</i>, <i>The Brick</i>, and other Canadian journals, and am currently building a working manuscript for a collection. In choosing a graduate program, I was particularly impressed by the way in which Carleton University's Department of English permitted combining creative and academic writing in productive ways. The work of Dr. Angela Carter, in particular, has been intellectually compelling to me, and I hope to be able to engage with her ideas in <i>Folklore and Poetry</i> as I work towards my Master's degree.</p>
<p>In terms of a career, I see myself teaching literature, writing criticism, and going into editing or publishing poetry. Doctoral studies would be valuable to me in several ways. First, your teaching assistant ship program would provide me with the practical teaching experience I am eager to acquire. Further, earning a Ph.D. in English and American literature would advance my other two career goals by adding to my skills, both critical and creative, in working with language. Ultimately, however, I see the Ph.D. as an end in itself, as well as a professional stepping stone; I enjoy studying literature for its own sake and would like to continue my studies on the level demanded by the Ph.D. program. (Stelzer pp. 40-41)</p>	<p>At the end of my Master's degree, my ambition is to apply for a position as Acquisitions Editor in a Canadian publishing house. As an Editorial Intern at McLelland and Stewart, during Summer 2017 and Summer 2018, I developed insight into the many steps in the production of an excellent publication; at the end of the second internship period, I was placed in charge of the Young Adult Fiction Training Program and created a digital editing training module that the publisher is using today to train summer interns. In the immediate future, I am eager to be a part of Carleton's <i>Graduate Student Gazette's</i> editorial team. I believe I will contribute to it my multicultural heritage and my passionate interest in words as a vehicle of thought and emotion.</p>

[https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job\\_search\\_writing/preparing\\_an\\_application/writing\\_the\\_personal\\_statement/examples.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job_search_writing/preparing_an_application/writing_the_personal_statement/examples.html)

### 9. For more information:

- [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job\\_search\\_writing/preparing\\_an\\_application/writing\\_the\\_personal\\_statement/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job_search_writing/preparing_an_application/writing_the_personal_statement/index.html)
- <https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/aacc/sites/utsc.utoronto.ca.aacc/files/u27/Personal%20Statement%20Checklist.pdf> (PERSONAL STATEMENT CHECKLIST)

### Some excellent examples:

- <https://www.law.uchicago.edu/news/their-own-words-admissions-essays-worked>
- [https://www.law.utoronto.ca/documents/ID/UofT\\_Law\\_Personal\\_Statements\\_Examples.pdf](https://www.law.utoronto.ca/documents/ID/UofT_Law_Personal_Statements_Examples.pdf)

### Use these questions from OWL Purdue for Personal Statement brainstorming/reflection:

- What is special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you/ your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, and/or persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

[https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job\\_search\\_writing/preparing\\_an\\_application/writing\\_the\\_personal\\_statement/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job_search_writing/preparing_an_application/writing_the_personal_statement/index.html)

10. The Write Place tutors and specialists are waiting to help you improve your Personal Statements, so please do book an appointment by going to [www.kings.mywconline.com](http://www.kings.mywconline.com). Follow us on Facebook for information about our group workshops on Personal Statements and Research Proposals or Statements of Intent.

Thank you for listening to this Voicethread! All the best with your applications.