

# Writing your Personal Statement or Statement of Intent: a step-by-step guide

## A Resource Created by Dr. Vidya Natarajan for The Write Place at King's

**START** early!

**UNDERSTAND** what a **Statement of Purpose** or a **Statement of Interest** or a **Statement of Intent** does. It

- allows **the graduate school** to assess your academic ability (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).
- 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 Intent or Interest.

**READ** the prompt and guidelines carefully! Note the word limit, questions you have to answer, if any, and the suggested approach and tone.

**RESEARCH** the university, department and program in detail. Identify scholars you have read, or have influenced the field in a way you find exciting, or who would like to work with.

**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.

**DRAFT** by identifying one or more key themes, and by creating an outline. A common structure is as follows:

1. **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...")
2. **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.
  - a relevant job (what did you learn? What special things did you contribute?)
  - technical or other certifications or education (a computer skill, for instance)
  - mentors or influences that affected your intellectual path (what did you learn?)
  - previous related research (e.g., an Honors Thesis, a major term essay)
  - 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

**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. Don't go back to high school achievements—stay current.**

- 3. 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

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

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

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

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

**REVISE, REVISE, 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?
- Have you got feedback on your draft? (The Write Place will gladly help!)
- Have you copy-edited to remove repetition, improve clarity, fix clichés, add flavour?

**PROOFREAD,** 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.

**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>

**Some excellent examples:**

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

**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)

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 to resume my studies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with special attention to its folk elements.</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 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</i>’s 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>

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<https://kings.uwo.ca/writeplace>