Acing Your Grad Application Materials

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SPSP Student Committee
What does the application process look like?

- Letters of Recommendation (usually 3)
- Statement of Purpose/Personal Statement (look different in each place)
- GRE (typically only the general)
- Unofficial transcripts (if international, need copies of cert. translations—and then originals when admitted)
- Resume/CV
- Writing sample (sometimes)
- Application fee & some filling out of forms

We will focus on these today
What are PIs trying to gauge?

- Research focus or interest
  - Does it match what the lab/PI/program can offer?
  - Is it something the PI appears to be interested in?

- Program fit
  - What you bring to the program/lab
  - What this program offers that you want to gain (courses, resources, faculty)
  - How this program will help you reach your career goals

- Research experience

- Writing skills
  - Grammar, spelling, length, flow, structure
    (so read, re-read, and have someone else read it for you)
Paragraph 1-2: Who you are, goals for graduate school and long-term goals.

What to include:
- Your interests, broadly and specifically
- What drove you to psychology and this area of research
- Your research/training goals (these are part of your interests)
- Long term goals (career, independent research, faculty position)

What this tells the PI:
- Who you are, your fit with the program, your interests/motivations, enthusiasm.
Family and friends often tease that I am perpetually eavesdropping on strangers’ conversations, trying to figure out the dynamic between them and the circumstances of their exchange. However, the reality is, I am simply, incredibly interested in and captivated by human relationships and social interactions. Although seemingly trivial, it has been experiences of observing the nature of relationships and social interactions around me over the last few years that initially stimulated and ultimately retained my interest in social psychology research.

Through my research, one book in particular stood out: Ernest Becker’s *Denial of Death* proposed that death anxiety drives people to construct ideologies and cultures as a form of symbolic immortality to combat this anxiety. I found this idea fascinating and continued to explore similar concepts in social psychology. Work in this field, among others, deeply challenged my preconceived notions about the world, politics, and religion. Although I was
People are constantly faced with experiences that threaten the positivity of their self-views, undermine motivation, and compromise successful goal pursuit. I am interested in investigating the interplay between individual differences and situational factors as they influence self-esteem and management of goal pursuit, especially in relation to health behaviors and academic performance. I also have a strong interest in research design and statistical analysis, and am eager to expand my knowledge and apply different techniques of modeling human processes and behaviors.

Statements kindly provided by SPSP members currently in PhD programs
Formatting Statements of Purpose

Paragraphs 2-4: Your experiences and how they have prepared you for graduate school

What to include:
- Parts of research you are familiar with (design, data collection, analysis, writing grants, IRB proposals)
- Dissemination experiences (publication, writing blog posts in psychology)
- Data analysis skills

How to include this:
- Describe research, work that shows these skills
- Be succinct and to the point
Beyond aiding in experiment design, data analysis, and writing research papers, I have experience delving deeper into statistical analysis and modeling, beyond what is required of psychology majors at Creighton by learning structural equation modeling (SEM) through SPSS AMOS as an independent project; further, I currently am working with the faculty at Creighton to design an independent study course in advanced statistics to complete second semester senior year. Additionally, this fall, I took part in a graduate-style seminar course centered on self and

The third project explored memory ability discrepancies between younger and older adults. Here I created stimuli, helped develop E-prime programming, tested participants in protocols that included the administration of standard neuropsychology measures (e.g., executive functioning battery), entered and analyzed data in SPSS, and contributed literature reviews for my colleagues. We are currently in the process of finalizing our last experiment in a series of three. We will be submitting a manuscript for publication for both the second and third projects
Paragraph 5 (closing): Time to wrap it all up

What to include:
- Who you would like to work with if admitted
- Your research & training goals can appear again
- Your long-term goals can appear again
- How this university and program would offer what you need

How to include this:
- This is a lot of information, so you need to be concise
- Show enthusiasm
My research interests greatly align with Dr. [blank]'s work on threat and defense. I was attracted by his proposal that reactive approach motivation (RAM) underlies the compensatory behaviours that have been regularly shown in this literature. I found this

Having come a long way in my personal and intellectual development, I believe that the University of [blank] will provide an incredible opportunity to further realize my potential. This will prepare me for a lifetime pursuit of meaningful scientific contributions in the service of pushing our understanding of the human mind to greater heights.

It would be an outstanding opportunity to study at [blank]. I believe the Social Psychology doctoral program would provide me the rigorous training to expand my skills in research design and analysis, and integrate a variety of theories and methods in my research. I look forward to furthering my education as I pursue my research interests and career goals. Thank you very much for your kind consideration of my application. Please do not hesitate to contact me for more information. I would be happy to answer any questions.
If admitted into the University of [blank] Psychological Sciences Program, I would love the opportunity to work with Dr. [blank], Dr. [blank], and Dr. [blank]. Dr. [blank] research on romantic relationships and, specifically, the experiences of stress and coping aligns with work I have done as well as my current research interests. Similarly, Dr. [blank] work with intimacy, satisfaction, and attachment in romantic development and narcissism, and I would love to explore this topic moving forward. Overall, University of [blank] graduate program in Psychological Sciences appeals to me because of its emphases on cross-concentration, curricular development and strengthening one’s statistical skills. Simply put, I am thoroughly excited by even the prospect of continuing my academic training and development my research interests further at [blank].
“Kisses of Death” in Grad School Applications

● Damaging personal statements
  ○ Personal statements are to inform about your personal and professional development, training and objectives for future training, research & practical experience (e.g., clinical, field), and your goals for future research and career.

● Excessive altruism
  ○ This is a hard one for students from more collectivistic backgrounds
  ○ But everyone wants to help others
  ○ Focus on your training, interests, your strengths and experiences and not on your motives

Appleby & Appleby, 2006
“Kisses of Death” in Grad School Applications

● Excessive self-disclosure
  ○ E.g., family history of psychopathology; your history with it
  ○ You (generally) want to show personal boundaries; go beyond personal motives
  ○ But personal motives may help in other areas (e.g., your identity if that motivates your work on identity research)

● Professionally inappropriate
  ○ Being too casual in your interactions, swearing, etc
  ○ Sending too many emails to potential PIs, departments, etc

● Misfired attempts to impress
  ○ Avoid being overly confident → there is a sweet spot of confidence

Appleby & Appleby, 2006
“Kisses of Death” in Grad School Applications

- Harmful (or even neural) letters of recommendation
  - People are looking for: “To excel in graduate school, a student must possess fundamentally positive personal characteristics such as intelligence, motivation, responsibility, and agreeableness” (p. 2)
  - Also: ability to work independently, like of research, team play and collaborative approach, responsible and mature
  - Inappropriate sources
    - You want someone at the level you want to reach & who can speak about your qualification for the program you want to go in (teachers, research employers/supervisors)

Appleby & Appleby, 2006
What about CVs?

It’s okay if you don’t have publications! Undergrad CVs often look different than grad-student CVs

- Emphasize the research experience you have (*this should be front and center*)
  - Lab experience
    - PI, project name, specific tasks, duration for EACH project (even within the same lab)
  - Projects or Presentations you did in classes
    - Lit reviews, proposals, mini research projects

- You can also include other clinical experiences, volunteer work, leadership positions you’ve had, and any awards/honors
What about CVs?

Research Projects

- Expansion of the validation of Fowler’s FDSS through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Creighton University. Ongoing.

Additional Experience

Research Collaborator
Creighton University Psychology Department

- Assist Dr. in research design, execution, analysis, and write-up
- Present work at conferences
- Assist with Creighton Undergraduate Research Fair
What about CVs?

Introductory Psychology Teaching Assistant
Creighton University Psychology Department
- Meet with students in the Introductory Psychology class to enhance their understanding of the material covered by Dr.
- Grade assignments and exams

Catholic School Initiatives Intern
Magis Catholic Teacher Corps/Catholic School Initiatives
- Design monthly mailings to the teachers in the Magis Catholic Teacher Corps
- Assist in the development of the new Catholic School Initiatives Office including webpage design, compiling data
- Perform statistical analysis regarding survey data collected from individuals in the Magis Catholic Teacher Corps and those contacts for the office of Catholic School Initiatives

School Counseling Intern
Woodrow Wilson Middle School - Council Bluffs, IA
- Met with a caseload of eight students with high behavioral issues or deemed “at risk” students once a week for 30 minutes
- Served as a positive role model and helped students construct positive coping techniques and plans for improving academics

Awards & Activities
Dean’s List
Alpha Sigma Nu Honor Society
Campus Ministry Student Reflector
Freshmen Retreat Leader
Freshman Retreat Coordinator
Weekly Volunteer – Jesuit Academy Boys’ School

Fall 2013-Present
Spring 2017-Present
Winter 2016-Present
Fall 2014, 2015
Fall 2016
Fall 2013-Fall 2015

Leadership
Jan 2016 – Jan 2017

//for Women – NE Gamma
Chapter operations for 166 chapter members while modeling servant leadership and emphasizing the mission, vision and core values of the organization.
Counsel goal setting and tracked progress of comprehensive chapter
• National and external spokesperson for the chapter while interacting with including university staff and faculty, alumnae advisors and international counterparts.
Other questions?
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