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PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

BECOMING A PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENTIST: A SERIES TO SUCCESSFULLY APPLY TO GRAD SCHOOL AND HELP DIVERSIFY THE FIELD:

SESSION 2: WRITING A COMPELLING APPLICATION STATEMENT (PRE-SESSION VIDEO)

TRANSCRIPT

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Dr. Mitch Prinstein: Hi, I'm Mitch Prinstein, APA's Chief Science Officer and I'm excited to welcome you to part 2 of our series Becoming a Psychological Scientist. We're teaching you how to apply to graduate school, we're hoping to help diversify the fields. We're doing so by offering to you a number of videos to walk you through the application process step by step. This is going to be done in a flipped format so you can watch this video in advance.

If you'd like to join us, you join us for a live Q&A session to get more specific questions answered. I'm really excited that for this particular video, we'll be joined by the Application Statement and Feedback Program or ASFP, that's been doing amazing work to help diversify the field by giving folks individualized feedback on their own essays.

Today, we're going to be talking about how to write a compelling application essay for your application to a doctoral program in psychology, with particular tips for how to become a terrific psychological scientist applicant. I'm going to briefly talk about why it is they asked you to do an essay, what is it that they're looking for? How do you communicate that you can think like a psychological scientist and how and if you should mention a mentor that you want to work with.

Let's dive right in. As far as writing an essay, this is the only part of your application where they get to see what your writing looks like. They get to see a little bit about who you are as a real-life person, not just based on your grades, or what letters of recommendation referees are saying about you. Most importantly, they're getting a chance to understand how you think scientifically.

I have to tell you that when reviewing applications, there was a remarkable number of people who have terrific grades, have gotten great research experience and who have letters that say that they are wonderful prospects for graduate school. This essay ends up doing quite a lot to help differentiate which folks are going to be selected for an interview during the application round.

Now, most people remarkably send a very, very similar personal statement or essay when they apply to graduate school. It often starts with a brief anecdote that talks about how they

initially found an interest in Psychological Science. They then go on to perhaps list the different courses that they took or the different research experiences that they were able to be involved in.

Sometimes those are simply listed in chronological order with an indicator of what it is they did on each of those research projects. Most essays end with a very enthusiastic statement about how will the information they read on the website about one particular faculty member seemed to really pique their interest and they'd like to work with them in graduate school. This is a very typical way to write the personal statement, perhaps not the most effective way. In fact, because this is so common, it would be a good idea for you to make sure you're doing something a little bit different.

Let me tell you why. Research has been done a poll, I should say, among a variety of training directors who oversee the admissions process for doctoral candidates in psychology programs. What they find is that there are a variety of characteristics that we're really looking for. I'm going to put these up, you can pause your screen to look at them in more detail.

I wanted to highlight just a few of these though that are particularly relevant to your personal statement because you can do a lot to express your curiosity, your ability to engage in critical thinking, and analytical and problem-solving thinking, the extent to which you're self-guided by research questions that you're passionate about, and how it is that you would take initiative to think about hypotheses on your own.

Let's talk about how to do that. A better personal statement. It's fine to start with an anecdote to talk about what got you interested in psychology, but you're being brought in not because you're interested in psychology, that's common among all applicants. The question is, why should they take you? It's because of how your mind works, what important lens and thoughts you bring to the field. How you think about the research area that you're talking about.

You don't have to be an expert at this already. You might talk about an area of your lived experience or something that you read and you reacted to that got you to particularly think about this area of psychological science and why you are someone that should be part of the scientific dialogue. What aspect of psychology really grabs an interest in you? Now, when you talk about your research experiences, don't simply say what you did on each of the projects where you volunteered. Frankly, those are often the jobs of a post-bac research assistant or an undergraduate assistant. That's not what you're applying for. You're applying to be a doctoral student where you will one day be an independent investigator.

Rather than saying that you are in charge of overseeing data collection, talk about what you learned from that data collection, what did you observe, what did you notice in the patterns of responses or what did it get you thinking about, what did you think was missing in the research study, what ideas were generated in you and how did it lead you to think differently about the topic that was being studied?

Now, if you can do that, you're showing them that you can think like a scientist. You might go so far as to mention a hypothesis or two, but you don't have to. Simply showing your ability to think carefully about psychological constructs and start to approach the idea of hypothesis will be really important to differentiate you from all of the others submitting a personal statement.

Now, it is indeed critical also that you are ending your statement with a carefully written sentence or two about what it is about a mentor's work that you're especially interested in. Don't just rely on what's on their website, go look at a couple of their recent papers that were published, and recognize that that research might be a year or two old by the time they got it published.

You can go to NIH reporter, Google that and see what research they might be working on right now. If it's grant funded by NIH, or on top of their graduate students or look at some of what their graduate students are tweeting about to get a sense about what they're working on right now. If that excites you, that's great, but don't just copy a line from their website about their general area of interest. Try and be specific if you can.

I'm really excited that this video will be followed by comments from folks who are reviewing personal statements as a service to the fields to help diversify the fields and they'll have lots of tips too. Some of which may be the same, some may differ from the opinions that I've expressed here. That's important, because there are many people out there reviewing these essays, and there's no absolute right or wrong. Remember that you can absolutely join us for a Q&A live if you would like, stay tuned for more information about that. Thank you.

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Dr. Peter Sokol-Hessner: Hello, my name is Peter Sokol-Hessner, and I'm an assistant professor at the University of Denver. Perhaps most importantly right now, I'm one of the founders in the executive director of the application statement feedback program or ASFP. Our mission is to help PhD applicants get closer to writing the best statement they possibly can, with a focus on applicants who identify as an underrepresented minority and/or someone who is not in the know or does not have access to mentors informed about the PhD application process.

To help applicants make the most of their statement, we match applicants and trained editors in a double-blind process to quickly provide applicants with multiple pieces of informed feedback on their application statement. Since founding ASFP in 2020, we've trained hundreds of editors to provide feedback on many hundreds of applicants' statements. What I'll be sharing with you today are the tips and information assembled by the ASFP team throughout that process.

We find that it's important to keep in mind that the statement is just one component of your application. Think about how your statement can provide information that's distinct from, for example, your CV or your letters of recommendation. These pieces of your application statement should be complementary. The average statement is something in the realm of

two to three pages, maybe 750 to 1500 words, although you want to check the exact requirements of the schools you're applying to. What does an effective statement look like?

Structurally, effective statements tend to have three big components. The first establishes who you are, including your interests and your motivations to get a PhD. The second establishes what you've done. This should be full of personal detail and not just list what you've done but show how those experiences have shaped who you are now. Finally, the third establishes what you want to do.

This is future-oriented, aimed at the school program or PI that this statement is for. When thinking about what to try to communicate in your statement, we think it's important to remember that your application statement is presenting an argument, it's making a case. First, it's establishing that you are ready for a PhD and second, that you are an ideal fit for a specific program and PI.

To demonstrate that you're ready, you want to convince your reader that you have the capacity, that you have mature question-oriented interests, and that you're deeply motivated and have made an informed choice to apply to PhD programs in general and this one specifically. Demonstrating fit on the other hand is all about showing that you understand the unique aspects of the program and the PI and show that you will fit with and add value to the same. Finally, writing an effective statement comes down to at least four things.

First, is organizing your writing. Most people find that chronological organization is easiest and most effective to both write and read. Being specific, by showing and not telling the reader about your readiness, skills, and personality, writing without jargon or vague language, and using a genuine voice that's free of clichés and gives the reader a sense of you. Over time, we've noticed a few common pitfalls. These include content that misses mark, for example, by focusing on less relevant extracurriculars or by disclosing too much about yourself, that isn't pertinent to the statement's goals

Weaknesses and structure of writing. For example, writing that's impersonal or maybe full of clichés or reads like a CV. Being too general, a statement that doesn't mention the specific school or mentor or quotes the PI's website or papers without relating it, to your goals, interests, and values. Finally, not leaving room for growth. Don't be too narrow in your interests. Aim for being committed to the big picture, the questions, and topics that really matter to you. While you should have some details and demonstrate an ability to get concrete and specific, stay flexible in those details.

That enables professors to see you fitting into their research a little more easily. Now, keep in mind that the feedback I've shared today is very general, requirements and expectations vary across specific programs and sub-fields of psychology. One particularly salient example is clinical psychology programs as just one example of the differences, clinical psychology PhD programs want to hear about your research and clinical experiences and interests.

Try to get guidance from a clinical psychology PhD about some of the other ways in which clinical statements may differ. I'll leave you with this last point about the process. Your statement should take many edits, many versions. Go get feedback. Get it from professors, mentors, good writers, other applicants, your friends and family, or initiatives like ASFP that offer feedback.

Take that feedback, critically evaluate it, use your common sense, and make your statement the best it can be. As Mitch said, you'll get many different suggestions from different sources. Take in as many as you can. Feedback can be the difference between an excellent statement that stands out and a mediocre one that isn't making the best case for you. You'll find more resources on our website here on the slide. You can also find us on Twitter. The whole team at ASFP wishes you luck. We believe in you and hope to see you around soon in psychology departments all around the country.