

Tips for Writing Personal Statements for your MSCJ Application

The Purpose of the Personal Statement

The personal statement is a written narrative that complements the other components of your application. It tells the review committee things your application and transcripts can't convey, like your goals, qualities, personality, and writing style. It should also expand on or explain elements of your application that committees might have questions about.

Before writing your statement, read everything you can about the program and send any questions you have to the program director. Also read about the degree you are seeking and the typical paths of graduates to make sure it will help you achieve your goals. This knowledge will help you build a stronger personal statement that is grounded in an understanding of what the program entails.

Major Points to Cover in Your Statement

When reading your personal statement, the graduate application review committee is looking for three things:

1. *Why you are interested in the degree.* Committees want to make sure your goals are aligned with what the program will teach. We don't want you to realize after enrolling that a master's in criminal justice isn't going to help you achieve your goals.
2. *Evidence of your potential to succeed in the program.* Describe the qualities, skills, and experiences you have that will help you complete the program. You can also talk about the skills and knowledge you hope to gain.
3. *Evidence of writing skills.* The graduate program is very writing intensive, and even more so for students pursuing the thesis track. For this reason, the committee seeks students who have above average writing skills. Your statement should demonstrate an ability to write a clear, organized, detailed, error-free product. It is helpful to regularly review and revise your draft as you work on it.

Tips for Writing Good Personal Statements

1. Proofread often. If possible, ask someone with writing experience to read your draft.
2. Be authentic, personal, and specific. This is not an occasion to use buzz words or vague language. An honest and personalized statement will stand out.
3. Use concise, clear, simple language. It is more important for readers to grasp your point than to "sound smart."
4. Acknowledge and explain any areas of your application that could be perceived as weaknesses. These might be poor grades, frequent school transfers, periods of time off from education, or other missing information. It is better to be up front about weaknesses rather than leave committees with unanswered questions.

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5. If you are interested in a Teaching or Research Assistantship, include a paragraph in your personal statement expressing your interest, any qualifications relevant to the position, and reasons for seeking the position. Relevant qualifications may include work with faculty on projects, independent research, literature reviews, data analysis, or experience with statistical software.

Common Mistakes

1. A personal statement that is *too short* can suggest a lack of effort and motivation, and leaves committee members with a lot of unanswered questions.
2. *Going off topic* is also a common mistake. Reviewers should be able to easily find what they are looking for. Creating an outline before writing your statement can help you stay focused.
3. Being *too vague* can suggest an applicant isn't sure what degree they want to pursue. Be specific about why you are seeking a criminal justice graduate degree.

Example Outline

1. Introduction
 - a. Brief introduction
 - b. Simple statement of interest
 - c. Basic eligibility (bachelor's degree, GPA, completion of required lower-level coursework)
2. Detailed interest(s)
 - a. Goals (such as a career or promotion)
 - b. Knowledge of program requirements
 - c. How the program will help you achieve your goals
3. Potential for success
 - a. Qualities, skills, and experiences you have that will help you complete the program requirements
 - b. Skills and knowledge you hope to gain in the program
4. Conclusion
 - a. Recap
 - b. Other details you want to share
 - c. Brief sign out ("thank you for your consideration")