

Excerpt from John King and Andrew McMichael, "The Trials and Tribulations of Applying to Graduate School," *Perspectives on History*, September 1998

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## The Personal Statement

The most challenging aspect of the application is the personal statement. This is not usually a fun assignment. It is difficult to decide what to write about, how much to exaggerate your interest in, or commitment to, a particular field, and whether to be whimsical or totally serious. Your best bet is a thoughtful, serious letter that focuses on your historical interests and their origins. Be direct. Remember, the admissions committee reads the statement not only to learn about you as a student and as a historian but also as a writer. While your specific historical interests will comprise the majority of what you write in the personal statement, discussing the broader reasons why you want to get a PhD might be a good way to begin your essay. What are your objectives? Is your ultimate goal a job researching, writing, or teaching in a university? What attracts you to history, rather than one of the other humanities? Tailor your letter both to your job objectives and to the school to which you are writing. Don't write about your desire to work in the business sector when applying to a Research I institution. Likewise, if you are applying to a public history program, emphasize your interest in this area. Such issues can show that you are not simply caught up in your enthusiasm for a narrow field of historical inquiry, but are concerned with your broader role as a member of the academy or whatever profession you ultimately choose.

These broader topics should then give way to your particular historical interests, which will form the basis of the statement. Describe these interests in as much detail as you feel comfortable with; if possible dissertation topics come to mind, mention them. There is no harm in showing the admissions committee that you have thought hard about what you want to study for the next several years and what you hope will come out of those many hours of hard work. You will also want to identify commonalities between your research interests and those of the faculty in the departments to which you are applying. Stating who attracts you to a particular department and why you wish to study with them (or why you think their scholarship will help yours) indicates that you are serious about the undertaking of graduate studies.

Similarly, if you have read a particular book or took a specific class that really turned you on to the intellectual pursuit of history, spend a few sentences discussing them as well. The books do not have to have been written by the faculty at the universities to which you are applying. Any academic works that inspire you will, again, show that you are serious about making a multi-year commitment, in the short-term to a PhD program, and a career-long commitment to history. What facets of these books or classes triggered your interest in the field? Was it the writing style? The methodology? Simply the way the subject matter was dealt with? Part of what historians do is read and review scholarship, so demonstrating, even so briefly, your interest in this activity can further display your interest and aptitude for a career in history. Most of all, your personal statement must distinguish your application from all the other 4.0 GPAs and Phi Alpha Theta members who are also applying. If you have any outstanding academic credentials or personal experiences relevant to the study of

history, play them up. Do not, however, oversell yourself to the point of being outrageous. Remember, these are intelligent people reading your applications. Moreover, these are people with significant teaching experience, which means many years of determining the difference between truth and fabrication in student essays and sob stories! Aggressively promote your application, within reason.

Finally, take a few simple steps to polish your statement. Have a trusted faculty member, your adviser perhaps, give you some feedback on your statement. Faculty members will be more helpful than career center agents. Professors have served on admissions committees; career advisers probably have not. Perhaps most important of all, proofread your statement. You do not want to send out an essay that portrays you as a careless writer or individual. You want to treat the personal statement as another example of your written work.

Most schools ask for a sample of your written research. Try to send something recent, perhaps a senior thesis or senior seminar essay. Send your best work, regardless of its length or subject matter. You want this piece to convey your strong research and writing skills, not necessarily how much you know about the trade networks between India and Southeast Asia in the 16th century.