

**COMPETITIVE  
PERSONAL  
STATEMENTS**

**EMILY DAINA SARAS, MS  
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# ABOUT ME



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## RELEVANT JOB EXPERIENCE

- Currently: Director of Development for Knowli Data Science firm in Tallahassee, responding to requests for proposals and writing bids
- Former: Assistant Director of The Office of National Fellowships at FSU, College and Career Program Coordinator with The Massachusetts Promise Fellowship

## AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

- P.E.O. Scholar Award
- Phi Kappa Phi Love of Learning Award
- Segal Education Award (AmeriCorps)
- Massachusetts Promise Fellowship (AmeriCorps)
- Central European University Masters Fellowship
- Smith-Mundt and Fulbright-Hays Grants from US Embassy, Lithuania
- Fulbright Fellow
- Goldman Undergraduate Research Grantee



# **ABOUT THE PERSONAL STATEMENT**

# WHAT IS A PERSONAL STATEMENT?

- A writing sample
- A critical thinking exercise
- Your first personal impression to a committee
- Breathe life into your resume and documentation on paper
- Offer evidence of how you, your mindset, your projects, and your goals fit with the mission of the fellowship

# WHAT *ISN'T* A PERSONAL STATEMENT?

- Your resume in narrative form
- A regurgitation of your project plan
- A stream-of-consciousness response
- A complete representation of you as a person

# WHAT CAN YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT ACHIEVE?

Brainstorm before beginning to draft:

- What are three personal characteristics or qualities that you **need** to demonstrate to the committee?
- What are three facts you **need** to highlight for the committee?



# **STATEMENT STRUCTURE**

# WHAT IS THE SHAPE OF A PERSONAL STATEMENT?

- Before thinking about content, think about FORM.
- What elements should be contained in a personal statement?
- How should it be structured?
- What is the **task** at hand? What does the prompt specifically ask for?



# WHAT IS THE SHAPE OF A PERSONAL STATEMENT?

- Every application might have different length or content requirements.
- Here is a general structure that works well for MOST personal statement prompts.

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CONNECTING TO THE FUTURE

# THE FIRST PARAGRAPH: THE ANECDOTE

Relevant Anecdote: show us who you are and your perspective.

What is the “friction” or **transformational moment** of this anecdote?

End with your **THESIS STATEMENT**: the one sentence summary.

Try this formula, then personalize:

“As a \_\_\_\_\_ recipient, I aim to \_\_\_(connect to anecdote’s purpose)\_\_\_ by \_\_\_(action you will take, purpose of award)\_\_\_.”

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# **THE SECOND PARAGRAPH(S): THE DETAILS**

- Address the point(s) of the prompt directly in one or two paragraphs.
- Does the prompt ask you to describe your qualifications? Do so – but consider covering some in depth, rather than all in depth.
- Does the prompt ask you to describe your project? Do so with detail, but avoiding jargon – many reviewers are very educated, but may not specialize in your field.
- Does each “point” or “argument” of your personal statement align with the mission, values, purpose, and ethos of the award or program?

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# **THE FINAL PARAGRAPH: THE FUTURE**

- Connect to the future – and your future.
- How will this award take you and your career to the next level?
- What will you achieve after this award?
- Why is **NOW** the right time for you to pursue this project, or receive this award?
- How will an investment in you “pay off” for the program after you win?

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# LET'S TALK ABOUT THE ANECDOTE

Relevant Anecdote: show us who you are and your perspective. Tell us about a transformational moment. End with your **THESIS STATEMENT**: the one sentence summary.

The mission of Peace Corps deeply resonates with my own personal ambition of actively investing my time, energy, and passion towards making a positive impact in the lives of other people. It has been a dream of mine for several years to become a Peace Corps Volunteer- to contribute to some sort of lasting betterment of the world. Though, for many years, I couldn't quite visualize specifics of where or how I might do so.

- What do you learn about this applicant?
- What worked?
- What could be improved?

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# LET'S TALK ABOUT THE ANECDOTE

My commitment to education equity research is grounded in my experiences serving as AmeriCorps Massachusetts Promise Fellow at a non-profit in Boston's South End. I was tasked with designing and implementing a college preparation program for racial-ethnic minority teens from low-income backgrounds. On paper, my role appeared simple: to motivate teens to pursue their dreams of going to college. Within the first few weeks on the job, however, I quickly understood how earning a high school diploma alone was an incredible achievement for these students, considering their lack of adequate resources and support both at school and at home. During that year as an AmeriCorps Fellow, I saw firsthand how systemic social inequality and injustice lead to lower academic, workforce, and economic outcomes for today's young people. This experience has motivated me to pursue my career in education, identifying evidence-based best practices for mitigating education disparities and improving student outcomes.

- What do you learn about this applicant?
- What worked?
- What could be improved?

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# LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR ANECDOTE

## Brainstorm:

- What are transformational moments that inspired your current academic trajectory?
- Can you talk about a time in which one of your fundamental understandings about your work, research, or life perspectives changed?
- Were you ever faced with a difficult decision that relates to your work or research? What were the challenges? What was the tipping point?
- Can you talk about EXTERNAL actions and interactions with others to talk about INTERNAL development?
  - For example, learning from a moment of volunteering that changed your perspective is far more “active” and “powerful” than describing how reading a book changed your mind.

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# **YOUR SECOND PARAGRAPH(S): THE DETAILS**

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- Does the prompt ask you to describe your qualifications? Do so – but consider covering some in depth, rather than all in depth.
- Does the prompt ask you to describe your project? Do so with detail, but avoiding jargon – many reviewers are very educated, but may not specialize in your field.
- Does each “point” or “argument” of your personal statement align with the mission, values, purpose, and ethos of the award or program?

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# **YOUR SECOND PARAGRAPH(S): THE DETAILS**

**Brainstorm:  
YOU + NEED + NOW**

- **Why do YOU need this award – and why should they select YOU?**
  - Why are you a good fit for what they need?
- **Why do you NEED this award?**
  - “Need” is a flexible word.
- **Why do you need this award NOW?**
  - What about this upcoming year to win is important? Why is it the right time in your career? Why is it the right time in the current academic / sociopolitical landscape?

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# YOUR FINAL PARAGRAPH: THE FUTURE

Try filling in this sentence,  
and then expand:

“Upon return/completion  
of \_award\_, I will ...”

How will the investment in  
you and your work pay off  
in the long term, for you  
and for “them”?

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# YOUR FINAL PARAGRAPH: THE FUTURE

Upon completion of my PhD, I aim to continue my analytical research career, contributing to the development of state and federal programs and policies that will eliminate educational and early-career employment achievement gaps. I plan to maintain an active academic publishing and teaching career, while also publishing practitioner-oriented texts and workbooks that share evidenced-based best practices for reducing STEM inequalities from K-12 through graduate education. Committed to making a strong local impact at community colleges and universities here in North Florida, I hope to contribute to wider regional and national dialogues about mitigating inequalities in education and the early-career workforce.

- What do you learn about this applicant?
- What specific future plans were discussed?
- What clear benefits may come from selecting this applicant?
- What worked?
- What could be improved?

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# YOUR FINAL PARAGRAPH: THE FUTURE

I aspire to be a Peace Corps Volunteer not only because it would allow me to be a change agent in a field that I feel so passionately about, but also because it would allow me to be shaped by so many new cross-cultural experiences and relationships. I have an all-consuming desire to serve, to learn, to listen, to have my boundaries broadened, and to use my energy and talents as impactfully as I possibly can. I hope that through the Peace Corps I can not only practice each of these exercises daily as a volunteer, but that eventually as a returned volunteer I can put them to better use as a more experienced and knowledgeable global citizen.

- What do you learn about this applicant?
- What specific future plans were discussed?
- What clear benefits may come from selecting this applicant?
- What worked?
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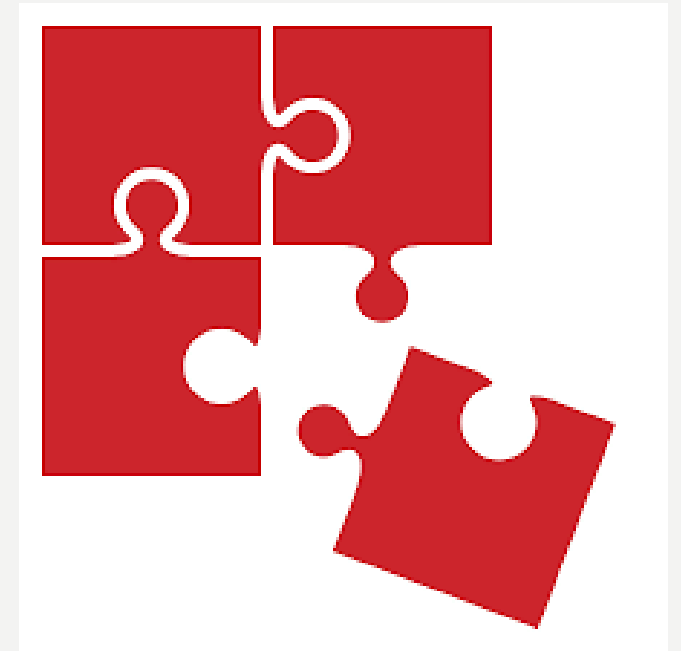
CONNECTING TO  
THE FUTURE



**LET'S TALK  
ABOUT FIT**

# FIT, MISSION, AND SCOPE

- Understanding how an organization may want to fund “you” – not just your ideas – is key
- What does this program fund / support?
- What are its mission and values?
- Do some research on your own, and be honest:
  - what **fits well** between your project/you and the organization?
  - what **doesn't fit well**? That's okay! Just focus your attention on what **ALIGNS**.
  - Focus on aligning what fits with the organization.





# **PRO-TIPS FOR SUCCESS**

# SOME SMALL TIDBITS OF ADVICE:

## DO:

- Take your topic seriously – humor and sarcasm aren't typically winning strategies in these applications.
- Connect personal stories and life experiences to your personal goals
- Have a generally positive tone in your essay
- Go deep on a few ideas, rather than casually reference a wide range of ideas
- Get feedback early and often – feedback is love!
- Plan to write a few drafts over several weeks (if not months)
- Proofread the heck out of the document(s)

## DON'T:

- Use gimmicks, like non-standard essay formats or “tricking” the reader
- Focus on the endless possibilities in life and uncertainty about your future. Pick one possible future, and write to that. The committee will know that you are doing the work to sort out your future. They will want a complete story of one fully-fleshed-out goal for your project and long-term success.
- Talk about how money itself will motivate you. Try to show how you will put the money to use, or how it will allow you to focus attention on the project.
- Go over word or page limit. They will stop reading, they will notice, and may disqualify you!





# QUESTIONS?

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