

# Perfecting Your Personal Statement

For Psychology and Counseling Fields



# But First...

- Excellent Free Resource: APA Modules (online)
  - **Preparing and Applying for Graduate School in Psychology** (approx. 3 hours of videos from faculty experts – 12 important modules/topics)
  - Link: [Click](#)
- Another Excellent Free Resource
  - Lynda – training videos for the GRE
  - Link: [Click](#) (enter GRE, after you log in with UMD)

# What is a Personal Statement?

- Essay about “you” and your professional path
- Nearly all grad programs require some version
- Length varies (e.g., range of 250-1500 words) but most are probably 500, 750, or 1000 words
  - “Prompt” varies too – each program is different
  - Therefore, you cannot use same one for each school!
- Contrast with a “Statement of Purpose” – more focused on career goals, reasons for applying, what you hope to gain from the program (less emphasis on the past)
- Note: some grad programs require both

# When Do I Write The First Draft?

- Not until you are sure you want to go to grad school
- Not until you are sure of the field you wish to pursue
- Ideally, not until you know the programs to which you want to apply
  - Why? Remember that the prompts differ
- Ideally, end of summer (or early fall, for masters) of the year you are applying
  - Approx: August/September (for Ph.D./Psy.D.)
  - Approx: October/November (for most masters)

# How Much Time to Write It?

- “It depends”
- Recommended:
  - Multiple drafts
  - Likely will take at least several months
- It’s not a “sit down and crank it out” thing
- Only work on 1 or 2 at a time
  - Takes time to tailor!

# What if I Need More Experiences?

- Okay to take time after college to get some real world experiences first
- Generally, for your “job” after college:
  - **Masters programs will value** psychology experience (broadly defined), especially clinical/mental health positions and/or volunteering, other helping roles (e.g., tutoring/teaching), strong letters of recommendation (at least 1 from faculty)
  - **Ph.D. programs will value** research experiences (even part-time ones that you do for long periods), possibly attending/presenting at conferences (at least 2 letters from faculty, research-oriented)
  - **Psy.D. programs will value** clinical/mental health positions, possibly mental-health related nonprofits (1-2 letters from faculty, 1 that is research-oriented is helpful)

# Tips for Getting Started

- **Rule 1: Always start with the basic prompt!**
- **Rule 2: Use your first main template to adapt**
- Tips:
  - Block off a big chunk of time each week (e.g., Fridays from 1-4, or Saturdays from 11-2)
  - Leave your physical/routine space (find a new sanctuary, e.g., that cozy corner spot in the library with your Starbucks in hand)
  - Giving yourself lots of time = not putting pressure on yourself = coming up with better ideas

# Important Reminders

- As you are writing, occasionally stop to make sure you are answering each program's specific prompt
- If there are multiple parts to each sentence of a prompt (e.g., separated by commas), make sure that each part is specifically addressed in your answer
  - E.g., “describe your aptitude and your motivation, including your interests and your goals”)
- Emphasize your motivation and uniqueness (without saying you are motivated or unique)



# More Tips for Writing

- Tell the story behind the scenes of your resume
  - **Do**: Show your motivation and intentions behind your choices (e.g., *“I realized that in order to advance my understanding of the empirical literature base on childhood affective disorders, I needed to take additional coursework in child psychopathology and pursue an evidence-based internship program at \_\_\_\_\_. It was there that I met Dr. \_\_\_ by attending her intern seminar on degenerative disorders, and she offered me the chance to contribute to her research project on \_\_\_\_\_”*)
  - **Don’t**: Reiterate your placements/tasks from your resume word for word (e.g., *“The following semester, I took Child Psychopathology and I interned at \_\_\_\_\_, where I received training and performed assessments on children with autism. I also took a course called Developmental Psychology, and I earned an A+ in both courses. I continued advanced psychology coursework and my research assistant position throughout senior year.”*)

# The Basic Aspects to Include

Again, follow the prompt, but most of them include:

- Your background and what led you to decide on this field
- Achievements
  - For most masters and Psy.D.: emphasize relevant clinical, volunteer, field, research, work experience
  - For most Ph.D. (and some Psy.D): emphasize research throughout
  - Remember, show intentional choices! Demonstrate motivation and commitment.
- Academic and career objectives
- Plans and goals for career training
- “Fit” with that graduate program (and why)
- For Ph.D.: Mention who you specifically want to train under, and why
- For Psy.D. and Masters: May not need to mention specific people, but can focus on the model of training, specialty areas that appeal to you, intern/practicum placements you would benefit from obtaining, etc.

# Things to Avoid

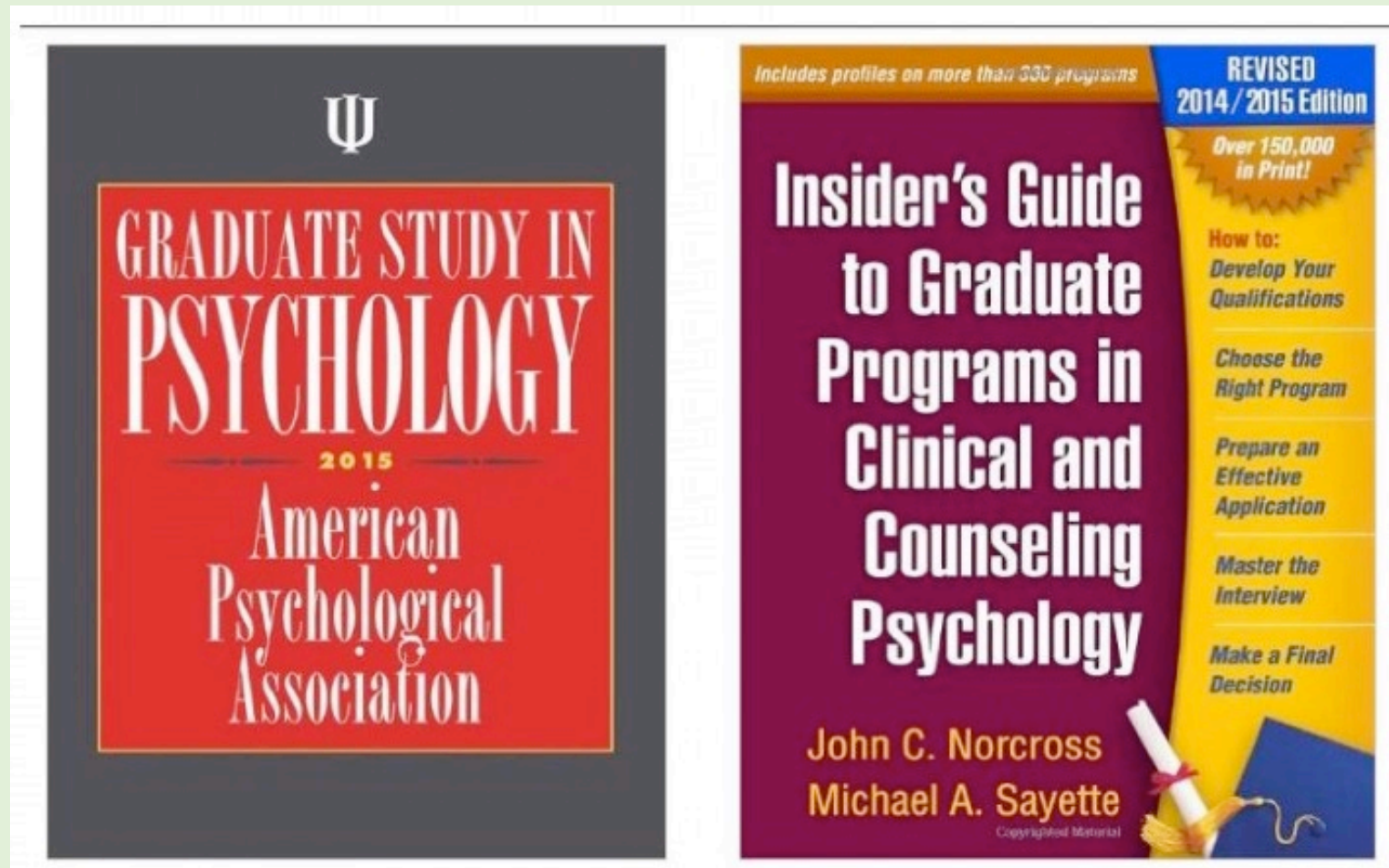
- “I fell in love with psychology when I took my AP course in high school”
- “My passion for psychology started at birth”
- “I decided to become a psychologist because I want to help people.”
- “I’m always the one my friends ask for advice.”
- “Being bipolar has wreaked havoc on my life.”
  - Avoid discussing personal psychiatric health in general – suggesting you have your own mental health struggles can make a potential advisor worry that you won’t be successful in graduate school
- Don’t be overly personal – keep it more of a “professional” story
- My perspective: Better to be on the safe side than to take huge risks (*this isn’t creative writing class*)
- See “Kisses of Death” Article (2006)

# I Have My Draft. Now What?

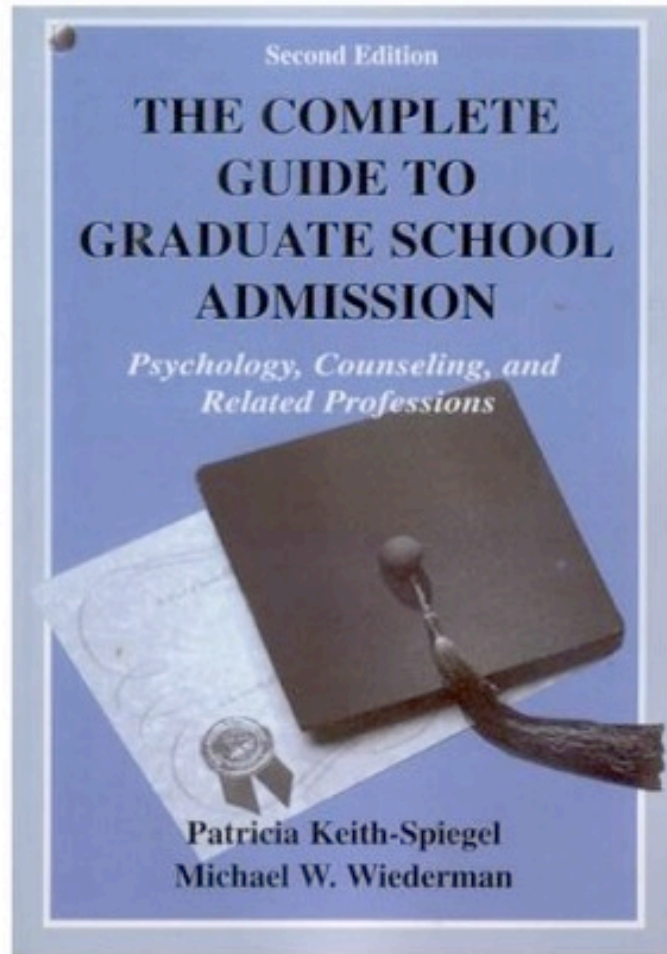
- Proofread it, multiple times
- Read it out loud, word for word (slowly)
- Asking 2 of your recommenders and/or faculty to review it (strongly recommended)
  - Make it your very best version first
  - They are not editors
  - Don't expect much; they are busy!



# Where Can I Get More Info?



# Even More Sources of Info (Norcross & Hogan, 2017)





# From Norcross & Hogan (2017)

## Specialized Sources

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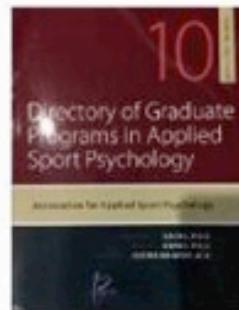
### By subdiscipline



SOCIETY for  
NEUROSCIENCE

Neuroscience Departments  
and Programs Directory

*SIOP's Graduate Training Programs  
in Industrial-Organizational Psychology  
and Related Fields*



ASSOCIATION FOR BEHAVIORAL  
AND COGNITIVE THERAPIES

### By applicant characteristic

Psychology Education & Careers Guide  
for College Students of Color



**APA RESOURCE GUIDE**  
for psychology graduate students with  
disabilities



AMERICAN  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION of  
GRADUATE  
STUDENTS

# Additional Sources

- APA web article on P.S. (2016):
  - <http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/psn/2016/09/graduate-school-applications.aspx>
- APA (2017) Video Series:
  - <http://www.apa.org/education/grad/application-video-series.aspx>
- APA (2017) Charts, Figures, Stats:
  - <http://www.apa.org/education/grad/graduate-school-handouts.pdf>