

Passion and Purpose in the Architecture Personal Statement

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No matter what name it goes by—statement of purpose, statement of interest, or plain old personal statement—architecture school statements are challenging. They often want you to cover a whole lot of information in only 500 words. For instance, Columbia University’s prompt last year was: *In a statement of approximately 500 words, describe your background, your past work in your intended field of study, and your plans for graduate study and a professional career.* All of that in only 500 words or less? No wonder my candidate Kara, an aspiring architect, had called me in a panic.

“So by ‘background’ do they mean my entire life story plus all of my work, school, and internship experiences?” Kara, wired on venti Americanos, asked. “It says ‘personal’—does that mean I should tell them about my parents’ divorce?”

Here’s the thing: It is important that after the admissions committee has read your statement of purpose, they feel that they know who you are. They need to know what you want to do (your goal)—Kara’s was opening her own “green” architecture firm one day—why this is important to you, what you have done thus far in regards to pursuing that goal or taking an interest in the subject matter, and what you still have left to learn and explore. And right there is the outline for your entire 500-word statement of purpose.

The break down:

Paragraph 1: This is where you get personal. No, this doesn’t mean empty the contents of your diary. This means write about the moment you realized you wanted to pursue your goal. In Kara’s case it was when her family moved from a sprawling home in Greenwich, Connecticut, to a 1,200-square-foot apartment in Manhattan. She found herself wishing she could move the walls around and reconfigure the space to be more open. There! She had her “ah-hah!” moment—the moment she realized that architecture would be a part of her life. This is the type of specific moment that all candidates should search for and write about.

Why? Graduate programs want students who are passionate about what they want to do, not students who are just looking to avoid the real world for another few years. This is your opportunity to show the school why you want this.

Paragraph 2: What have you done thus far to pursue your interest in architecture? Did you explore classes in college? Did you take art or art history classes? When you studied abroad, did you take an active interest in the city’s architecture? This is an opportunity to discuss specific classes you have taken as well as experiences—talk about a particular professor you’ve learned from or clubs you started or joined. Discuss internships or observation hours. But, as I told Kara, do not simply list them; you don’t want to regurgitate your resume (remember, they have it!). Tell the school what’s not on your resume. Dig down deep and discuss specific moments within that internship where you’ve learned something significant and how you plan to apply what you learned.

Why? Graduate schools want students who have already been seeking knowledge.

Paragraph 3: Why do you want to go to grad school? What do you still have left to learn? Discuss skills that still need development or improvement. Kara was looking to strengthen her foundation and design skills with a master’s in architecture. She was also interested in expanding her knowledge of technology and how she could use it in the design process in order to achieve greater innovation. So look at your goals, and then ask, “What do I need to get better at in order to improve my chances of achieving my goal?”

Now here’s the part where Kara asks, “But, don’t I want to appear confident? Won’t it make me look weak to admit that I still have stuff to learn?”

No. Schools want students who are self-aware, who know their strongest and weakest areas. Kara needed to show the school that she knows what she needs to work on and what experiences she needs to gather in order to accomplish her goal. This also demonstrates that she actually will benefit from graduate school—and proves to the school even more that she is a serious candidate.

Paragraph 4: The school-specific portion of your essay addresses why Columbia, specifically. Here it is important to be extremely specific to show enthusiasm for a particular school. Do your research on classes, professors, and clubs, and discuss how they will help you accomplish your goal.

Why? The candidate must prove their desire to go to the school. Being specific about the school demonstrates Kara’s ability to research and gain knowledge—good traits for a prospective student. Additionally, when she got that interview—she had lots to discuss.

Final paragraph: Finish with a few short sentences about how Columbia is going to help you achieve your goal—and how you will contribute to Columbia—to change the planet (by using your master’s in architecture).

Kara, who is now at Columbia, called me the other day. She was still drinking a venti Americano, but this time she was excited—not panicked. She had just interviewed for an internship at a prestigious New York “green” architecture firm and wanted to tell me she had nailed it. And she had applied the work we had done together almost a year ago. She researched the firm, was specific about what she could contribute to its office environment, and communicated clearly to the interviewers how gaining experience at their firm was in line with her long term goals.

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