Writing the Personal Statement

(advice from S. Kannappan, with inspiration from the Purdue Owl)

Have a "story"

- Use your experiences and interests to tell a story whose logical conclusion is your application to this program. Having a theme running through this story – a unique approach, style, interest, experience, or other aspect of you/your background – makes your essay interesting and gives the committee a way to remember you. Are you the tinkerer? the interdisciplinary thinker? the team leader? the practical innovator? You need to be memorable in a stack of hundreds of applications. If your life has been unexciting, dig deep to come up with an angle to make yourself distinctive.

Be specific

- In describing your skills and talents, give examples to demonstrate them rather than just asserting them. Tell ancecdotes about research experiences, classes, people/books/events, or anything else that inspired you to pursue the career you want or illustrates why you're suited to it.

Start strong

- Your reader usually forms an impression of you within the first few sentences. Make sure to set up the framework for your story. An anecdote or memory can be very compelling here.

Leave some things out

- Personal statements are generally better without references to accomplishments in high school (unless key to your story), potentially controversial subjects (religious or political issues), or anything negative (reframe bad experiences key to your story in terms of what you learned).

Do your homework

- Get online to figure out why this program is a good fit for you. Mention specific faculty or facilities with whom you would like to work. Write program-specific comments in 1-2 specific places in your essay so you can always edit the same sentences and you won't miss a reference to Duke while applying to UNC (for example!). If there are specific questions asked in the instructions for a particular program, make sure your statement answers them.

Be professional

- Check your spelling and proofread carefully. Adhere to word limits or accepted norms.