

## Personal Statement: A Writing Sample?

### Uses of the Personal Statement

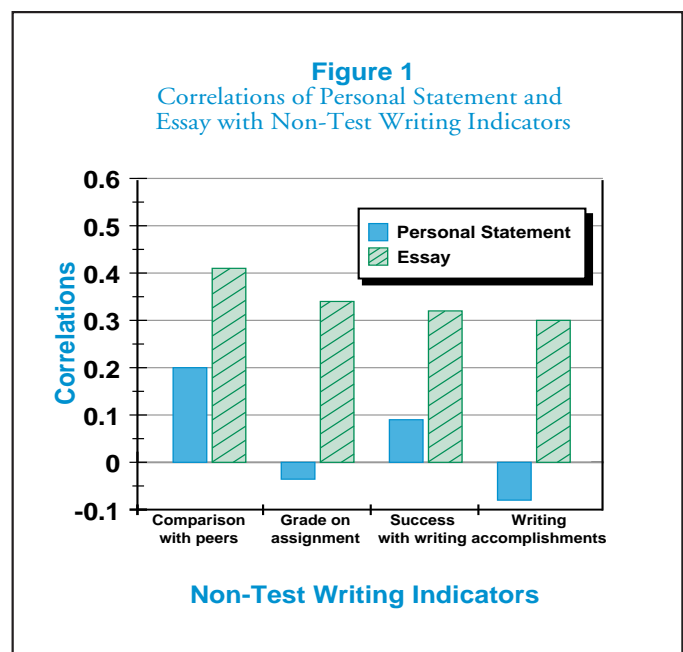
The personal statement is used by graduate and undergraduate admission committees for multiple purposes. It is used to learn about an applicant's personal characteristics, to match interests between advisors and students, to determine an applicant's goals, and/or to gain greater insight into an applicant's experiences. It is also used to assess the applicant's writing ability. Although the personal statement may be a good indicator of personal attributes and experiences not otherwise revealed in an application packet, its value as an indicator of writing ability is largely unproven. Recent research conducted by ETS provides insight about the value of the personal statement as an indicator of writing ability.

### A Look at the Data

The data show that the personal statement is not strongly correlated with other indicators of writing ability. A standardized essay test, designed to measure writing ability and administered under controlled conditions, was used as a source for comparison. A personal statement and the essay were scored by trained readers who applied the same scoring criteria to both. The correlation between the scores given to the personal statement and the essay was low (.15), suggesting that the personal statement and essay were not measuring the same thing. Eight non-test indicators of writing ability were used as criteria against which the validity of both the personal

statement and the essay as measures of writing ability could be assessed. These included various students' self-ratings: writing ability as compared to that of peers, success with the process of writing, success with various kinds of writing, grades in writing-related courses, grade on most recent writing assignment, and documentable accomplishments in writing. In addition, students submitted a recent writing sample from a college course, which was evaluated by both the professor for the course and a trained scorer.

Seven of the eight indicators demonstrated a stronger correlation with the essay than with the personal statement. For four of these indicators, the correlations were significantly stronger ( $p < .05$ ) for the essay than for the personal statement. Figure 1 presents a comparison of the statistically significant correlations of the personal statement and essay with the selected non-test indicators of writing ability.

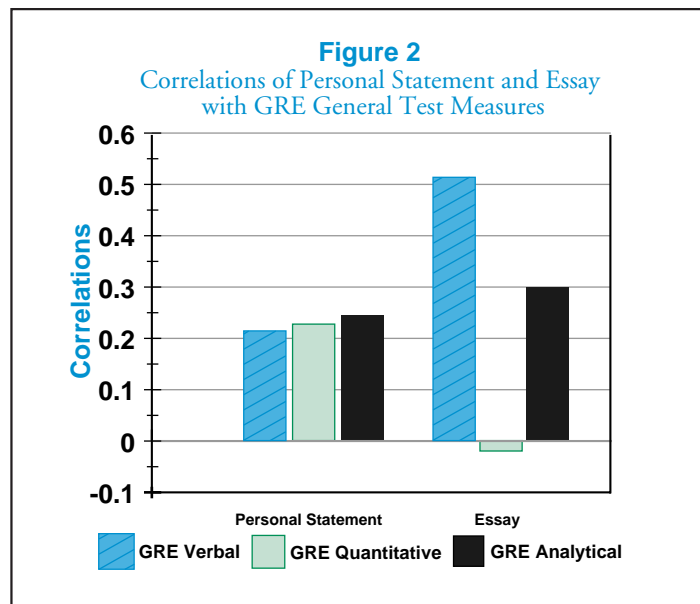


Correlations between the three measures of the GRE General Test (verbal, quantitative, and analytical) and the essay and personal statement were also examined. Figure 2 illustrates a comparison of the correlations of the scores on the three GRE General Test measures with the scores from the personal statement and essay. As expected, the essay is highly correlated with the verbal measure and unrelated to the quantitative measure. However, the personal statement has similar correlations with all three measures. In contrast to the essay, the personal statement does not appear to primarily measure verbal skills.

Overall, the data indicate the existence of a much stronger relationship between the essay and other writing indicators than between the personal statement and these same indicators.

### A Cautionary Note

The personal statement is an invaluable component of the application packet. Though the personal statement may be quite effective for certain uses, the data suggest that care must be taken when using it as an indicator of writing ability. Another reason for caution is the question of authorship. According to students, they do indeed get assistance in drafting and editing their personal statements. Thus, if the personal statement were to be utilized as a writing sample, more evidence would need to



be gathered to establish its validity as a measure of writing ability.

This research was part of a study of the relationship between various non-test indicators of writing ability and the new GRE writing test. The writing test is targeted for introduction in 1999 and is expected to provide a basis for the comparison of applicants' writing ability.

**Based on** Powers, D. E., & Fowles, M. E. "The Personal Statement as an Indicator of Writing Skill: A Cautionary Note" (GRE# 93-26d). *In press.*

Copies of this research report may be obtained by writing to the GRE Program at: Educational Testing Service, GRE Program, Mail Stop 51-L, Princeton, NJ 08541 or by sending an e-mail request to [gre-info@ets.org](mailto:gre-info@ets.org).



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