

University of X, Virtual Writing Center Email Response

Figure 3: Sample Online Writing Conference End Comment SAR

Dear Jennifer,

My name is Lindsey, and I'd like to thank you for using the Virtual Writing Center again. Below, I've responded to some of the concerns you listed on your request form. I see you're working on a personal statement today—good luck! I've already seen quite a few personal statements like these in the physical writing center, so hopefully I can be of some help to you.

THIS DOCUMENT

This document follows a specific format to make it easy for you to see my suggestions. When I've copied **your** writing into this document, I've changed the text color to **PURPLE**. When I want to focus our conversation on specific areas of the text, I **HIGHLIGHT** the text with a light blue background. My explanations appear beneath your writing in *italicized text*. Occasionally, you'll see some text that is underlined blue, like [these words](#). These are hyperlinks that will take you to pages on our website or other websites that I think might help you.

GRAMMAR

Here I identify any issues I see with the grammar of your paper, which is an area you asked me to consider.

Jessica, grammar can definitely be challenging to figure out. I don't think it's anyone's favorite subject! Luckily, there are a few techniques you can use to check your grammar yourself. I've found them all very useful.

- 1.) Read your paper out loud. Better yet, if you can, find someone to read it to you. Some recent articles have come out that ranked what businesspeople consider to be the “worst” grammar errors, and typos and easy misspellings ranked high on their list. This was because, according to the subjects, these “easy” errors give the impression the writer doesn't care enough to proofread. Reading your paper will also show you how often you repeat yourself, or go back over information again and again.
- 2.) Consider what it is you're trying to say—and who you're saying it to. Usually, people forget grammar rules because they aren't attached to anything important. But if you can remember that you want to give an introduction, commas usually come up? You're far more likely to remember what to do with those commas.

Make sense? Okay. Let's get into the body of your paper.

The most consistent error I noticed had to do with transitions. Basically: when you use transitions, you need to divide the sentence with commas. Let's look at this sentence from your paper, for example:

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Throughout my undergraduate college career my experiences both inside and outside of the classroom have attributed to my interest in the College Student Personnel program.

When you read this sentence, can you hear a pause after “throughout my undergraduate experience”? That’s because this is a nonessential clause—basically, it’s a transition. You’ll want to put a comma after this part of your sentence to make it more understandable to your reader. Otherwise, if someone is reading very quickly, they could get confused.

Throughout my undergraduate college career, my experiences both inside and outside of the classroom have attributed to my interest in the College Student Personnel program.

Now, let’s look at a larger section from your paper. Can you find where you need a comma?

With a combination of these experiences I would like to further this education through the College Student Personnel program in order to help improve the college student experience by providing useful resources and implementing effective programming, with a focus specifically on minority and underprivileged students in order to help increase college retention rates overall.

Transition words usually deal with the passage of time, or show some kind of relationship. When, while, as, with, during, before, after, first—all of these are transition words. In this case, your transition word is “with.” So, you need a comma after the word “experiences.”

With a combination of these experiences, I would like to further this education through the College Student Personnel program in order to help improve the college student experience by providing useful resources and implementing effective programming, with a focus specifically on minority and underprivileged students in order to help increase college retention rates overall.

One easy way to find all of these errors might be to use MSword to search your document for specific transition words that you use a lot. “As” is one, as in: “as I did X,” or “as I learned Y.”

ORGANIZATION

Jessica, organization in small and super-important papers like these is always very tricky. In general, I got the sense that your paper was classically organized: you had an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. More specifically, the body of your paper was chronologically organized: you went through your life as a student in order. All of these choices seem like wise ones to me. In addition, you always began each paragraph with a topic sentence that forecasted what you would be talking about next. Choices like these means that your readers can quickly skim through your personal statement, which is what they definitely will be doing. Great job.

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However, there is one thing I think you could do, organization-wise, that would make this paper even stronger. Right now, your introduction and conclusion seem kind of vague. I understand why—you're trying to introduce your paper on one hand, so it makes sense to work globally. On the other hand, conclusions are always hard. But I think being more specific, especially in your intro, will provide a strong and clear impression of who you are right away---definitely a good thing.

Here's your introduction. In italics, in black, are my questions. They're designed to get you thinking more specifically.

I am currently applying for the College Student Personnel program at the University of X's College of Education. *Isn't everyone turning this in applying? I think you have the qualifications to begin much more strongly! One of my professors in my graduate program said their "favorite" personal statement started this way: "I am a strong 40 year old Puerto Rican woman." He liked it because it had punch and actually told who was writing. I am very interested in this program because I feel it best meets my future career and professional goals as a graduate. What kind of goals? What goals, specifically? Throughout my undergraduate college career my experiences both inside and outside of the classroom have attributed to my interest in the College Student Personnel program. My experiences inside of the classroom have contributed to my knowledge of and passion for diversity and social justice. What kind of experiences? And my extra-curricular involvement has contributed to my interest in student affairs. Extra-curricular involvement in what? Doing what? The knowledge and experiences I have gained as an undergraduate have peaked my interest in this program. With a combination of these experiences I would like to further this education What kind of education do you have so far in particular?* through the College Student Personnel program in order to help improve the college student experience by providing useful resources and implementing effective programming, with a focus specifically on minority and underprivileged students in order to help increase college retention rates overall. *This last part of the final sentence is the best. You actually might consider BEGINNING WITH this. Imagine a personal statement that started this way:*

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I would like to further my education through the College Student Personnel program in order to help improve the college student experience by providing useful resources and implementing effective programming, with a focus specifically on minority and underprivileged students in order to help increase college retention rates overall.

After this, you could discuss why focusing on improving retention rates is so important to you as a future member of the field, and give some specific instances that led to your interest.

Basically, I asked these questions because I feel like almost any dedicated smart student could have written your intro. But I know from the body of your statement that you are WAY more qualified than those people! Adding specific details early on will give a strong impression to your committee. Make sense?

RELEVANCE/ ANSWERING ALL THE QUESTIONS

Jessica, I know personal statements are challenging because you have to write a lot of information in a very short space. However, every single part of your body section is doing real work to forward your argument—that you deserve a place in this program. Aside from being more specific in your introduction and conclusion, everything feels relevant and impressive and strong. This is an amazing accomplishment. Excellent work.

FUTURE WORK

As you move forward, you will want to consider the following issues:

- 1.) Try reading your paper out loud to catch grammar mistakes.
- 2.) Remember to put commas after transition words and phrases.
- 3.) Don't be afraid to be specific early on—the “best” personal statements usually start personal and end there, too.