BSW Program: Personal Statement Guide for Applicants
Northern Michigan University, Department of Social Work

About the Personal Statement and Submission Criteria:

Your personal statement should be in APA format, including your name on the page and in the file, typed (12 point font, 1" margins), double spaced, and should not exceed five pages. Statements that do not fit within these guidelines are subject to be rejected from consideration.. For example, a statement will only be assessed up to five pages. The sixth cannot be considered in its assessment.

The committee reads for specific reasoning about your own coursework, experience, and practice thinking. That specificity is what distinguishes a strong statement, and it is not something a general purpose writing tool can produce on your behalf. If a statement raises a question about authorship, the applicant will be asked to discuss it with the committee before any decision is made about the file. A statement the applicant cannot account for as their own work will not be reviewed. The committee encourages applicants to contact the program director, Ann Crandell-Williams (acrandel@nmu.edu) for further clarification and guidance, and the Writing Center (The Learning Commons, Lydia Olson Library) for statement writing assistance.

What a Personal Statement is:

The personal statement is not a cover letter, a resume narrative, or a statement of long-term career ambitions. It is an evaluative document. The program admission committee is reading your statement, along with other factors, to assess whether you can synthesize what you have learned in your coursework thus far, with who you are and where you are headed. Specifically, it is an opportunity to demonstrate that you are ready for upper-level practice courses and field placement in the BSW program.

This is a narrower task than it might seem. Your statement should be oriented toward the BSW, not toward a future MSW, a dream job, or a specialty you hope to pursue after graduation. The committee cannot evaluate readiness for something you have not yet started. They can evaluate readiness for what comes next.

A strong personal statement does three things well:

1. It demonstrates synthesis, not summary.

You have taken coursework in generalist social work practice, professional ethics, and human behavior. The committee already knows what those courses cover. They do not need you to restate the content back

to them. What they need to see is that you have actually understood the course objectives and that you can apply a framework to a real situation. It can include naming a tension you have encountered and work through it using professional reasoning, or show how a concept from class has changed how you see something you've experienced.

The difference looks like this: restating that generalist social workers operate at micro, mezzo, and macro levels is a summary. Taking one situation from your life or work such as a person you sat with, a family you observed, or a policy gap you noticed, and walking it through those three levels is synthesis. One tells the committee you read the syllabus. The other tells them you are ready to proceed in the program.

2. It uses personal narrative with purpose.

Your experiences matter, but not as credentials for empathy or right of passage. Telling the committee that you grew up in poverty, or that someone you love has a mental illness, or that you have faced adversity does not demonstrate compatibility with social work. Many people with those experiences do not become social workers. Many excellent social workers do not have them.

What the committee is looking for is what you do with your experience. Personal narrative earns its place in a statement when it illuminates or extends something about your practice orientation that nothing else could. It is a useful insight that should further demonstrate how you think, what you noticed, what changed for you, or where you are still working something out. A disclosure offered as a credential for empathy does not demonstrate readiness to the committee. A disclosure that leads to a practice question, a structural observation, a tension you are still sitting with, is.

3. It demonstrates professional ethical reasoning, not personal compatibility.

Statements that tell the committee you are a caring person, that you have always wanted to help others, or that your values align with the profession because you believe in treating people fairly are not making the argument they intend to make. Those claims describe character. The committee is evaluating professional readiness.

Professional ethical reasoning means being able to name specific values from the NASW Code of Ethics and show how they operate in practice, including where they create tension. If your faith, cultural background, or personal convictions are meaningful to your practice orientation, include them. But do not offer them as reassurance.

<u>Common Patterns That Weaken Statements:</u>

Restating the field instead of situating yourself in it.

Opening paragraphs that define social work, describe its breadth, or summarize what social workers do are almost always expendable. The committee knows the field. Use that space to say something about you. Naming attributes without illustrating them. Patience, empathy, communication skills, and

commitment appear in nearly every statement. They are not meaningless, but they are weightless without a specific, grounded example that shows the attribute doing something real.

Long-term goals that drift away from the BSW.

Discussion of graduate school, specialization, or post-career plans is not what the committee is evaluating. Redirect that energy toward the two years ahead of you: the courses, the placement, the supervision, the relational demands of becoming a beginning-level practitioner.

Language that inadvertently reflects a deficit or compliance model.

Be mindful of your word choices and be intentional in their use, particularly when writing about marginalized populations, disability, children, or mental health. Phrases like "helping people who cannot help themselves," "giving a voice to the voiceless," or describing client goals in terms of compliance and normalization often reflect frameworks that conflict with your training and course work in anti-oppressive practice.

Self-disclosure as credential.

Your narrative is not evidence that you will be a good social worker. It is raw material. The question the committee is asking is not what happened to you, but what you made of it, and what it means for how you will practice.

Direct Statement Question Guide

1. The mission of the Social Work program is to create competent generalist social work practitioners. Discuss what the concept of a generalist social worker means. How are your career goals compatible with being a generalist social worker?

Define it, then show it working in a situation you know. If you already have a population in mind, the compatibility question is a real one. Answer it. Keep your goals inside the next two years.

2. Discuss your perspective on social work ethics and values. How well do your personal values fit with those of the profession?

Name specific standards from the NASW Code of Ethics. Asserting that your values align demonstrates less than examining where they do not. A tension you can reason through is not a liability here.

3. Describe your personal attributes that will contribute to a profession in social work.

Patience, empathy, adaptability, and calm appear in nearly every statement the committee will read. Pick one or two, attach each to a specific situation, and include applicable information that further shapes your attributes to the committee.

4. List any social service employment or volunteer position(s) you have held, including job title, organization name, start and end dates, and approximate number of hours. Briefly describe your duties.

A narrative list, not a story about those roles. Four data points per position and a sentence or two of duties. A short list is not disqualifying; report what you have.

5. Keeping professional boundaries in mind, discuss aspects of your identity or lived experience that you feel will influence your career as a social worker.

Boundaries govern your relationships with clients. Here the phrase means you decide what to include and at what level of detail. No particular disclosure is expected.

This section is not asking you to be objective about yourself. Write toward influence: what your experience lets you attend to, and where it could get in the way of the person in front of you.