Sample Personal History Statement

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In an essay, discuss how your personal background informs your decision to pursue a graduate degree. Please include any educational, cultural, economic, or social experiences, challenges, or opportunities relevant to your academic journey; how you might contribute to social or cultural diversity within your chosen field; and/or how you might serve educationally underrepresented segments of society with your degree.

The writer of this personal history statement also authored the statement of purpose. In this essay, she relates how her personal background informs her decision to pursue graduate studies in history. With permission of the author, I have reprinted her essay, parsed with my comments on why and how it works as a winning essay.

I am impressed by the anomaly I have become: a female student of Mexican descent specializing in early modern European history.¹ My undergraduate curriculum, which consisted mainly of English classes on Shakespeare or Milton and history courses on the Enlightenment and the Reformation, belied my ethnic origins.² In fact, I can recall those uncomfortable moments in class when I would pause to glance around the room, realizing that I was the only brown student in a lecture hall of sixty or eighty students.³ Despite these occasional setbacks, I continued, headstrong, to pursue my passion for all things early modern. And I credit my academic success and accomplishments to my firm resolve to study only that which interested me and not that for which I was intended.⁴

Yet there comes a time when an amateur scholar becomes a professional, at which point she must reconcile somehow her personal life and past with her new career and future. Finding myself on the verge of that transition, I feel it is an adequate time to reflect on how my scholarly interests intersect with my cultural upbringing.⁵ It is this odd but unique relationship between my identity as an historian of Renaissance Europe, my developing feminism, and my Mexican origins, that I want to discuss in this essay.⁶

¹ Note how the author juxtaposes the unlikely pairing of her ethnic identity with her subject of specialty. In so doing, the reader expects a thoughtful, nuanced, and highly personal discussion about how she came to become a lover of early modern European history.

² Immediately, the second sentence elaborates on her undergraduate course work and by ending with reference to her ethnic origins she provides added emphasis and thematic continuity to her essay.

³ This sentence helps us to visualize the physical scene as well as the isolated feeling evoked in the description. Note that she does not overstate the case of her isolation.
Succinctly and beautifully rendered is her resolve. Without telling as much as showing, the reader sees that she is someone with an inordinate passion and resolve to pursue her interests. We can also infer from this statement that she is someone who refused to be put in a box. All these are endearing traits for a prospective graduate student in the social sciences.

In a nutshell, a personal statement is supposed to do exactly this: to link one's "personal life and past" with "career and future." On another level it is also about how one's "scholarly interests" intersect with one's "cultural upbringing." She has a way of never losing sight of the main theme of her essay, yet avoiding repetition.

This final sentence in the paragraph details the seemingly disparate elements she hopes to concatenate. By now it is evident that her style of writing is to move from the general and thematic to the specific. It is a gentle unfolding of ideas that keeps the reader interested and eager to continue.