

Writing Effective Personal Statements

What is a Personal Statement?

The personal statement is a writing sample describing you at your best. This includes: your reasons for choosing the field and the graduate school you have chosen, your career interests, your objectives, and the unique ways you can contribute to the program to which you are applying. A personal statement should communicate 5 things:

1. **Your Writing Abilities.** This is your opportunity to SHOW your writing and communication skills. A well-written personal statement demonstrates proficient grammar, organization, creativity, and ability to communicate effectively.
2. **Who You Are.** The personal statement allows for others to get to know your personality and character. The reader should be able to have a good sense of who you are when they are finished reading your personal statement.
3. **What Sets You Apart.** What can you contribute to the program that is unique? Are you a non-traditional student, an underrepresented minority, musician, or athlete? The personal statement is the place to communicate how your distinct attributes would add to a program and support your motivation.
4. **Connections.** Demonstrate how your past education and experiences orient toward your future goals.
5. **How You Can be an Asset to the School or Field.** Your personal statement should communicate to the school and to the professional field why you in particular should attend graduate school.

From The Admission Committee's Point of View

As important as your personal statement is, admissions committees only spend an average range of 3-25 minutes reviewing it. So, grab the reader's attention from the start! Rather than a general essay, make sure to answer the specific question or prompt that is given. If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar. Don't be tempted to use the same statement for all of your applications! It is important to answer *each* question that you are asked, even if it means slightly different answers are needed.

Basic Tips for Writing a Personal Statement

- **Show, Don't Tell**
If you tell a committee why you want to go to their school, the essay will be boring. As one admission's officer put it, "Applicants tend to state and not evaluate. They give a recitation of their experiences but no evaluation of what effect a particular experience had on them." Use concrete experiences *and* what you have learned from them to distinguish yourself through your story.
- **Find an Angle & Develop a Theme**
See the entire application as a whole, demonstrating the "theme" of the story of who you are. Figure out a cohesive and engaging way of demonstrating a "hook" to differentiate yourself from other candidates. Discuss what makes you unique and different!
- **State Your Goal (But not too much)**
Describe your experiences and what you've learned from them, and where they are leading you—to your goal! However, avoid over-emphasis on future goals. Admissions committees want to know about who you are now and what you have done more than your general, future aspirations.

The Process of Writing a Personal Statement

Research the school or schools thoroughly *before* you begin.

Know the ongoing research, the interest of the faculty that you want to work with, and the strengths of the institution you are applying to. Align your message to communicate how you would fit into the specific program you are applying for. Describe the school's special appeal to you!

Ask Yourself Some Hard Questions.

Before writing, reflect and ask yourself the "hard questions" to illuminate your values and your unique experiences.

Answer these questions and try to identify a theme that will tie together your personal statement. These questions could include:

Intellectual Influences

- Who were your favorite professors, and why?
- Identify the best paper or project you ever completed, the most influential book you have read, the single most important concept you have learned. Expand on how and why these made an impact on you.

Encouragement

- Recall and write out the actual words of a professor, teacher, or someone else in your life who encouraged you to go in this direction. (Caution on parents: In the field, you need to go beyond parents to show your own individual and mature commitment.)

Turning Points

- Where were you and what were you doing when you first thought of going in this particular direction? How has your interest changed or evolved?

Academic

- How have you prepared yourself to succeed?

Skills

- What skills have you honed through the experiential and educational choices you have made? Avoid temptation to list as in a resume!

Personal Attributes

- What personal attributes make you particularly likely to succeed? What distinguishes you as an individual? What experiences or events reveal something about your value system or about the challenges you like to meet?

Experiences

- List volunteer, travel, family, and life experiences that have inspired you to go in this career direction. Do not state only what you did; rather, reflect what you have learned from these experiences.

Create an outline for each paragraph *before* you write it.

Make sure that all components of the question being asked are addressed.

Then, begin to write!

Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do is to bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you will make yourself more memorable!

Practical Guidelines

Length: 1 ½ - 2 pages is appropriate, but over 3 pages is too long. Follow given guidelines, but do not be afraid to ask for clarification, if needed.

Timeline: Give yourself at least 2 months to write a personal statement. Allow for longer if you are applying to several schools, especially if they have unique guidelines.

Editing: After every major editing session, get feedback from others, take a break, and come back to it.

Write from a firm foundation. . .

- Do not start your essay with "I was born in", or a similar statement
- Link your paragraphs with smooth and clear transitions
- End your essay with a conclusion that refers to the introduction

Write purposefully. . .

- Be clear, concise, and direct
- Follow any and all directions
- Try not to repeat too many ideas
- Do not write an autobiography

Choose your words wisely. . .

- Use active voice
- Be yourself – don't use words that you would not normally use
- Use the word "passion" sparingly and look for alternatives
- Use professional language