

Writing Effective Personal Statements

What is a Personal Statement?

The personal statement is a writing sample describing you at your best: 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. It should communicate these 5 things:

1. **Your Writing Abilities.** This is your opportunity to SHOW your writing and communication skills. A well-written personal statement demonstrates your skillful grammar, organization, creativity, and ability to communicate effectively.
2. **Who You Are.** The personal statement allows for others to know you more--your personality and character. When finished reading, the reader should feel as if they know you better.
3. **What Makes You Unique.** 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 attributes may add to a program and spur on your motivation.
4. **Connections.** Demonstrate how your past education and experiences orient to 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 3-25 minutes on it. So, grab the reader's attention from the start. Make sure to answer the specific question or prompt that is given, rather than a general essay. 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 applications! It is important to answer each question asked, even if 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 or 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 more about who you are and what you have done than your general, future aspirations.

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The Process of Writing a Personal Statement

Research the school or schools thoroughly before beginning.

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. Explain the school's special appeal to you.

Ask Yourself Some Hard Questions.

Before writing, use reflection and "hard questions" to elucidate your values and your unique experiences. Answer these questions and try to identify the theme that will tie together your unique 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 and why.

Encouragement

- Recall and write out actual words of a professor, teacher, or someone else in your life who encouraged you to go in this direction. (Caution about Parents: In the field, you need to go beyond parents to show your own personal, 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 just state 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!

Practical Guidelines

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

Timeline: Allow 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: Get feedback from others, let it rest, 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 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