

Writing a Personal Statement

Objectives

1. Understand the purpose of a personal statement.
2. Develop the ability to write an engaging and effective personal statement capturing your strengths and career goals.

Purpose of a Personal Statement

A personal statement, also known as a “statement of purpose,” demonstrates your unique qualifications to an admissions committee. It also illustrates your writing ability, creativity, and career goals. Admissions committee members look for interesting, insightful, and non-generic personal statements that provide concrete evidence of your competence and motivation.

Prepare to Write

Deciding on a topic about which to write can be challenging at first. To help facilitate your writing process, take some time to reflect on the following:

- **Personal History** — Prior life experiences, events, and achievements relevant to your career choice or application to graduate school. Life events are experiences that are distinct or unusual which relate to your professional goals. You may also want to think about the people who have influenced your decision to pursue this field or who have had a significant impact on your values as they relate to this choice.
- **Academic Life** — Research interests and prior experience, academic accomplishments and/or recognitions, and influential professors/mentors.
- **Work Experience** — Previous jobs, internships, volunteer experience, and/or extracurricular activities that have influenced your career choice or career goals.

Helpful Questions to Ask Yourself

- What is special, distinctive, unique, or impressive about you or your life story?
- How did you learn about the field? What stimulated your interest in this field?
- What characteristics and skills do you possess that enhance your prospects for success?
- Have you overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships?
- Are there any gaps in your academic record that you want to explain?



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- What are the most compelling reasons for the admissions committee to be interested in you?
- What are your short- and long-term goals?
- What is the most important thing for an admissions committee to know about you?
- Why do you want to apply to this program?
- What are the special features/values of this program that attracted you to it, and how do they match your own interests, values, and skills?

Formatting Tips

- Read the application carefully, follow the directions, and adhere to word or page limits! Most personal statements are 2-3 pages.
- Be sure to answer the question/topic(s) posed in the application.
- Choose a font style and size that can be easily read by your audience.
- Write in first-person.
- Proofread for typos and grammatical errors.

Common Mistakes

- **Sloppiness.** Avoid spelling, punctuation, formatting, and grammatical errors. Be sure to leave yourself adequate time to edit and revise your essay. You do not want to send your first draft to the admissions committee.
- **Writing one statement for all schools.** Learn about each school's program, including research interests and publications of faculty. Clearly state reasons for pursuing a degree from that school. Be sure to mention faculty members with whom you would like to study when necessary.
- **Boring content.** Have a positive tone, vary length and structure of sentences, and avoid clichés. Use active voice.
- **Sounding like everyone else.** Identify your strengths and clearly articulate what sets you apart from other applicants. Do not simply state that this is your passion.
- **Dwelling on crisis.** If you discuss a personal crisis, it should relate to the purpose of your essay. Mention how it affected your personal goals, perspective, or academic performance.

Tips to Help You Evaluate Your Personal Statement

Evaluating your personal statement is an important part of the writing process. Carefully read over your personal statement and use the Personal Statement Evaluation Chart on page 3 to critique your statement. Then ask at least one person whose opinion you value (e.g., friend, teacher, family member) to review and evaluate your personal statement using the Personal Statement Evaluation Chart criteria.

Do's and Don'ts for Writing Personal Statements

Do:

- FOLLOW DIRECTIONS OF THE PROMPT!
- Aim for depth, not breadth.
- Write why an event is significant to you and what you learned from it.
- Use readable fonts, conventional spacing, and margins.
- Focus on one or two specific themes and discuss related experiences.
- Concentrate on capturing the reader's interest in the opening paragraph.
- If the prompt contains no specific instructions for content, you may mention specific faculty with whom you would like to work with and/or specific reasons for applying to each program.
- Strive to make the essay unique by using concrete examples from your life experience. This allows you to stand out from other applicants.
- Select people whom you trust to read and provide feedback on your personal statement, especially if English is not your primary language.
- Create a conclusion that refers back to your introduction and ties your points together.
- Connect life experiences to your professional goals and career motivation. Articulate short- and long-term career goals clearly.
- Comment (briefly) on irregular grade trends, discrepancies on transcripts, or circumstances that affected test scores.

Don't:

- Submit the exact same essay to multiple schools.
- Write a clichéd introduction or conclusion (e.g., "my passion...").
- Preach to the reader.
- Repeat information listed elsewhere in your application.
- Discuss money as a motivating factor.
- Cram too much information into the essay.
- Exceed word and/or page limits.
- Exaggerate your qualifications or experience.
- Discuss potentially controversial topics (e.g., politics or religion).
- Include extraneous materials (e.g., addendums to applications, videotapes, or audiotapes) unless specifically asked.
- Remind the school of its ranking or tell them "how good they are."

Personal Statement Evaluation Chart

Questions to Ask	Comments	N/A
1. Did my opening paragraph capture the reader's attention?		
2. Is the statement as a whole interesting?		
3. Is it well-written? (e.g., grammar, tone, verb agreement)		
4. Is the statement positive and upbeat?		
5. Does it reflect well on me and my qualifications?		
6. Is it an honest and forthright presentation of me?		
7. Does it answer key questions posed in the application?		
8. Was relevant material omitted?		
9. Is there inappropriate or irrelevant material in the statement?		
10. Does the reader gain insight from reading the statement?		
11. Is it free of typos or other errors?		
12. Does it explain my career aspirations?		
13. Are there any gaps or discrepancies in my academic record that need to be addressed?		

Summary

Writing a strong personal statement requires preparation and careful attention to instructions. This guide has given you some ideas and guidelines to help you get started. If you would like to have your personal statement critiqued, visit The Career Center and meet with a career advisor. To view sample personal statements, view the Sample Personal Statements Binder (call number IIIC2 C3) in The Career Center Library.

Additional Career Library Resources

Select Career Center Library Resources

<i>Business Essays that Made a Difference</i>	IIIC2 G5
<i>Essays That Worked for Business Schools</i>	IIIC2 C81
<i>Essays That Worked for Law Schools</i>	IIIC3 C82
<i>Get into Graduate School</i>	IIIC K31
<i>Graduate Admissions Essays</i>	IIIC A75
<i>Law School Essays that Made a Difference</i>	IIIC2 B7
<i>Medical School Essays that Make a Difference</i>	IIIC4 K4
<i>Real Essays For College & Grad School</i>	IIIC M35
<i>Sample Personal Statements</i>	IIIC C3

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