

How to Write a Personal Statement

What is it? An autobiographical essay introducing yourself, the way you think, and the way you express yourself. *When do I need one?* Usually required with application to graduate or professional schools. Also required with some scholarship applications.

There are 2 kinds of personal statements:

1. Comprehensive- you write about yourself and have the most freedom in what you write.
2. Responses- you answer specific questions asked on an application.

Goals of a Personal Statement:

1. Set yourself apart from other candidates. What makes *you* unique?
2. Engage the reader. Be creative and interesting.
3. Be concise.

Remember:

This is a sample of your writing ability and a good chance to set yourself apart. Most law schools don't have interview processes, and test scores, GPAs, and resumes tend to look alike. This is your opportunity to explain any circumstances that have adversely affected your academics and future goals.

Getting Ready to Write your Personal Statement:

Taken from Donald Asher's [Graduate Admissions Essays: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why](#). What makes you unique? Different? Unusual?

1. Who/What have your intellectual influences been? Think about:

- Writers and articles you have read in your field that have influenced your development
- Who were your favorite professors in college and why
- The best paper you ever wrote (in your major) and why it was good
- What was the most important book, play, article, or film you have ever read/seen, and how has it influenced you
- What is the single most important concept you have learned in college
- Are there any professors at the school you are applying to that have influenced your work, or who you'd like to work with? (You MUST be sincere! Name-dropping isn't cool.)
- Any other educational milestones that seem relevant

2. Academic background:

- How have you prepared yourself to succeed in grad school?
- What body of relevant knowledge will you take with you?
- What study or laboratory skills have you honed to date?
- What research have you completed to date? Any publications?
- What role did you play in any research project? What was the outcome or purpose of it?
- What did you learn (*Really learn*) from your research? It may not be just facts, but concepts, techniques, or skills.
- What is your biggest accomplishment to date?

3. Career Choice/Goals:

- Think about the reasons why you are choosing to go to grad school, and to what career you hope it leads.
- Why are you choosing grad school rather than some other path?
- How have your work/internship experiences, volunteer activities, and/or family or life experiences led you to pursue grad school?
- What are the options that going to grad school will give you?
- What is your five-year goal? Ten-year goal?
- When did you first become interested in your current career direction? How has that interest evolved?
- How did you become certain of this choice?

Finally, remember: Tact, Sincerity, Honesty. Be clear and concise, but don't leave out the obvious!

Writing Personal Statements

"The secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components." - William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*

Don't try to guess what the admissions committee wants to read. Don't try to impress them. Just write honestly, simply, and clearly about yourself and your aspirations.

Understand your motivations for applying and include them. Attending grad school is a huge commitment of not only money but several years of your life. You should know why you want to attend a certain school. Let them know what those reasons are too. A compelling personal statement enables you to stand out in a field with other high-achieving persons and helps you overcome any gaps or inadequacies in your record.

Be personal—talk about YOU! But hone in on certain aspects of yourself. Ask yourself: "What are the most important characteristics and values, goals and ambitions,

life experiences and service activities that define who I am?" Then decide which of these you wish to emphasize in your personal statement. Don't try to cover every aspect. Keep in mind that while you might not have had any traumatic experiences nor come from a financially challenged family environment, you still have likely had experiences that are interesting to relate and that have been formative in your development as a future leader.

Read good personal statements to see how effective and revealing they can be. Come to the writing consultancy for some, or go to the library- there are lots of books about writing personal statements with lots of examples.

Decide on a story line for your personal statement. In telling your story, use your responses to bring out some dimensions that are not obvious from reading your list of activities. Reveal why you are committed to making a difference in the world. Tell the story in an interesting, compelling, and perhaps amusing way. But remember: **it must be authentic.**

Build a good case for your chosen path. Make clear what you want to study/do, why you would be an excellent student in this field, and how it will benefit you in the long run. Explain your career goals and motivations. Consider having fun and lightness in your personal statement.

Explain 'understandable' gaps or weaknesses. If you had a serious illness or unusually heavy family obligations that temporarily affected your grades or limited your participation in various activities, share it. Just don't use a 'sob story' in an attempt to advance your candidacy.

From "The Rhodes Scholarship: Notes for Truman Scholars and Other College Students" by Louis H. Blair, Executive Secretary of the Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation, <www.rhodesscholar.org>

Structuring your Personal Statement

A typical 2-page personal statement will consist of the following:

- An introductory paragraph that provides your essay's controlling theme.
- 2-4 body paragraphs that develop your theme through examples and detailed experiences and build upon each other. The final body paragraph will contain you most poignant information.
- A conclusion that widens the lens and wraps up your essay without summarizing or repeating what has already been written.

Advice from Professor Judge (who used to read Personal Statements for Admissions Committees):

- 1) Personal Statements are read and taken into serious consideration by faculty and staff. Professors are critical and carefully review the essays. They are

looking for focus and clarity. They want to see if you are focused and understand the topics studied in their programs. It is always beneficial to add a paragraph on a specific feature of the program that you find interesting. Also, if students have read articles or books by a professor on the faculty of the institution, include that in the personal statement. However, faculty can see through flattery. They want to see that students have a genuine interest in the field and are ready to make a commitment.

2) Personal statements should be carefully crafted for each school to which students are applying. That means no general personal statements (NO mail merges that simply change the name of the school). Faculty and staff spot this type of personal statement very quickly. Faculty want to see that students have researched the program and are interested in the academic discipline.

3) Carefully read the application and the directions provided on the application. If an institution asks very specific questions on the application, students must answer the question, NOT the question you want to answer.

Dos and Don'ts for Writing Personal Statements

DO:

- Grab your reader's attention. Does it pass the 20 second test?
- Find a "hook" for your essay, a controlling idea that ties it all together. It could be a story or an interesting characteristic.
- Be positive and upbeat in tone.
- Be as selective as possible. Avoid listing or too much detail.
- Use concrete examples from your life experiences to support your thesis and distinguish yourself from other applicants.
- Be honest. The admissions people want to find out who you really are.
- Write about what really interests or excites you.
- Show you know more about the field than what you have seen on TV or movies.
- Explain your weaknesses. Succinct explanations work best.
- Fit your essay into the big picture of your application. If you declare a lifelong interest in a career but have no supporting evidence, your words will be suspect.
- Visit the Writing Consultancy.
- Ask your friends and family to read it. Ask them if it sounds like you.

DON'T:

- Just tell a story. If you use a story, be sure to analyze it and explain why it is important, what you learned, etc.
- Just repeat your résumé. Your application already includes one. This is your chance to fill in the blanks.
- Dwell on something from the distant past. High school happened too long ago to make an impact. Exceptions are lifelong struggles, such as disability or economic hardship.

- Assume that your education background will be instantly understood by the reader. Describe your school, workplace, etc. with names and detailed explanations.
- Use clichés or generalities.
- Brag. Statements like “I plan to win the Nobel Prize” or “I am a caring person” do not reflect well on you.
- Try to impress the readers with your vocabulary.

Still having trouble getting started?

Having trouble determining what makes you unique or why you would be a good candidate? Try asking family, friends, professors, employers, or anyone else who knows you well what they think your strengths are. Here are a couple of questions that you can either ask them or ask yourself in the brainstorming process:

1. What do you think is most important for the admissions committee to know about me?
2. What do you regard as most unusual, distinctive, unique, and/or impressive about me (based on our association)?
3. Are you aware of any events or experiences in my background that might be of particular interest to those considering my application to graduate school?
4. Are there any special qualities or skills that I possess that tend to make you think I would be successful in graduate school and/or the profession to which I aspire?