

# Write the Right Personal Statement



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**What is a personal statement?** Your personal statement is the first impression that you will make on prospective graduate and professional schools. Your GPA and standardized test scores give the committee some idea of your academic abilities, and your resume lets them know what you have done and where you have been. But your personal statement may actually be the most important part of the application because it lets the committee learn something about you that they would not have gathered from the rest of the application. Personal statements are easy ways to make a lasting first impression on the selection committee. And for law schools the statement carries even more weight in the eyes of the selection committee since most use the personal statement in lieu of an in-person interview.

A personal statement is not a diary, plea or a justification for why you should be admitted to a particular program. It is an opportunity to introduce yourself to the selection committee without them physically meeting you. Do not be afraid to open up a little. The best advice is to put your best foot forward and really present yourself to the committee. A personal statement is supposed to be a meaningful self reflection, not a resume.

Different people will give you different advice on what to include and what to leave out of your statement, so always consider the source of information and explore the possibilities. Write the appropriate type of personal statement for the position you are applying for, whether it be graduate, medical or law school. Spend time reflecting on your life, the things you consider most important and the major events and people who have impacted you, and use these to write a statement that lets the reader learn something about you that s/he could not gather from the rest of your application.

Make sure several sets of eyes review your statement before submission. Faculty in your area of interest, the Debbie Ellis Writing Center and friends are great places to look for help. If you have a personal statement and would like it reviewed by Career Services, call x1346 to set up an appointment.

## Format of a personal statement

**The basics:** Personal statements are usually limited to 500 words, or about one or two pages. Paragraphs should be single spaced and an extra line should separate individual paragraphs. A standard typeface and formatting conventions should be used to make your statement easily readable. Review committees look at hundreds of statements a year, so if yours exceeds one page, a header with your name and page number should be included on the subsequent pages. Some

applications encourage applicants to submit supplementary materials like resumes, CVs, accredited peer-reviewed published works and presentations, whereas others will not even consider these additions. "Above all else," experts say, "read the guidelines and follow every single one."

As one of the few opportunities for free expression to the committee, a statement is also read to evaluate your writing and communication skills. Your statement should transition easily throughout while staying focused on one main topic.

A common mistake that applicants make is forgetting to answer the question by the end of their statement. Read the prompt over a few times and jot down any and every idea that comes to mind well before you even get near a computer. When you begin writing it's more important to have extra ideas than to have nothing to write about at all. Besides, editing doesn't come until much later. Another frequently encountered mistake is incorrect word usage. After writing your first draft, take a break and then read it thoroughly. Go slowly and take the time to look for any and all simple errors. A common mistake like switching "effect" and "affect" annoys committee members and also makes your work appear sloppy and unimpressive. Critics also suggest that applicants avoid loading their statements with new vocabulary and unfamiliar jargon. If you aren't sure what it means, leave it out.

Simple grammatical and spelling errors will also distract from your story and make you appear careless to the committee. Don't let this happen to you. After you are finished, read your statement over a few times then have at least one other person proofread it. Try to find a person very familiar with you and ask her/him if your statement is an accurate representation of you. It should be as if you are standing right in front of readers after they finish with your statement. In short, if the statement doesn't sound like you, it's not personal enough. Thoroughly check over your statement before you send it off and make sure you have answered all the questions and that you have said exactly what you meant to say.

**Start strong:** Application committees read hundreds of statements each year and need help distinguishing one from another. The best way to make your statement as memorable as possible is to open with a really attention-grabbing paragraph. Be creative and give the committee members something to remember while reading someone else's statement. Using a unique style or including a particularly interesting piece of information are possible ways of accomplishing this goal. Above all, try to get the selection committee to remember you in

the most positive light possible. Be careful not to confuse creative with weird or questionable, though. However you decide to begin, keep the same tone throughout your paper and drive your point home in the end.

**Types of statements:** One of the two most common types of personal statements is the general, comprehensive personal statement, which is an open-ended prompt similar to "Tell us about you." Personal statements of this type are usually the hardest to write and require that you put some serious soul-searching thought into your response. The most important thing to remember is to avoid clichés. Most students applying to medical school have at one point or another told someone that they like science and want to help people. A personal statement should be more specific and unique. Also stay clear of saying that you have "*always wanted to be a...*" This statement too is cliché; the rest of your application should reflect how much dedication you have put towards your career goals.

There are also personal statements which are response essays to more specific questions like, "What is your intended major and what academic interests do you plan to pursue if you are accepted?" Some applications use multiple questions that are to be answered in a more essay-style format. Business and graduate schools often ask applicants to evaluate a particular problem and offer advice as the prompt of the statement. Schools like to use these types of statements to analyze the candidate's thought process and problem solving abilities. Avoid writing an answer because you think it is the "correct" response or it's what they want to hear. Be as truthful and honest as possible and write what truly comes from the heart. Graduate programs are looking for creative and free-thinking problem solvers not just bodies.

**Most importantly your personal statement should be able to answer the questions:**

- o Why do you want to pursue continued education?
- o Why are you interested in this specific program?
- o What ideas do you have for future research (Master's and Doctoral programs)?
- o What are your future career goals and how does this graduate or professional education help you attain them?

In answering these questions, be sure to comment **briefly** on previous education, research and work experiences that have prepared you for graduate or professional school. Do not repeat everything from your resume or CV but include enough detail to show your proficiency within the field. Showcasing your experience will help you convince selection committees of your dedication to the field, and it also helps committees when the time comes to distribute grants, fellowships, and research/teaching assistantships.

Selection committees are interested in what interests you, so let them know. Some information on your current work interests is always welcomed. Often professors working as selection members use these essays as means of finding new students to work as research and teaching assistants.

Finally, make sure to include your career goals. Graduate schools especially like students that have given serious thought to where they will be in the future. It comforts the schools to know that the training they would potentially expend on you will not be done in vain. Letting the schools know that you have plans speaks well on your behalf. The more thought-out your plans, the more likely schools are to consider you for their limited number of positions.

### Helpful advice to remember

**Write more than one:** Tailor every statement to each individual school to which you apply. Committee members can tell when applicants have chosen to write a generic personal statement for their applications, and experts highly advise against doing so. Just as every student wants to feel particularly special, so do graduate and professional schools. Generic statements imply a lack of interest in the school and can do more harm than good.

**Research:** Before you write your personal statement do some research into the programs the school offers and what current professors are working on. Experts suggest strict adherence to Asher's Law, which states, "Thou shalt not write, nor call, nor visit any faculty member without having read some of his or her writings first." Make special notes in your statement about any current research that corresponds to your own interests and what skills you could bring to the table if allowed. Try not to be too narrow or too specific with your work interests, however. It is always reasonable to add that you are open to exploring new directions while in graduate school. Do not simply praise the school for its reputation because the people reading your statement are already well aware of it. The more interest you show in the school the better.

**Repetition:** Try to avoid repeating information from other parts of your application in your personal statement. You are only given so much space to paint a complete picture of yourself so try not to waste space by saying the same thing twice. Unless your work experience or minority status and upbringing are integral to your story leave them out of your personal statement.

**Blemishes:** Experts recommend not wasting precious personal statement "real estate" commenting on a GPA or another aspect of your application which may be less competitive than you'd like. Do not make your statement a set of excuses for any blemishes in your application. However, if a serious illness or the death of a loved one directly contributed to a lower GPA consider writing a separate short addendum to explain. Use what space you have efficiently and effectively to put your best foot forward.

Recommended Reading Material:

Asher, D. Graduate Admissions Essays. Berkeley. Ten Speed Press. 2000. 35-110.

Kornegay, M. Getting into Business School. Canada. Peterson's. 2000.

Mager, E. "The Personal Statement." Get Into Graduate School: A Strategic Approach. New York. Simon & Schuster. 2003. 137-148.