



CENTER FOR CAREER & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Writing Personal Statements

What Is a Personal Statement?

Graduate or professional school may be the next step for you as you construct your well-managed professional life and shape your professional identity. Your personal statement is the first impression 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. It lets the committee learn something about you that they can't get from facts and numbers alone. Personal statements are an easy way to make a lasting first impression on the selection committee. And for law schools, the statement carries even more weight, since most use the personal statement in lieu of an in-person interview.

A personal statement is not a diary, a 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; 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. Always consider the source of the advice 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, friends and family, and the Center for Career & Professional Development are all great places to look for help. Visit CCPD's drop-in advising hours or set up an appointment to have your draft reviewed.

Format of a Personal Statement

THE BASICS: Using your 21st century career-readiness skills of communication and professionalism are critical to crafting a

winning personal statement. Personal statements are usually limited to 500 words (approximately one to two pages). Paragraphs should be single-spaced with an extra line separating one from the next. A standard typeface and formatting convention 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 a page number should be included. Some schools encourage applicants to submit supplementary materials like resumes, CVs, accredited peer-reviewed published works, and presentations, whereas others will not even consider these additions. Most importantly, read the directions 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 thus be free of errors and typos and transition easily throughout, all while staying focused on your main topic.

A common mistake in writing personal statements is forgetting to answer the question asked in the prompt. Before going near a computer to start typing, read the prompt over a few times and jot down any and every idea that comes to your mind. When you begin writing, it's better 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 before reading it over thoroughly. Go slowly and take the time to look for simple errors. A common mistake like switching "effect" and "affect" annoys committee members and makes your work appear sloppy and unimpressive. Critics also suggest avoiding loading your statement 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 selection 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. Find someone who is very familiar with you and ask her/him if your statement is an accurate representation of you. Your statement should make readers feel as though you are standing right in front them. 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, making sure that you have answered all questions and 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 and drive your point home in the end.

TYPES OF STATEMENTS: There are two common types of personal statement. The general, comprehensive personal statement 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 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 _____.*" You have the rest of your application to show how much time and dedication you have put towards your career goals; don't waste precious space in your personal statement for such clichés.

There are also personal statements responding 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 include multiple questions that are to be answered in a more essay-style format. Business and graduate schools often use prompts asking applicants to evaluate a particular problem and offer advice. 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's the "correct" response or that it's what they want to hear. Be as truthful and honest as possible and write 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 following questions:

- Why do you want to pursue continued education?
- Why are you interested in this specific program?
- What ideas do you have for future research (Master's and Doctoral programs)?
- 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 in the field. Showcasing your experience will help you convince selection committees of your dedication to the field and will also help 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. Professors working as selection members often 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 the school it's being sent to. Committee members can tell when applicants have chosen to write a generic personal statement for all their applications, and experts highly advise against doing so. Just as every student wants to feel 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. 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—the people reading your statement are already well aware of it. The more knowledge of the school you demonstrate, the better—it shows readers that you are invested in your search and are genuinely interested in the school.

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 don't waste any 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 that 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, the death of a loved one, or another major life disruption 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.