

Writing Personal Statements

Overview of the Personal Statement

Personal statements are sometimes also called “application essays” or “statements of purpose.” Whatever they are called, they are essentially essays which are written in response to a question or questions on a graduate or professional school application form which asks for some sort of sustained response.

Some applications ask more specific questions than others. There is no set formula to follow in shaping your response, only choices for you to make, such as whether you should write an essay that is more autobiographically focused or one that is more professionally focused.

From application to application, requested personal statements also vary widely in length, ranging from a couple of paragraphs to a series of essays of a page or so each.

Personal statements are most important when you are applying to an extremely competitive program, where all the applicants have high test scores and GPA’s, and when you are a marginal candidate and need the essay to compensate for low test scores or a low GPA.

Context Considerations

How are personal statements read, and by whom? It’s most likely that your personal statement will be read by professors who serve on an admissions committee in the department to which you are applying. It is important in developing your personal statement to carefully consider this audience. What are the areas of specialty of this department, and what might it be looking for in a graduate student?

Additionally, since personal statements will most often be read as part of your “package,” they offer an opportunity to show aspects of yourself that will not be developed in other areas of your application. Obviously, it is important that personal statements are not simply prose formulations of material contained elsewhere in the application.

It may be helpful to think of the statement as the single opportunity in your package to allow the admissions committee to hear your voice. Often times, committees are sorting through large numbers of applications and essays, perhaps doing an initial quick sort to find the best applicants and then later reading some of the personal statements more thoroughly. Given that information, you will want your statement to readily engage the readers, and to clearly demonstrate what makes you a unique candidate—apart from the rest of the stack.

One Process for Writing the Personal Statement

1. Analyze the question(s) asked on a specific application.
2. Research the school and/or program to which you are applying.
3. Take a personal inventory (see ** below). Write out a 2-3 sentence response to each question.
4. Write your essay.
5. Revise your essay for form and content.
6. Ask someone else—preferably a faculty member in your area – to read your essay and make suggestions for further revision.
7. Revise again

****Personal Inventory Questions****

1. What makes you unique, or at least different from, any other applicant?
2. What attracts you to your chosen career? What do you expect to get out of it?
3. When did you initially become interested in this career? How has this interest developed? When did you become certain that this is what you wanted to do? What solidified your decision?
4. What are your intellectual influences? What writers, books, professors, concepts in college have shaped you?
5. How has your undergraduate academic experience prepared you for graduate/professional school?
6. What are two or three of the academic accomplishments which have most prepared you?
7. What research have you conducted? What did you learn from it?
8. What non-academic experiences contributed to your choice of school and/or career? (work, volunteer, family)
9. Do you have specific career plans? How does graduate or professional school pertain to them?
10. How much more education are you interested in?
11. What's the most important thing the admissions committee should know about you?
12. Think of a professor in your field that you've had already and that you like and respect. If this person were reading your application essay, what would most impress him or her?

Do . . .

1. Answer all the questions asked.

If you are applying to more than one program, you may find that each application asks a different question or set of questions, and that you don't really feel like writing a bunch of different responses. However, you should avoid the temptation to submit the same essay for different questions – it's far better to tailor your response to each question and each school.

If you do find yourself short on time and must tailor one basic essay to fit a number of different questions from a number of different schools, target your essay to your first-choice school, and keep in mind that the less your essay is suited to an application's particular questions, the more you may be jeopardizing your chances of being admitted to that school.

2. Be honest and confident in your statements.

Use positive emphasis. Do not try to hide, make excuses for, or lie about your weaknesses. In some cases, a student needs to explain a weak component of his or her application, but in other cases it may be best not to mention those weaknesses at all. Rather, write an essay that focuses on your strengths.

3. Write a coherent and INTERESTING essay. Make your first paragraph the best paragraph in your essay.
4. Develop a thesis about yourself early in the essay and argue it throughout. Each piece of information you give about yourself in the essay should somehow support your thesis.
5. Pick two to four main topics for a one-page essay. Don't summarize your entire life. Don't include needless details that take space away from a discussion of your professionalism, maturity, and ability to do intellectual work in your chosen field.
6. Think of the essay as not only an answer to a specific question but as an opportunity to introduce yourself, especially if your program doesn't interview applicants.
7. Ask yourself the following questions as you edit for content:
 - Are my goals well articulated?
 - Do I explain why I have selected this school and/or program in particular?
 - Do I demonstrate knowledge of this school or program?
 - Do I include interesting details that prove my claims about myself?
 - Is my tone confident?
8. Make sure your essay is absolutely perfect spelling, mechanics.
9. Use technical terminology and such techniques as passive voice where appropriate, but only where appropriate. You should write clearly and interestingly, yet also speak in a voice appropriate to your field.

Don't . . .

1. Write what you think the admissions committee wants to hear. You are probably wrong, and such a response is likely to make you blend into the crowd rather than stand out from it.
2. Use empty, vague, over-used words like *meaningful*, *beautiful*, *challenging*, *invaluable*, or *rewarding*.
3. Overwrite or belabor a minor point about yourself.
4. Repeat information directly from the application form itself unless you use it to illustrate a point or want to develop it further.
5. Emphasize the negative. Again, the admissions committee already knows your GPA and test scores, and they probably are not interested in reading about how a list of events in your personal life caused you to perform poorly. Explain what you feel you need to, but emphasize the positive.
6. Try to be funny – you don't want to take the risk they won't get the joke.
7. Get too personal about religion, politics, or your lack of education (avoid emotional catharsis).
8. Include footnotes, quotations from dead people, or long-winded and slow introductions.
9. Use statements like "I've always wanted to be a . . ." or any other hackneyed phrases.
10. Use gimmicks – too big of a risk on an application to a graduate or professional program.
11. Allow ANY superficial errors in spelling, mechanics, grammar, punctuation, format, or printing to creep under your vigilant guard.