

Personal Statements

WHAT IS A PERSONAL STATEMENT?

A personal statement (or “statement of purpose”) is a short essay designed to let an admissions committee know who you are. In some ways, it is similar to a cover letter, in that it puts a personality on the more “objective” parts of your application (like your resume, test scores, etc.). Although personal statements are meant to be “personal,” they should be neither informal nor overly intimate. Remember: your personal statement should demonstrate to the committee that you will be successful in their school or program.

HOW DO I WRITE A GOOD PERSONAL STATEMENT?

There’s no one way to write a good personal statement, and what you include in yours will vary depending on your background, experience, and the program to which you are applying. That said, keep in mind....

- Admissions committees are going to read dozens, if not hundreds, of personal statements. They’re probably only going to read yours once. You want to make it both memorable (in a good way) and easy to read.
- Personalize your statement to the school/program for which you are applying. Like cover letters, you will need a different personal statement for each application you fill out. Different schools and programs have different focuses, faculty, and research opportunities. Show the committee that you are a good fit for their program by demonstrating interest in what they have to offer you.
- Keep focused. Make up a “bumper sticker” version of the life story you want to present to the committee – something like “I was a patient; I want to be a doctor” or “from show jumping to veterinary school” – and keep it in mind as you write. Think of this as the “thesis” of your personal statement.
- The human mind is built to value and remember narratives better than lists of dry facts. Take advantage of this when you craft your personal statement. Use stories, anecdotes, humor, and concrete details when describing your experiences.
- Avoid clichés. Statements like “ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to be a doctor” or “I want to help people” may be true, but they are also probably true of at least 75% of the other applicants. You want your personal statement to be personal to *you*. Don’t use stories or statements that could apply to anybody else.
- Demonstrate your interest in the specifics. In addition to experience and qualities specific to their program, remember that most committees are looking for applicants who are interested in and dedicated to their field. You don’t have to know what your exact career path will be when you apply, but you should demonstrate some knowledge of the possibilities available to you. The more specific you can be, the more serious you will appear to the admissions committee.
- Follow the rules! DO NOT exceed the maximum word limit, make sure you proofread carefully, and if there is a prompt make sure you’ve answered every aspect of it. Remember: you want to make your statement as easy for the committee to read as possible.

WHAT SHOULD I AVOID?

While you should not write a generalized or overly vague personal statement, you should also avoid information and tactics that can make you appear unprofessional. These include references to personal topics – like mental health or religion – that are unrelated to the program at hand, inappropriate humor, or insincere flattery. For more on what NOT to do, see “How to Avoid the Kisses of Death in the Graduate School Application Process.”

Brainstorming Content for Personal Statements

You can brainstorm for a personal statement much the same way that you can brainstorm for any other assignment: think about your thesis (the “bumper sticker” version of your story), your points (the qualities you want to illustrate to the reader), and the evidence you have (your personal experience). Just like with other types of essays, you don’t necessarily have to gather the information in that order. Below is a worksheet that can help you get started.

Write down the qualities and skills that the admissions committee is looking for in Column 1. Then, write down the personal stories that you could include in your statement in Column 2. Now, play a matching game and decide what materials from Column 2 best demonstrate the skills and qualities in Column 1.

COLUMN 1

Qualities/skills your program requires

COLUMN 2

Stories/anecdotes that illustrate those qualities

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Once you’ve filled out the chart above, go back and look over the best material you have come up with. What kind of narrative, transformation, or progress is illustrated by your chosen stories? That will be your “bumper sticker” version of events.

This handout is adapted from resources created by Shane McNamee and Courtney Massie of the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin (umc.utexas.edu).