

Personal Statement Assignment

PERSONAL STATEMENT ASSIGNMENT

Personal Statement

Personal Statement

The personal statement, your opportunity to sell yourself in the application process, generally falls into one of two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement—this allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write and is the type of statement often prepared for standard medical or law school application forms.
2. The response to very specific questions—often, graduate school applications ask specific questions, and your statement should respond specifically to the question being asked. Some school applications favor multiple essays, typically asking for responses to three or more questions.

Questions to Ask

Questions to Ask Yourself

- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influence your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulate your interests and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, and/or persistence) do you possess that would improve your

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prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?

- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
- Why you might be a stronger candidate for graduate school—an more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

Personal Statement Principles

Answer the questions that are asked

If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar. Don't be tempted to use the same statement for all applications. It is important to answer each question being asked, and if slightly different answers are needed, you should write separate statements. In every case, be sure your answer fits the question being asked.

Tell a story

Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do is to bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you'll be putting yourself ahead of the pack. If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable.

Be specific

Don't, for example, state that you would make an excellent doctor unless you can back it up with specific reasons. Your desire to become a lawyer, engineer, or whatever, should be logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.

Find an angle

If you're like most people, your life story lacks drama, so figuring out a way to make it interesting becomes the big challenge. Finding an angle or a "hook" is vital.

Concentrate on your opening paragraph

The lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab the reader's attention or lose it. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.

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Tell what you know

The middle section of your essay might detail your interest and experience in your particular field, as well as some of your knowledge of the field. Too many people graduate with little or no knowledge of the nuts and bolts of the profession or field they hope to enter. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field and use the language professionals use in conveying this information. Refer to experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other source of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it. Since you will have to select what you include in your statement, the choices you make are often an indication of your judgment.

Don't include some subjects

There are certain things left out of personal statements. For example, references to experiences or accomplishments in high school or earlier are generally not a good idea. Don't mention potentially controversial subjects (for example, controversial religious or political issues).

Do some research, if needed

If a school wants to know why you're applying to it rather than another school, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. If the school setting would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention.

Write well and correctly

Be meticulous. Type and proofread your essay very carefully. Many admissions officers say that good written skills and command of correct use of language are important to them as they read these statements. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Adhere to stated word limits.

Avoid clichés

A medical school applicant who writes that he is good at science and wants to help other people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from often-repeated or tired statements.

Effective Personal Statement

But before you write a single word, make sure you know what is expected of a successful personal statement.

An effective personal statement . . .

Is thoughtful and honest

A strong personal statement is **reflective**; that is, it demonstrates that you have thought about and gained a clear perspective on your experiences and what you want in your future. It does not simply tell a reader what you think he/she wants to know. Instead, it gives the reader a vivid and compelling picture of you--in essence, telling the reader what he or she should know about you. Remember that the focus of the essay is YOU--your achievements, your obstacles, your goals, your values.

Strives for depth, not breadth

A good essay is not a list of your accomplishments. Remember when your mom told you that it's quality, not quantity, that counts? Well, the same adage applies for your college essay. A reader will be much more interested in how your experience demonstrates the theme of your essay, not the number of accomplishments you can list. What is NOT interesting: an essay that devotes one paragraph each to a variety of different topics. This type of approach denies you the ability to give depth to your essay.

Follows the conventions of good writing

A good essay uses appropriate grammar and syntax, uses precise and vivid language, and does not contain any spelling errors.

Conforms to guidelines

If the essay instructions tell you that the essay should be two pages long, on white 8.5x11 inch paper, then the essay should be two pages long, on white 8.5x11 inch paper. Less is not more, and more is not better, either.

Answers the question!

A good essay is the result of a writer who has examined the essay question and written an essay that explicitly addresses that question. For example, if you are asked to *describe* your greatest accomplishment or any unusual circumstances or challenges you have faced, then your reader will expect you to use vivid language that will enable the reader to visualize your accomplishment and share your sense of success.

Benefits from several drafts and feedback from others

Revision allows an essay to grow. Revising is not editing; revising is the act of "re-seeing" and of looking for those parts of the essay that

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would benefit from more explication, more (or less) vivid language, or even deleting parts that simply don't work to move your primary theme forward. Similarly, feedback from others can help you identify those parts of the essay that work well--and those that don't.

Contains a catchy introduction that will keep the reader interested

It is important to recognize that essay readers will read hundreds, maybe even thousands, of essays during the application review period. That means that an essay with a catchy introduction, one that gets right to the point and uses precise language and vivid imagery, is going to stand out more than an essay that is predictable and conventional in its opener.

Transforms blemishes into positives

It's okay to have flaws! The essay is your chance to show how you have transformed blemishes. For example, if your essay theme is "overcoming obstacles" and you earned a poor grade in a class, but went to a community college at night to repeat the course, it is important for your reader to know this because it is an example of your perseverance. The reader does not want to hear complaints about poor grades or circumstances, but rather wants to know how you have overcome them.

Demonstrates your knowledge of the major/college

No one expects you to know everything about the college or university to which you are applying. However, readers will want to know that you have done your homework. For example, if you write an essay that states your interest in becoming an engineer, but the college does not have an engineering program, then you haven't done your homework.

Exudes confidence--you will be successful no matter what

A good essay doesn't beg or brag. Colleges and universities want to admit the best students, and the best students are those who can demonstrate their ability to pursue their goals regardless of where they are admitted. Think of this as quiet confidence--the kind that reveals itself through your description of lifelong interests, sustained commitment, and/or perseverance in the face of adversity.

Personal Statement Structure

Introduction

Your introduction is where you establish the tone of your personal statement and set the scene, define its theme, and generally hook

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your reader by sparking interest with details and quotes. It's important that you avoid meaningless prose and get right to the point. Be sure, too, that your language is clear and specific--avoid filler words and clichés. Most importantly, be sure that the introductory paragraph captures the main idea of your essay.

Sometimes the introduction is the last portion of the essay to be completed, and that's okay. The introduction should provide a snapshot of what the rest of the essay will develop and expand upon, so if you don't know where the rest of the essay is headed, the introduction is impossible to write. Therefore, it is important to outline your essay so that you know how each of your examples will build upon one another and can better draft your introduction to reflect this.

Body Paragraphs

Body paragraphs are the meat of your essay, and as such are the most important component of your essay. In the body paragraphs, you will expand upon and provide support for the theme you introduced in the first paragraph and will provide the details that move that theme forward. A two page essay will typically contain 2-4 body paragraphs. Each paragraph contains:

- A topic sentence that expands your theme and makes a transition from the previous paragraph
- Development of ideas that support your essay's theme
- An ending sentence that wraps up the paragraph and helps to transition into the next paragraph

The first body paragraph is the place to start building your support for your theme. Here you will begin with the smallest components of your theme and, in subsequent paragraphs, work toward the most significant. Or you can organize chronologically. Try both methods and see which one is most persuasive for your particular theme.

Conclusion

Your conclusion is your chance to extend your essay's parameters and to demonstrate the significance of your experience in a larger context. A conclusion is not a repeat or summary of ideas presented elsewhere in the essay or application. Instead, it should re-affirm the validity of your essay's theme. This means that your conclusion should widen the lens rather than narrow the focus.

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Style Tips

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- Examine the personal statement for word accuracy; whenever possible, use a simpler word in place of a longer or more obscure word.
- Make sure that every word you use means what you think it means.
- Be yourself!
- Avoid empty words and phrases like "basically," "really," "goals and dreams."
- Use active verbs whenever possible. Go through your essay and circle every form of "to be" that you find ("is", "are", "were", etc). Substitute more active verbs.
- Avoid predictable (and stereotypical essay phrases) such as "I learned a lot," "I learned to work with others," "It was a fun and challenging experience," or "I learned that everyone is different," etc.
- Avoid using clichés and proverbs, or other over-used phrases from literary sources. They detract from the freshness of your essay.
- Use a normal, 10-12 point font to type your essay. Don't type in all italics, or in bold, or in an unusual font size. Avoid fancy font types—they are difficult to read.

Resources

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"Writing the Personal Statement," <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>.

"The Personal Statement," <http://students.berkeley.edu/apa/>