

PERSONAL STATEMENTS

TYPES OF PERSONAL STATEMENTS

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

- **General, comprehensive personal statement:** This allows maximum freedom for what you write and is the type of statement frequently used for standard medical or law school application forms.
- **Response to specific questions:** Business or graduate school applications often ask specific questions, and your statement should respond explicitly to the question. Some business school applications favor multiple essays, typically asking for responses to three or more questions.

WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT

Answer the questions that are asked

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

Tell a story

Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. But, don't bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively and different, you'll put yourself ahead of the pack. By distinguishing yourself through the story, you will be memorable.

Be specific

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

Find an angle

For many people, their life story lacks drama. So finding a way to make it interesting can be a challenge. Finding an angle or a "hook" is vital.

Concentrate on your opening paragraph

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

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 subject. Too many people graduate with little or no knowledge of the workings of the profession or field they hope to enter. Be specific on what you know about the occupation and use the language of professionals in the field. Refer to experiences, such as work, research, classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended or other sources of specific information about the career you want. Demonstrate why you're suited to it. Since you select what is included in your statement, your choices are often an indication of your judgment.

Don't include some subjects

There are certain things best 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, such as religious or political issues.

Do some research

If an institution wants to know why you're applying to it rather than another school, do some research. Find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. If the 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 carefully. Many admissions officers say good written skills and correct use of language are important 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.

CONDUCT A PERSONAL INVENTORY

- What's special, unique, distinctive and impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events) have shaped you or influenced your goals? Your answer might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants.
- When did you become interested in this field? What have you learned about it, and yourself, that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- How have you learned about this field? Was it through classes, readings, seminars, work, other experiences or conversations with people in the field?
- If you have worked during your collegiate years, what have you learned? Leadership or managerial skills are good examples. How has the work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain? Some examples include good grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning.
- Have you overcome any obstacles or hardships in your life? Examples may include economic, familial or physical issues.
- What personal characteristics, such as integrity, compassion or persistence do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills do you possess? Examples may include leadership, communicative and analytical skills.
- Why are you a stronger candidate for graduate school? Why will you be more successful and effective than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons why the admission committee should be interested in you?

RESEARCH THE ACADEMIC PROGRAM

- 1) A personal statement begins with good research.
 - Know as much as you can about the program to which you are applying.
 - Look at the university's website and identify the scholars who have interests similar to yours. Look at funding agencies' recent awards in areas you hope to study. Identify individuals with whom you hope to work. What courses do they teach? What are their approaches? Where have they been published and what active grants are they working on?
 - Check out what the roles teaching assistants and resident assistants have there.
- 2) Choose programs that are a good fit with your research interests.
- 3) Gather materials on the application process for each school you hope to apply to. Make a grid to help you organize what materials you will need for each application and how the letters of application or personal statements might differ.
- 4) At every step, answer the question "SO WHAT?" Why does what you are saying matter to the future of the profession? Demonstrate you are engaged in an intellectual conversation. Don't say you love to read or love animals or want to help children – No one needs a doctorate to do those things, and those are assumed. Discuss what intellectual questions or problems you are interested in exploring and why this school is the best place to explore those issues.
- 5) Show you know the language of your discipline – talk the talk. But you don't need to write convoluted prose to do this. Be clear, be concise, be smart, but be correct. Use terms and ideas you find in the school's program materials, after being sure your definitions are on-target.
- 6) Be human – show who you really are. If they don't want you, you would not have been happy there.

WRITING THE PERSONAL STATEMENT: 10 RULES

- 1) Strive for depth rather than breadth. Narrow your focus to one or two key themes, ideas or experiences.
- 2) Tell the reader something no other applicant will be able to say.
- 3) Provide the reader with insight into what drives you.
- 4) Be yourself, not the "ideal" applicant.
- 5) Be creative and imaginative in the opening remarks, but make sure it's something no one else could write.
- 6) Address the school's unique features that interest you.
- 7) Focus on the affirmative in the personal statement; consider an addendum to explain deficiencies or blemishes.
- 8) Evaluate experiences, rather than describe them.
- 9) Proofread carefully for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage and style. Use your university's resources, such as the Center for Writers.
- 10) Use readable fonts, typeface conventional spacing and margins.

THINGS TO AVOID

- Don't repeat your resume in essay form; avoid repeating information found elsewhere on the application.
- Don't complain or whine about the "system" or circumstances in your life.
- Don't preach to your reader. You can express opinions, but support and contextualize them.
- Don't talk about money as a motivator.
- Don't remind the school of its rankings or tell them how good they are. If they are good, they know it. If they aren't, the committee laughs at your research skills.
- Don't use clichéd intros or conclusions.
- Don't use unconventional and gimmicky formats and packages.
- Don't submit supplemental materials unless they are requested.
- Don't get the name wrong of the school, individual professors or the person to whom you are addressing your materials.
- Don't incorporate technical language or uncommon words.
- Don't use the same essay for multiple schools – you will nearly always need to fine-tune your responses to specific questions to show you have done research on each institution.
- Don't use inappropriate email addresses.

Stewart, Mark Alan. *Perfect Personal Statements*. New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1996.



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