
Agenda:

- Kinds of personal statements (what are you being asked to do?)
- Some general things
- Doing an inventory (know yourself)
- Begin with research (know your target program)
- What to include
- What NEVER to include
- Quick video: How not to represent yourself
- Questions?

Types of personal statements:

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

- **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.
- **The response to very specific questions:** Often, business and graduate school applications ask specific questions, and your statement should respond specifically to the question being asked. Some business school applications favor multiple essays, typically asking for responses to three or more questions.

(Doran, Jo and Allen Brizee. "Writing the Personal Statement." *Purdue OWL*. July 9, 2010. <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/> October 15, 2010. Web.)

Writing a personal statement**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.

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 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 (for example, controversial religious or political issues).

Do some research!

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.

(Stelzer, Richard. *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement*. 3rd ed. Peterson's: Princeton, 1997.)

Begin with an inventory:

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 influenced 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 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—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?

- What are your career goals?

- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

Full Personal Inventory:

- 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 influenced 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 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—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 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 might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and 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?

Knowing the target program:

- 1) A personal statement begins with very good research.
 - Know as much as you can about the program to which you are applying.
 - Look on the university's web site and identify the scholars who have interests similar to yours, people with whom you would want to work. Look at funding agencies recent awards in areas you hope to study. Identify individuals with whom you might hope to work. What courses do they teach? What are their approaches? Where have they been published, what active grants are they working on?
 - Check out what TAs teach there or what RAs do there.
- 2) Choose programs that seem like 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, etc. Show that you are engaged in an intellectual conversation and that you know the other people conversing are. DON'T say you love to read or love animals or want to help children. No one needs a PhD to do those things, and those are assumed (for the appropriate field). Talk about what intellectual questions or problems you are interested in exploring and why this school is the best place to explore those issues.
- 5) Write to show that you know the language of your discipline—that you talk the talk—but know that you do not 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 program materials the school has sent out, after being sure your definitions are on-target.
- 6) Be human—write to show who you really are. If they don't want you, you wouldn't have been happy there.

Writing the Personal Statement: Top 10 Rules

- 1) Strive for depth rather than breadth. Narrow focus to one or two key themes, ideas or experiences.
- 2) Try to tell the reader something that 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) Get creative and imaginative in the opening remarks, but make sure it's something that 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, and conventional spacing and margins.

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

Probably don't do these things:

- 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 and if they aren't the committee laughs at your research skills.
- Don't use boring 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 of the school or individual professors or the name of the person to who you are addressing your materials wrong.
- Don't incorporate technical language or very uncommon words.
- Don't use the same essay for multiple schools—you will nearly always need to fine tune to respond to specific questions, or to show you have done your research on each institution.
- Don't use inappropriate e-mail addresses.

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