

Personal Statements



A strong personal statement can set you apart from other candidates with similar test scores, transcripts, and letters of recommendation. Although every discipline and program is different, this handout offers general principles to keep in mind as you develop your personal statement.

Prewriting

There is much work to be done prior to actually writing a personal statement. Research, reflection, and review are important prewriting activities that will help you draft a personal statement and tailor it to each program.

Research

Conduct research to better understand your chosen field, the programs you are applying to, and your connections to these entities.

- Why do you want to enter this field? When did you become interested in the field and why?
- What related career paths interest you? What schools and programs are you interested in?
- What is special about the faculty, courses offered, placement record, or facilities at this program?
- How do the program offerings and faculty expertise fit your personal and professional goals?

Reflect

Determine how to most effectively portray your personality, unique experiences, and specific knowledge. Include any other elements needed to help you connect with your audience and stand out as a strong candidate for your chosen programs.

- What unique education, work, life experience, or values have prepared you to enter this field?
- Why should you be chosen over other applicants? What are your strengths and shortcomings? How will these affect your educational and career goals?
- What experiences will best help your audience get to know you? Which are most relevant?

Remember, it is better to provide a specific example demonstrating your strong work ethic rather than just stating you are a hard worker.

Review

Thoroughly review all application instructions to make your personal statement most effective.

- What key terms from the prompt will guide your personal statement?
- What are the page length or word count requirements?
- Is a sample application provided? Are tips for preparing effective application materials offered?
- Who is your audience? Who can you contact with questions during the application process?

Writing

Begin drafting your personal statement early to give yourself sufficient time to review and revise your work. Keep in mind that weaving your main points into a story or narrative often makes your statement more memorable. Below is a basic outline for a personal statement, but always be sure to tailor your statement to the discipline and program you are applying to.

Introduction: Capture the audience’s interest, state your purpose, and preview your main points

Body Content:

- Answer prompt questions
- Explain qualifications (i.e., the aspects of your past that qualify/prepare you for this program)
- Explain aspirations (i.e., the goals this program will help you achieve in the *future*)
- Address any information about your application that needs explaining, such as weak grades, unusual coursework, or long periods off of school or work

Conclusion: Restate your purpose, maintain the audience’s interest, and provide a sense of closure

Revising and Editing

Polish your writing. Be sure to leave plenty of time for revising and editing.

- Does your introduction capture your reader’s attention?
- Does your personal statement answer the questions posed by the application?
- Does your statement balance relevant past experiences (qualifications) with how the program you are applying to will help you achieve your personal and professional goals?

Things to Remember

- Avoid listing every related experience. Instead, focus on a few recent, relevant experiences that convey your main points. Cut irrelevant details to make your statement easier to read and remember.
- Make sure the tone or voice in your personal statement is personal, professional, and genuinely yours. While using “I” is acceptable, avoid overuse; vary sentence length and style to improve the tone of your work and keep the audience engaged.
- Ask for feedback on your writing from several trusted sources, including peers, family members, professionals, and writing tutors.
- Avoid cliches (common or overused phrases) that might make your writing seem generic.
- Avoid offending your audience with controversial or overly-personal topics or biased statements.
- If submitting online, be sure to use a professional file name and the requested file format.
- Continue revising and editing until you submit. Read your statement aloud to find and correct errors and awkward sentences. Be sure to take a break now and then and return to your statement with fresh eyes and renewed energy.