

Personal Statements

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

Personal statements are application essays that give admissions committees insight into who you are as an individual and why you are applying to a specific program or to continue your education in a particular field. While this handout outlines general steps for developing a personal statement, always tailor your statement to your discipline and to individual program application.

Before Writing a Personal Statement

Identify the Kind of Statement You are Writing

- ❑ Determine if you are writing **centralized or individual applications**. Some applications are submitted through a **centralized application system** where you submit one statement to be distributed to all the schools or programs you applying to (e.g., MCAS for medical school). If you are submitting **individual applications**, tailor your statement to each program.
- ❑ Establish whether you are writing a **personal statement or statement of purpose**. While some programs use these terms interchangeably, document titles may also indicate expectations. For example, a *personal statement* may emphasize personal content (e.g., background, experiences, or personal characteristics), and a *statement of purpose* may focus on your reasons for applying to a program (e.g., research interests or career goals). Read each prompt carefully to determine what information you are being asked to provide.

Research the Schools and Programs You are Applying to

- ❑ **Meet with advisors, professors, or professionals** who are knowledgeable about the programs you are applying to and the field you want to work in. Seek advice from those who have recently served on admissions boards or recently completed a similar program.
- ❑ **Collect program information**. Look for online **application materials**, including personal statement prompts, examples, and any guidance which programs give for writing a statement. Examine **faculty research** within programs, noting possible mentors or research areas.
- ❑ **Read and analyze prompts**. If provided with a question or prompt, consider why an admissions committee might ask that specific question. For example, if a prompt asks you to share how academic or work experiences have prepared you for graduate school, the question is *explicitly* asking you to connect your experiences to the program, but it is *implicitly* inviting you to share your personal strengths, such as how you pursue goals, overcome obstacles, or take initiative.

Reflect on Your Experiences and Aspirations

- ❑ **Consider how your personal, academic, and work experiences** have prepared you for graduate school and informed the work you want to pursue within your field of study.
- ❑ **Think about your career goals and how graduate school will help achieve them**. Use research about your field and the programs you are applying to in identifying how graduate school will help you achieve your personal and professional goals.

- ❑ **Note your qualifications or aspirations and how they *fit* each program’s objectives, culture, and values.** Consider your existing or desired research paths, coursework, communities, or personal connections.
- ❑ **Reflect on your experience working with diverse populations or how you might be a diverse candidate.** Since diversity can be defined multiple ways, be prepared to discuss your cultural, ethnic, or socioeconomic background or how your unique experiences or interests could contribute to the program.
- ❑ **Plan how you will bridge gaps.** For example, if you are applying for a graduate program in clinical psychology, you might include your interest in gaining clinical experience if you only have research experience listed on your resume.
- ❑ **Make a list of what you want to include in your personal statement.** List how you might respond to application prompts. While you may not use your entire list in your personal statement, listed experiences or responses can help you quickly draft effective statements.

Writing Your Personal Statement

- ❑ If you are writing a **longer statement** (between 500 and 2000 words), avoid simply restating your resume. Instead use the prompt to identify and write about select experiences that emphasize your personal qualities, qualifications, and aspirations. Give the statement a sense of cohesion by using a thesis statement or guiding theme.
- ❑ When writing **shorter statements**, answer as directly as possible while highlighting significant experiences, characteristics, or goals that set you apart from other applicants. When possible, avoid repetition when completing shorter statements.
- ❑ Use the **essay format** to engage readers, establish themes, and provide meaningful details that do not appear on your resume or transcripts.
- ❑ Use the **show, don’t tell** approach. Describe specific experiences that demonstrate your qualifications, rather than simply stating your qualifications. Use vivid language to make your personal statement engaging, particularly when you have plenty of words/length to work with.

TELLING: By volunteering at food coalitions, I have seen how sympathy can improve someone’s day.

SHOWING: John usually shuffled in alone, newspaper in hand, and sit at a back table. When his food was ready, I’d take a seat next to him for a few minutes to talk about what he was reading. As we talked, he seemed to light up, knowing there was someone willing to listen . . .

- ❑ If there are **discrepancies in your academic record**, you may choose to address them in your personal statement. However, many schools ask for an additional statement to explain these types of situations. In such a case, you need not address discrepancies in your main statement

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- ❑ **Be specific** with examples and details to help make your statement unique.

GENERAL: I am an incredibly personable student and love to help others. I'm excited to be able to interact with the students at your school.

SPECIFIC: While at ACME Inc., I built lasting relationships with peers and assisted in training new employees. This experience increased my desire and ability to interact and assist classmates in...

- ❑ **Avoid topics or experiences** that are generic, negative, or controversial as they can negatively affect how you are viewed. Some of these subjects include
 - overtly political or religious experiences or viewpoints
 - being critical of others
 - narratives of saving or saviorism
 - unyielding dedication to a specific area of study (since you want to demonstrate adaptability and a desire to learn).

If a prompt asks about your experience in religion or in politics, or, if you decide to talk about these topics, focus more on what you learned rather than on attempting to convert others to your beliefs or point of view.

- ❑ **Double-check the prompt** once you finish writing to ensure you have answered everything asked in a clear and purposeful way.

Revising Your Personal Statement

- ❑ **Plan on writing multiple drafts** of your personal statement, sometimes starting over several times to find the right tone and phrasing. Allot ample time for this stage.
- ❑ **Get feedback** from those in your field of interest, including professors and professionals.
- ❑ Consider scheduling several **writing center appointments** to work on or review drafts. Tutors can act as a general reader to let you know if your message is coming across clearly.
- ❑ Be sure to **tailor your personal statements** for each application.

Finalizing Your Personal Statement

- ❑ **Proofread** your personal statement for typos, grammar, and punctuation. If you are struggling with grammar or specific phrasing, consider meeting with a writing tutor or hiring an editor.
- ❑ Check your **word count** or **page limit**.
- ❑ Save your statement as a **PDF** to retain format AND **name your file** clearly and professionally.
- ❑ **Upload and submit** your statement in advance of the deadline in case of technical difficulties.