

The Personal Statement

Your ability to write well is a physical expression of your ability to think....

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q. WHAT IS A PERSONAL STATEMENT?

- A. A personal statement is a common part of the graduate/professional school application process. The personal statement allows you to create a more complete picture of who you are as a person, in addition to your application and transcript. A personal statement should tell a story, *your* story.

Q. WHAT DO I WRITE ABOUT?

- A. Many schools will list topics to address on their application websites. Make sure that you answer all questions the school asks as well as provide some details about what makes you unique as a candidate. Some schools will not provide any criteria for the personal statement; in this case, you have more freedom with your content, but reference the “general advice” on the back page of this handout for greater clarification about what to include in your statement.

Q. HOW LONG SHOULD MY PERSONAL STATEMENT BE?

- A. Unless otherwise specified on the school’s admission website, most personal statements are between 2-3 pages in length. Personal Statements are typically 1.5 or double spaced and adhere to regular one inch margin space. Use a font that is common and easy to read (Calibri, Times New Roman, etc.).

Q. CAN I USE THE SAME PERSONAL STATEMENT FOR EVERY INSTITUTION I AM APPLYING TO?

- A. The personal statement needs to be targeted to each individual school. You need to relate your experiences and qualifications to each individual institution. Make sure the reader knows why you are choosing their school and their program. It is EXTREMELY important to answer all of the questions the school has posed in their essay prompt.

Q. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE PERSONAL STATEMENT AND THE STATEMENT OF PURPOSE?

- A. A statement of purpose will contain much of the same information a personal statement contains (i.e. Your career goals, reasons for applying to the program, what you hope to learn, etc.), but a statement of purpose lacks the story telling element of the personal statement. The personal statement is a more engaging and literary document, whereas a statement of purpose is typically a more concise way to answer the questions asked by the school.

BEFORE YOU WRITE

THE HARDEST PART ABOUT WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT IS GETTING STARTED. BEFORE YOU START TYPING, THINK ABOUT THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS.

- What’s unique or distinctive about you?
- Who are your role models or major influences?
- What interests you about your field?
- How have you learned through your field?
- What other experiences have been influential in college?
- What are your career goals?
- What do you need to explain (GPA, gaps in education, etc.)?
- Have you overcome obstacles?
- What personal characteristics/skills do you possess?
- Why are you the right candidate for admittance?

GENERAL ADVICE

ANSWER THE QUESTIONS THAT ARE ASKED: Lots of schools may ask for similar information, but not all are the same. Use different statements for different schools, depending on the requirements.

TELL A STORY: Engage the reader, use a writing style that is fresh and active. Don't be afraid to use dialogue and descriptive language. Back up statements with examples and details.

HAVE AN ANGLE: Even if your life has been less than dramatic, you still have a story to tell.

PAY SPECIAL ATTENTION TO YOUR "LEAD": In the first paragraph, you will either grab attention or you will lose it. Use the lead to set the tone and direction for the statement.

SHOW THAT YOU KNOW SOMETHING: The middle section explains what you know and who you are. Show knowledge of your field and your profession. Show how you will impact the field, or what has impacted you in the pursuit of your field.

BE VERY WEARY OF SOME TOPICS: Accomplishments that happened in high school are generally irrelevant. Do not be controversial. Your content choice speaks volumes about your general judgment.

AVOID CLICHÉS: Statements like, "I like science" or "I want to help people," aren't specific enough reasons to pursue a graduate degree.

DO YOUR RESEARCH: What sets that particular program apart? Why does that program speak to you personally?

STAY FOCUSED ON THE INSTITUTION: What can you offer them?

PERFECTION IS A MUST: Be meticulous and thorough with your editing.

WATCH OUT FOR 'I'; STATEMENTS: Be careful that every statement does not begin with the word 'I'. Vary the sentence beginnings and stay focused on the institution.

COMMON PITFALLS

DO NOT....

- Simply repeat information that is found other places in your application packet.
- Complain or whine; do take ownership for the circumstances in your life and show how you have grown as a person and as a potential candidate.
- Preach to your reader. Avoid extremism.
- Talk about money as a motivating factor in your decision making process.
- Remind a school of its ranking or how good they are; do show you have researched the school and know more about it than merely its rank or reputation.
- Submit supplemental materials unless they are requested; do precisely follow the application instructions.