

Personal Statements

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

Requirements and expectations for a personal statement vary by field. Research your specific discipline thoroughly before you begin.

If there are discrepancies in your academic record (for instance, a bad semester that brought down your GPA, a great GPA but mediocre GRE score), you may choose to address them in your personal statement. Many schools, however, will ask for an additional statement to explain these types of situations.

General tips

- Learn about the field: do interviews, read, study programs.
- Be yourself, not the “ideal” candidate.
- Adhere to length limits set by the university.
- If the admissions committee asks you specific questions, be sure to answer them explicitly and completely.
- Go through several drafts to fully develop and focus your ideas—5 to 10 is not too many.
- Get feedback from professors, professionals in the field, and people you trust. Hire an editor if necessary.
- Customize your statement for each school you apply to.

Models

You may choose to follow a general model in your personal statement. Several examples of each model are available in the Writing Center. Standard models include:

Overcoming adversity

The “overcoming adversity” model is extremely popular among applicants, but it is a difficult genre to write well. Your adversity should be unique and you must connect it in a convincing way to your proposed program of study. Avoid sounding like a victim; instead, focus on one or two specific moments and deeply analyze them for relevance to your future path.

Explicating your qualifications

Successful examples of this genre often focus on a specific theme and delve deeply into a couple of specific experiences. Avoid simply restating your resume; instead, flesh out experiences and make connections to your future field. This model works especially well if you have significant related work experience to your proposed program of study or if you have impressive academic research you want to highlight. Be sure to give a sense of yourself as a person as well, however: don’t simply write impersonally about your achievements.

Answering the admissions questions

Graduate programs will often ask applicants a standard set of questions. One approach is simply to answer each of these questions in a paragraph or two each. Your personal statement will not read like a coherent whole, but this model allows you clearly to give the committee the information they want, and when written well, to spotlight on one or two significant events that set you apart. As with the other models, you should reflect and interpret your experiences rather than simply presenting them.

Writing Tips

Many students find it useful to brainstorm ideas and write up a few drafts with raw material before selecting the ideas for the final personal statement. Here are a few questions to start your brainstorming:

- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to admit you?

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- What was a major turning point in your life?
- How did you handle huge challenges in the past?
- What and who have been the major influences in your life?
- What details of your life might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- How have you learned about this field (classes, readings, work, personal study, interviews, etc.) and what insights have you gained that reinforce your desire to enter it and succeed?
- How will attending this university help further your career goals?

After you have some material to work with, begin crafting your statement. Using specific details, you will want to create accounts of one or two experiences that signify the core of what you want to say. Connect these with more general statements about your qualifications and about the program.

Give specific examples

Statements such as “I am a good worker” or “I have good work ethic and will succeed at your school” mean virtually nothing without specific examples. Focus on creating detailed accounts that exemplify the message you want to convey.

Weak Example: I have a good work ethic and can work until the cows come home. This means I will do well in your school.

Strong Example: My strong work ethic drives me to exceed expectations set for me. During my time as team leader at ImagiTech, I focused on beating quarterly and yearly sales projections. Under my leadership, the sales of my team rose 21% during the first fiscal year. All this was accomplished while attending my first year of college and earning a 3.7 cumulative GPA.

Use vivid language

Weak Example: I like snakes. As a kid I played with garden snakes all the time. I want to be a zoologist and specialize in reptiles. I want to go to your school because I am passionate about snakes and all sorts of reptiles.

Strong Example: I can still recall vividly the first time I saw a snake. I was in my backyard when a small green snake slithered quickly through the grass. I was intrigued by its sinuous movement, its speed, and beauty. I quickly ran and caught it, holding it gently in my hands. I knew then and there that I wanted to study snakes and other forms of reptilian life. Quickly exhausting the local library’s source of reptile books, I begged my mother to take me to the local university, where I would sit for hours, studying the habits and physiology of all sorts of reptilian life. Upon graduating high school I knew that I wanted to pursue a career as a herpetologist. Your institution appeals to me due to the reputation of its Zoology faculty and extensive opportunities for research.

Editing

Your personal statement is probably the most important document you will submit to graduate programs. Students commonly go through 5, 10, or even more drafts, sometimes starting over several times to strike the right tone and find the right phrasing. Don’t skimp on time at this stage, and get input from several people. Once you are happy with the results, have someone proofread your final version for stylistic mistakes.

If you are struggling with your personal statement, consider hiring a professional editor. The investment will often pay off in terms of admissions or financial offers.