

Writing A Winning Personal Statement

The admissions process for graduate and professional school is more competitive today than ever before. The increase in applications has been especially dramatic in recent years. Admissions officials recognize that "the numbers" -- GPA and test score -- do not tell the whole story about the candidate. They are looking for interesting, articulate, and distinctive individuals with different points of view, ambitions, and backgrounds. How does the admission committee strip away the numbers to uncover the human candidate? The essay questions commonly referred to as the **personal statement** on the admissions application are depended upon heavily.

What Is A Personal Statement?

A personal statement provides an account of who you are, what you have accomplished within the context of your own experiences and opportunities, what you intend to accomplish during graduate school and beyond. A good statement links the topics mentioned to create a well-organized and articulate presentation of your candidacy. It should include:

- 1) compelling reasons for the admission committee to accept you;
- 2) convincing evidence that you will both thrive in and contribute to the academic and social environment of the school.

What should you write about? What does the application question ask? Usually personal statements come from unique experiences, major influences or abilities. Do not discount anything. Though you may be applying to several schools and therefore have to answer many different essay questions, you will probably be able to submit essentially the same essay to multiple schools. Take inventory of all the different questions on the applications and make the appropriate modifications to your statement for each school to which you apply.

A personal statement is like an interview on paper. It is your chance to present a real sense of who you are. Writing an effective personal statement requires soul searching and reflection. Most people find it difficult to write about oneself, especially something personal or introspective. Describe who you are rather than what you have done -- what you care about -- what has shaped your life.

How To Write An Effective Statement

An effective personal statement will focus on one or two specific themes, incidents or points. It should be brief and concise. Strive for depth, not breadth. Do not try to put too much into your statement. An unusual, compelling story that is colorful and imaginative will make for a memorable and impressive personal statement. Tell the reader what no other applicant will honestly be able to say.

The most common mistake in writing personal statements is to write an expository resume of your background and experiences. Other portions of the application are meant for this. Remember that the admissions committee is looking for some insight into your persona: a glimpse of the human being behind the data in your file. Your statement should evoke a mental image of your personality.

The opening sentences are particularly critical in capturing the reader's curiosity and attention. Your introduction should entice the reader to read on. Tell a brief story with a clear, coherent, and distinctive theme. For example:

- Relate a particular experience and explain how it contributed to your sense of social commitment.
- Talk about what you learned about yourself (e.g.: your strengths or limitations) from a particular experience that has made you a better person - more mature, more self-confident, better suited for your chosen career path, etc.
- Demonstrate your tenacity by discussing one or two situations in which you succeeded in the face of adversity.

Do your homework on the school and weave into your statement indications that you possess the attributes most desired by the admissions committee. The personal statement is your opportunity to sell yourself to the committee. In general, what are admissions committees looking for:

- 1) how well you present your experiences and goals;
- 2) how well your accomplishments support your long-term goals; and
- 3) how your rationale for pursuing this program and degree fits into your career plan.

Your Final Draft

Test yourself to determine you are on the right track. When complete with your draft, show it to friends, family members or a Career Center staff member and ask: "If you never met me before, would you know me better after reading my personal statement? Does it give you a sense of who I really am?"

Before completing your final draft enlist others to proofread for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage and style. Who should give you feedback? Your faculty advisor, a career counselor or a writing center representative would be good choices. Be sure to use a highly readable font with conventional spacing and margins.

Now go and write a great personal statement and get into the graduate school of your choice!

Compiled from Perfect Personal Statements, Mark Alan Stewart, 2002, Thomson Peterson's, Lawrenceville, NJ. (Available for your use in the Career Center library in the graduate school section.)