

Writing a Personal Statement

A college application is made up of multiple documents that offer different representations of you as a student and as an individual. However, most of these documents speak for you: transcripts summarize your coursework and grades, letters of recommendation offer another's perspective of your potential, and a resume lists your experiences. The personal statement is the one place in your application where your voice is heard. Spend some time thinking about how you want that voice to sound and the picture of yourself you wish to portray.

Getting started: What should I write about?

- ❖ **Answer the question(s):** This should be your first priority when determining the focus of your essay. If a college or university has asked you to address specific questions, make sure that you do so in a clear, thoughtful, and thorough manner. Going off topic or ignoring these prompts means that you are not giving the admissions committee information they are looking for and can give the impression that you do not follow instructions.
- ❖ **Additional topics to consider:**
 - **Think like an admissions officer:** What questions will they have after reviewing your other application materials?
 - Have you attended multiple colleges or universities? If so, why?
 - Have you jumped between fields of study and/or programs? If so, why?
 - Are there places in your academic history where your grades dip, you have multiple withdrawals, and/or large absences from school? Explain these.
 - Which course of study have you followed so far and why?
 - **Address your long term academic plans and goals:**
 - What is your intended major? What leads you to pursue this?
 - What are your long term career goals? What leads you to pursue this?
 - Why have you chosen this college or university?
- ❖ **Focus:** By their nature, personal statements are short. You can't cover everything and shouldn't try. A statement that tries to cover too many topics generally lacks depth and reflection. Determine the one or two things you feel are most important for the admissions committee to understand about you and develop this/these topic(s).

Tips:

- ❖ **Answer the question(s):** See "Getting Started" above.
- ❖ **Respect stated word limits:** Admission Officers read hundreds of applications each year, which means that they need to read quickly. A too-long statement is often scanned and your big ideas can get lost or overlooked. Good personal statements offer a clear, focused message and create a distinct impression in 1-2 double spaced pages. If no word limit is offered, keep your statement to 500-750 words.
- ❖ **Make sure that your tone is appropriate:** A good personal statement strikes a balance between the personal and the professional. A statement that uses slang or "texting" language, or that feels overly confessional, can sound too informal or casual. At the same time, you don't want to sound overly formal as your personality will not come through. Be careful when using the thesaurus as you don't want to incorporate vocabulary that you would not use in your everyday life, and make sure that the statement still sounds like you. Your tone should be engaging and genuine, but it should also be professional.

- ❖ **Be reflective:** Reflective writing is different than informative writing. Informative writing relays facts and/or generalities: “My grades were low my first couple quarters in college, but I worked hard and brought my 1.6 up to a 3.1.” Reflective writing delves deeper, showing readers how you are thinking about, or have thought through, an experience: “With a cumulative GPA of a 1.6 at the end of my second quarter in college, I had to own up to the fact that I wasn’t taking my education seriously. School had fallen to the bottom of my priority list and I wasn’t sure what my goals were anymore. I needed to figure that out, so I took a year off and went back to work full time. Once away from school, I missed it. I missed learning new things and then talking about them in a classroom environment. I missed the feeling of accomplishment when I finished writing a paper or solved a hard math problem. I wasn’t sure what my major would be when I reenrolled in 2011, but I understood that taking my coursework seriously would allow me to find this focus and establish long term goals. I attended all classes, worked hard to understand my assignments, and even started visiting my professor’s office. I felt in control of my education and my GPA shot up as a result.” Memorable personal statements don’t simply list experiences and goals; they show the reader that the writer has really thought through the subject(s) they are writing about. The ability to be reflective is generally highly valued by admissions committees.
- ❖ **Show, don’t tell:** In such a short document it is easy to go into listing mode, naming or briefly summarizing qualities or experiences without offering specifics. However, writing like this can easily become vague or clichéd. Try to offer specific examples that show readers your central idea(s). For example, instead of saying “I want to be a nurse because I want to care for people” offer a specific example that illustrates your point: “The three days that my sister spent in the hospital were some of the hardest my family has ever experienced. Through it all, the nurses kept us updated about my sister’s status, offered in-depth answers to our many questions, and reminded us to eat and sleep. They made us feel safe, informed, and cared for during a difficult time, and I want to provide this kind of support to patients and their families in situations like ours.” Specific examples, particularly narratives, are memorable and allow you to stand out in a stack of applications.
- ❖ **Choose your stories carefully:** Offering personal narratives can be a great way to add reflection and specific examples to your statement. However, choose your stories carefully. Make sure that they illustrate the broader point or impression you are trying to give the committee. Stories that are not directly related to these main ideas can end up distracting from your broader point and make your statement seem unfocused.
- ❖ **Be organized:** Like all formal essays, the personal statement needs to have a clear beginning, middle, and end. You should have an introduction that highlights the main theme(s) or idea(s) your statement will cover, a body that uses reflection and examples to talk through these topics, and a conclusion that wraps things up without repeating what you have already said.
- ❖ **Revise, revise, revise:** Summing up your goals and creating an impression of the person you are in 500-750 words is hard. The personal statement is not a document to pull together the night before your application is due. Give yourself time to create multiple drafts and get feedback from others. It is harder to see shortcomings in your own writing, particularly when you are writing about yourself, so make sure that you have family members, teachers, and tutors read your draft(s). Use your Writing Center!
- ❖ **Edit:** Revision focuses on form and content while editing focuses on grammar, punctuation, spelling, and other sentence level issues. Because revisions will change the content of your essay, editing should be a last step in your writing process. While it is highly unlikely that a misplaced comma will make the difference between admission or denial, a poorly edited statement looks sloppy. It also calls into question your writing abilities, which can be a red flag for an admissions officer. Make sure that you give time to these mechanics.
- ❖ **Don’t Panic!** The personal statement is one piece of your application. Admission committees look at all aspects of your application when making their decisions and piece these together to create a broad picture of the person and student you are. The personal statement is important, but there are many other factors that will play into admission decisions.