



Personal Statement

A personal statement is a narrative that describes aspects of yourself that have not already been addressed in your application. It is not a simple reiteration of your experiences, as in your resume, nor is it only a description of your academic goals, as in a statement of purpose. A strong personal statement can set your application apart from the rest.

The following information should help you get started, but keep in mind that specific requirements for personal statements vary between institutions and programs. Always refer to instructions and fine print for each application.

Brainstorming

- **Create a list of questions to answer in depth**

Examples: What specific personal experiences/values made you pursue this path? What personal, professional, and/or academic skills/qualities of yours make you well-suited for this work? What roles have you played/what experiences have you had that led you to discover and hone these skills/qualities? What makes you unique from other potential applicants?

- **Get rid of the blank page**

Start with free writing, even if it seems meandering or unfocused. Some people like to begin with a rough outline instead—do whatever is most useful for you. Just start getting ideas on the page.

Refining

- **Be specific**

As you begin to flesh out your outline or free write, be sure to include as many specific details as possible. Root your essay in specific experiences rather than mere facts. Also, be wary of vague explanations.

- **Identify your focal point**

Once you have a rough draft or a more specific rough outline, read through and ask yourself: What is the single most important aspect of this piece? What is the one thing that all the other parts of the essay either point to or define? When you can point to this single idea, then you know where to focus all your energy. Any part of the essay that doesn't help strengthen this idea can be left out. Likewise, any area that only partially helps strengthen this idea can be reworked to clearly support it, or ultimately cut out as well.

- **Find your narrative hook**

Once you've found your essay's focal point, you can start to think about how you will present your story or ideas in a distinct way. Try to weave a theme through your statement. Start with the moment that marks your focal point and hook your reader by creating a scene around it.

Here's an example of an effective narrative hook:

“As the firm’s attorneys escorted the former chief financial officer from the building, his files confiscated and his office sealed and locked by a locksmith, I realized more than ever that teamwork and cooperation are essential management skills. The CFO had a vision and an action plan for the future of the company, but his methodologies led to his own downfall, damage to the shareholders, and disruption in every aspect of the organization. As he walked out the door, I resolved to go to graduate school at the University of Texas-Austin (U.T.) and pursue the M.B.A.”

(From Graduate Admissions Essays ed. Donald Asher)

Seeking Responses from Peers and Mentors

Sharing your work is a crucial step to a successful statement. Talk about your statement with friends and mentors. Your ability to convey points in conversation will confirm your clarity in writing, or it might help you identify certain ideas that need elaboration. Most importantly, always have professors or other professionals in your field read your drafts to provide discipline specific feedback.

Final Tips

- **Be your (formal) self**

Avoid over-elevated language or complicated jargon. Present yourself and your ideas in a simple, clear, and direct way. Someone outside of your field should be able to read and understand your essay just as easily as any professor in your discipline would.

- **Consider the past, but look to the future**

Your readers want to know your background, but they also want to know what you plan to do during/after your time in their program. Strive for a balanced discussion of both.

- **Be positive**

The personal statement is an ideal time to acknowledge/explain discrepancies in the rest of your application—poor grades, time taken off, employment gaps, etc.—but this should be handled in a positive way that ultimately emphasizes your competence and strength as an applicant. Illustrate what you've learned from those setbacks and discuss the role they have played in your journey to your application.



Links for Further Information

- **OWL at Purdue: Writing the Personal Statement**
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job_search_writing/preparing_an_application/writing_the_personal_statement/index.html
- **Accepted: Grad School Application Essays**
<https://www.accepted.com/grad/sampleessays>
- **UC Berkeley: Graduate Student-Statement**
<https://grad.berkeley.edu/admissions/steps-to-apply/requirements/personal-statement/>

