
GUIDE TO WRITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Personal statements, sometimes called application essays or statements of purpose, supplement your application to a graduate or professional school program. These essays provide your background and summarize your professional goals. Some applications ask you to address specific questions, while others leave it up to your interpretation about what you wish to share with the admissions committee.

ADMISSIONS COMMITTEES USE A PERSONAL STATEMENT TO:

- Get to know you, beyond your academic record, and understand your motivations.
- Assess your communication skills, especially your writing abilities.
- Evaluate whether you are a good match for the program and/or school.
- Gather additional information regarding your likelihood to succeed in the program.
- In some instances, gain context for application gaps or other challenges or obstacles in your life.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

- Address the questions or topics in the prompt. Tailor your statement to each school, if applicable, but note that for some programs (such as health professions) the same essay goes to all schools.
- Follow length guidelines. If not provided, aim for 1-2 pages (double spaced) or 500-1,000 words.
- Highlight your relevant experiences and exposure to the profession. Include examples from college and/or post-graduate work; this demonstrates a commitment beyond simply a childhood dream.
- Present yourself and the experiences and skills you bring the program; not the “ideal” candidate.
- Start early and be prepared to multiple drafts; the first version does not have to be perfect.
- Seek advice from trusted sources and mentors that can provide helpful, constructive feedback.
- Proofread! Read your final version out loud and/or ask others to review it for any typos.

COMMON PITFALLS:

- Using cliches, such as “I want to be a doctor because I want to help people” or “I’ve known I wanted to be a lawyer since I was five years old” and other often-used statements.
- Appearing overly negative or making excuses when discussing challenges; be sure to also include growth or lessons learned from difficult situations.
- Failing to address the prompt or question(s), listing the incorrect school, or not proofreading.
- Repeating the resume / curriculum vita (CV) or simply listing accomplishments; be sure to reflect on why these experiences have been influential on the journey to graduate school.

BELOW ARE SOME QUESTIONS THAT MAY HELP SPARK YOUR WRITING.

- What motivates you to learn more about this academic field?
- Why have you selected this field of study or career path?
- Did you have any role models or life experiences that influenced your decision to pursue this path?
- What type of exposure have you had to this profession?
- What are your values, and how do these align with the values of the profession?
- What skills or qualities do you have that will enable you to positively contribute to the profession?
- Why have you selected the program at this particular institution?
- What are your professional goals? How will this degree help you achieve those goals?
- Why is now the right time for you to apply?

SAMPLE OUTLINE

The outline below is only a suggested format or framework for writing a personal statement and is not intended to be prescriptive or mandated for all essays or situations. Be sure to address the prompt or questions, if provided. Personal statements and other application essays should also reflect a candidate's own perspective, interests, qualifications, and voice.

Introduction

This is your opportunity to grab your reader's attention, however, be mindful to not overdo it with cliches or over-the-top language. Sharing a story is a common method to open a personal statement and provide context for your interest in the degree or profession. You could also choose a more straightforward approach that introduces your background, your motivation for pursuing the degree, and the central idea or story you will tell throughout the essay. Many writers find it helpful to write the body paragraphs first and come back to the introduction paragraph later.

Body - *(Tip: Start writing here – it can be easier to write the intro if you already know the story you want to tell)*

Use these paragraphs to share your relevant experiences and skills, demonstrating why you are a good candidate or fit for the program and profession. Focus on depth instead of breadth. Consider choosing 2-3 examples or areas to highlight in greater detail than you did on your resume or CV. Show how these experiences have impacted you and helped you prepare for future study and work in this area.

Conclusion

Wrap up the personal statement by discussing your long-term career goals, and why this degree can help you achieve them. If the essay is being submitted to a specific school, this is often a good place to discuss why you have applied to that particular program. Put some time and thought into your concluding sentence, so it leaves a positive impression with the reader.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Health Professions Programs

Most health professions graduate programs have a common application, known as Centralized Application Services, so same personal statement is submitted to each school. However, the personal statement should still be tailored for the type of profession (physician, PA, PT, etc.) and reflect why it is a good fit. The most fundamental question to address is, "Why do you want to be a [doctor, physical therapist, physician assistant, etc.]" Candidates should write primarily about their own experiences and not co-opt someone else's narrative. Telling a long story about someone else's health concerns followed by simply, "I wish I could help them, so I decided to become a doctor" does not tell the admissions committee enough about the applicant's interests, qualifications and strengths. Finally, health-related essays should discuss clinical experiences to demonstrate exploration into the field.

Law Programs

If a law school poses a specific question, answer it directly and honestly. If there is no prompt, remember that this is an opportunity to express your personality. Consider sharing a narrative or finding ways to (professionally) demonstrate your creativity. This is also a time to demonstrate your writing ability. There are two opportunities within the law school application to explain anomalies such as low grades, traffic violations, or something else amiss: the personal statement or the addendums. Some applicants choose to reserve the personal statement to highlight their stronger qualities. Overall, embrace the opportunity to speak to the admissions committee; leave them rooting for you.

PhD Programs

Research is an important element of most, if not all, PhD programs. Be sure to include examples of previous research experiences and explain the skills you developed. In addition, you can use the personal statement to demonstrate your knowledge of the program's faculty and/or academic focus and explain why your interests are in alignment. While some programs request a separate research proposal with your application, the personal statement may also be an opportunity to briefly discuss your research interests and long-term goals.