

Guide to Writing Personal Statements

Personal Statements

Personal statements, sometimes called “application essays” or “statements of purpose,” supplement your application to a graduate or professional school program. Generally speaking, personal statements serve as a brief autobiography and summarize your professional goals. Some applications ask specific questions, while others are left up to your interpretation and what you wish to share with the admissions committee. In some instances, it may be appropriate to include challenges, obstacles or hardships that have influenced your educational pursuits.

Admissions committees use a personal statement to:

- Get to know you, beyond your academic record.
- Assess your writing ability.
- Evaluate whether you are a good fit for the program and/or school.
- Gain additional information regarding your likelihood to succeed in the program.

Tips for Success:

- Tailor your statement to each program. Address specific questions or topics in the prompt, if one is provided.
- Be concise and follow guidelines related to length. If specifics are not provided, aim for 1-2 pages double spaced.
- Highlight your relevant experiences and exposure to the profession. Include examples from your undergraduate years, as this demonstrates an interest or commitment beyond a childhood dream.
- Proofread! Read your statement out loud and/or ask others to review it for any spelling or grammar issues.
- Seek feedback from multiple sources, including but not limited to professors, professional practitioners within your industry, Career & Professional Development (CPD) staff and the Writing Center.

Things to Avoid:

- Using clichés, 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.”
- Exaggerating or lying about your experience and/or qualifications.
- Appearing negative or critical, or making excuses.
- Regurgitating your resume / curriculum vita (CV) or simply listing your accomplishments.

Below are some questions to spark your writing.

Motivation, Interest, Inspiration

- 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 profession?

Fit – Professional & Personal

- What are your values, and how do these align with the values of the profession?
- What personal, unique qualities do you have that will enable you to positively contribute to the profession?
- Why have you selected the program at this particular institution?

Capacity to Learn – Experiences & Strengths

- What type of exposure have you had to this profession?
- What skills do you possess that are necessary to be successful in this program and/or career?
- What are your most defining experiences?

Vision, Goals, Impact

- What are your professional goals?
- Why is now the right time for you to apply?
- How will this degree help you achieve your professional goals?

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. Personal statements and other application essays can take on many forms, and should express each candidate's individual perspective, interests, qualifications and voice.

Introduction

Start with a brief introduction, explaining who you are, your background and your interest in pursuing this degree. Sharing a story is a common method to open a personal statement and provide context for your interest in the profession. This is your opportunity to "hook" the reader, but be careful not to overdo it with clichés or flowery language that give the impression you are trying too hard or make the reader not want to continue.

Body Paragraphs

Use this section to share your relevant experiences and skills, demonstrating why you are a good candidate or fit for the program and profession. This should not read as a laundry list of all of your accomplishments; rather, consider choosing 2-3 examples or areas to highlight in greater depth and detail. Show how these experiences have impacted you and helped you prepare for future study and work in this area.

Conclusion

Wrap up the statement by discussing your long-term career goals, and why this degree can help you achieve them. This is a good place to discuss why you have applied to the specific school or program. Put some time and thought into your concluding sentence, so it leaves a strong and memorable (in a good way) impression with the reader.

Special Considerations

Health Profession Programs

Most health professions have a common application, known officially as Centralized Application Services, so the first personal statement a candidate submits is the same for each school. However, the personal statement should still be tailored for the particular type of program (MD, DO, PA, PT, etc.) and reflect why that school or field is a good fit. The most fundamental question for the personal statement 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 really long story about someone else's health concerns followed by "I wish I could help them so I decided to become a doctor" does not say very much about the applicant's interests, qualifications and strengths. Finally, health-related personal statements should be sure to discuss any clinical experiences, in order to demonstrate previous exploration into the field of interest.

Law School

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. Remember that this is 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. These can be included in the personal statement or addendums. You may choose to reserve the personal statement to highlight your 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 through those examples. 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 alignment. Some programs may request a separate research proposal with your application, but the personal statement may also be an opportunity to briefly discuss your research interests and long-term goals.