

Writing the Personal Statement

Summary: This handout provides information about writing personal statements for academic and other positions.

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The personal statement, your opportunity to sell yourself in the application process, generally falls into one of two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement:

This allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write and is the type of statement often prepared for standard medical or law school application forms.

2. The response to very specific questions:

Often, business and graduate school applications ask specific questions, and your statement should respond specifically to the question being asked. Some business school applications favor multiple essays, typically asking for responses to three or more questions.

Questions to ask yourself before you write:

- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or

- profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
 - Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
 - What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

General advice

Answer the questions that are asked

- If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar.
- Don't be tempted to use the same statement for all applications. It is important to answer each question being asked, and if slightly different answers are needed, you should write separate statements. In every case, be sure your answer fits the question being asked.

Tell a story

- Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do is to bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you'll be putting yourself ahead of the pack. If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable.

Be specific

- Don't, for example, state that you would make an excellent doctor unless you can back it up with specific reasons. Your desire to become a lawyer, engineer, or whatever should be logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.

Find an angle

- If you're like most people, your life story lacks drama, so figuring out a way to make it interesting becomes the big challenge. Finding an angle or a "hook" is vital.

Concentrate on your opening paragraph

- The lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab the reader's attention or lose it. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.

Tell what you know

- The middle section of your essay might detail your interest and experience in your particular field, as well as some of your knowledge of the field. Too many people graduate with little or no knowledge of the nuts and bolts of the profession or field they hope to enter. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field and use the language professionals use in conveying this information. Refer to experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other source of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it. Since you will have to select what you include in your statement, the choices you make are often an indication of your judgment.

Don't include some subjects

- There are certain things best left out of personal statements. For example, references to experiences or accomplishments in high school or earlier are generally not a good idea. Don't mention potentially controversial subjects (for example, controversial religious or political issues).

Do some research, if needed

- If a school wants to know why you're applying to it rather than another school, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. If the school setting would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention.

Write well and correctly

- Be meticulous. Type and proofread your essay very carefully. Many admissions officers say that good written skills and command of correct use of language are important to them as they read these statements. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Adhere to stated word limits.

Avoid clichés

- A medical school applicant who writes that he is good at science and wants to help other people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from often-repeated or tired statements.

Source: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/>

From about.com:

Most, if not all, graduate school applications require you to write an [admissions essay](#), sometimes referred to as a personal statement. This component of the graduate admissions application permits the admissions committee to see "beyond the statistics" -- to see you as a person apart from GPA and GRE scores. This is your chance to stand out so make sure that your admissions essay truly reflects you. An essay that is truthful, appealing, and motivating can increase your chances of acceptance. What should and shouldn't you do in writing your admissions essay or personal statement?

Admissions Essay Dos and Don'ts

Do:

- Prepare an outline and create a draft.
- Answer all the questions being asked.
- Make sure your essay has a theme or a thesis.
- Provide evidence to support your claims.
- Make your introduction unique.
- Write clearly and make sure it is easy to read.
- Be honest, confident, and be yourself.
- Be interesting and positive.
- Make sure your essay is organized, coherent, and concise.
- Write about yourself and use examples from your own life experiences.
- Use a mixture of long and short sentences.
- Discuss your future goals.
- Mention any hobbies, past jobs, community service, or research experience.
- Speak in the first person (I...).
- Mention weaknesses without making excuses.
- Discuss why you're interested in the school and/or program.
- Show, don't tell (Use examples to demonstrate your abilities).
- Ask for help.
- Proofread and revise your statement at least 3 times.
- Have others proofread your essay.

Don't:

- Have any grammar or spelling errors. (Proofread!)
- Be wordy or use jargon (don't try to impress the readers by using big words).
- Swear or use slang.
- Digress or be repetitive.
- Be boring.
- Generalize.
- Include cliches.
- Use gimmicks.

- Be comical (a little humor is okay but remember it can be misconstrued).
- Be defensive or arrogant.
- Complain.
- Preach.
- Have your essay focus too much on other individuals.
- Discuss politics or religion.
- Give excuses for a low GPA.
- Make lists of accomplishments, awards, skills, or personal qualities (Show, don't tell).
- Write a term paper or an autobiography.
- Summarize your resume.
- Include information already cited on the application.
- Forget to proofread.

How to Organize Your Graduate Admissions Essay:

The [admissions essay](#) or personal statement is an important part of the graduate school application. It provides the admission committee a chance to distinguish you from other A+ applicants and the opportunity to get to know you at a more personal level. Your admissions essay can be the deciding factor in whether you are accepted or rejected by a school. Therefore, it is necessary that you write an essay that is honest, interesting, and well structured.

Many students write admissions essays that are incomprehensible to the reader and as a result, they are rejected. How you structure and organize your essay can determine your fate. With a well structured essay, the reader will not only be interested in the content of your essay but will also know that you have the capacity to create a legible essay -- and thereby think clearly and logically.

There are several different ways you can structure your essay but the most common format includes an introduction, a body, and a concluding paragraph.

Introduction:

- The introduction is the most important part of the essay, especially the first sentence. The first sentence introduces your essay and a bad introduction, in person or in writing, is detrimental to your admissions chances.
- Keep the reader interested by making them continue to read your essay after reading the first paragraph.
- The first sentence should be unique and compelling, possibly thought provoking or attention-grabbing.
- First sentences may explain your desire to study the subject of interest or discuss the motivation that influenced your desire to study the subject of interest. State it in a creative manner.

- The sentences following the first sentence should provide a brief explanation that supports the claim stated in the first sentence.

The Body:

- The body should include several paragraphs (usually about 3) that provide detailed evidence to support the statement made in the introductory paragraph. The paragraphs should flow by using transitions and resolutions.
- Each paragraph should have a transition, which starts each paragraph with a topic statement that will be the theme of that paragraph (See more on transitions and resolutions below).
- Each paragraph should have a resolution, which ends each paragraph with a meaningful sentence that provides a transition to the next paragraph (See more on transitions and resolutions below).
- Experiences, accomplishments, or any other evidence that can support your claims should be included in the body. Future goals should also be mentioned in the body.
- A short summary of your educational background can be discussed in the 1st paragraph.
- Personal experiences and the reasons for wanting to attend the school can be discussed in the 2nd paragraph.
- Do not repeat what was stated in the application.
- The last paragraph should explain why you should be accepted. [/li

Conclusion:

- The conclusion is the last paragraph of the personal statement.
- State why you are interested in studying the subject of interest.
- State the key points mentioned in the body, such as your experiences or accomplishments, that explain your interest in the subject. State it in a conclusive and brief manner.
- End on a positive note with one or two attention-grabbing sentences.

It is crucial that your paragraphs have transitions and resolutions. Transitions start a paragraph by providing a statement that suggests the theme for that paragraph. This allows the reader to be aware of the direction the essay is heading in. Transitions connect paragraphs to other paragraphs (usually preceding paragraphs), which causes the essay to flow smoothly. Resolutions, on the other hand, are statements that end paragraphs and allow for transition to the next paragraph. The resolution should not be a general statement but rather a meaningful one that connects facts included in the current paragraph. Both transitions and resolutions are beneficial in terms of making your essay clear and understandable.

Your essay should include enough detail, be personal, and specific. The purpose of a personal statement is to show the admission committee what makes you unique and different from other applicants. Your job is to display your distinct personality and

provide evidence that confirms your passion and desire for the subject and the school. However, even if you can write an interesting and compelling essay, the structure and organization may not be appropriate. Therefore, it is necessary that you follow the proper structure of an essay and allow all your paragraphs to flow smoothly. The structure and organization of your personal statement will not only make your essay more comprehensible and fascinating but it will also increase your chances of being accepted.