

Personal Statements



What is a personal statement?

A personal statement is a narrative that describes aspects of yourself that have not been illuminated in your application. It is not a simple reiteration of your experiences, as in a 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 above the rest, but it might be the hardest thing you ever have to write! The following information should help you get started, but keep in mind that specific requirements for personal statements vary. Check the instructions and fine print for each application.

Brainstorming

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

Examples: What made you pursue the path you are pursuing? What experiences led you to understand your path? What are your strongest personal and professional qualities? How do you show them in your work and other activities? What is unique about you?

- **Get rid of the blank page**

Write! Jump right in with a free write, even if it seems meandering or unfocused. Some people like to begin with a rough outline instead—do whatever feels most comfortable to you. Just get ideas in front of you!

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 essays in specific experiences rather than mere facts. Also be wary of vague explanations.

- **Look for the *aha!* moment**

Once you have a rough draft or a 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, help build, or define? When you can point to this single idea (the *aha!*), then you know where to focus all your energy. Any part of the essay that doesn't help strengthen this idea can be eliminated. Likewise, any area that only-kinda-sorta-maybe helps strengthen this idea can be reworked to clearly support the main point.

- **Find your narrative hook and theme**

Once you've found your essay's focus, 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 your *aha!* moment and hook your reader with this moment by creating a scene.

Refining (continued)

Here's an example of an introductory paragraph using the techniques listed above:

“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

- **Discuss and share**

Sharing your work is a crucial step to a successful statement. Talk about your statement with friends and mentors. Your ability to convey your points in conversation will confirm your clarity in writing (or, you might realize you need to go back and revise more!). Also solicit feedback from professors, graduate students, friends and family members. You'll be amazed at the insights they can offer!

Some General Tips

- **Be your (formal) self**

Avoid high language and complicated jargon. Present yourself and your ideas in a simple, clear, direct, but formal way.

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

Your readers want to know your background (in the chosen field), but they also want to know what you plan to do at school and/or after school. Strive for a balance.

- **Be positive**

You might like to complain to your best friends about what went wrong during your undergraduate career, but keep it upbeat in your personal statement—or at least illustrate what you've learned from setbacks in a positive way.

Links for Further Information

- **OWL At Purdue: Writing The Personal Statement**

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

- **Accepted: Grad School Application Essays**

<http://www.accepted.com/grad/default.aspx>

- **UC Berkeley: Graduate School-Statement**

<http://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/GradStatement.stm>