



Personal Statements

Tips for perfecting your personal statement.

What is it?

Often requested by education programs, the personal statement can take the form of an essay, letter or paragraph. It tends to demonstrate your writing ability and outline key information that helps readers understand information about your application that is not covered in other pieces of it (e.g. your resume/CV, transcript, letters of recommendation).

For more help, attend our [Grad II: Personal & Research Statements](#) workshop.

The Ultimate Test for Content

Put your personal statement to the test by asking yourself:

- Is this essay one that only I could honestly write?
- Is it possible that other applicants could have honestly said essentially the same things that you have said?

Take a yellow highlighter and mark every sentence or phrase that another applicant might honestly have written. Do you see a lot of yellow?

If so, you know you need to dig deeper (stay with the same theme but bring it down to a more personal level that is relevant to YOUR experiences) or go back to the drawing board and find a different theme or topic – one that you know only you will be writing about.

What is the purpose?

Many schools are hoping to get a glimpse of the human being behind the data in your file. Your statement should complement the rest of your application and contain the content the program has requested. If they haven't given any guidelines about what to include in your personal statement, you may want to help readers understand more about:

- Your motivations for this program/career direction
- Select experiences that have helped you confirm this as a good fit
- Personality/suitability (what will help you be successful in the program?)
- Career goals
- Reasons for choosing this program, at this location

Ask advisors, professors and trusted friends for their impressions, and try to convey your persona through your personal statement, either by the way you write or by what you write about.

Getting creative - especially in your opening remarks

Review carefully the guidelines put forward by the program(s) you are writing to. At times, it may be appropriate to exercise your creativity a bit and tell a compelling short story in which you are the main character. This does not mean that you should write a work of fiction. However, a story that comes from your unique experience can help create a memorable and impressive personal statement.



The opening sentences of your statement are particularly critical in capturing the reader's curiosity, attention, and interest. Ideally, your opener piques the reader's interest, enticing him or her to read on. Consider opening with an (appropriately) amusing personal anecdote, an observation from "out in left field," or a bold and perhaps mildly provocative statement.

Example (from a "why I want to be a lawyer" personal statement):

My interest in the law began with donuts. As a child, I developed early persuasive skills during family disagreements on how to divide boxes of the treats. My parents belonged to the "biggest people deserve the most donuts" school of thought; while as the youngest family member, I was a devout believer in the "one person, one donut" principle. The debates were often cutthroat, but when it came to donut distribution, I sought justice at any cost"

Top 10 rules to write by

1. **DO** strive for depth rather than breadth: narrow your focus to one or two themes, ideas, or experiences.
2. **DO** tell the reader what no other applicant will honestly be able to say.
3. **DO** provide the reader with insight into what drives you – i.e. what makes you "tick."
4. **DO** be yourself rather than pretending to be the "ideal" applicant.
5. **DO** get creative and imaginative, particularly in your opening remarks.
6. **DO** address the particular school's unique features that attract you.
7. **DO** focus on the affirmative in the personal statement itself; consider an addendum to explain deficiencies or blemishes.
8. **DO** evaluate your experiences rather than merely recounting them.
9. **DO** enlist others to proofread your essay for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage, and style.
10. **DO** use a highly readable typeface with conventional spacing and margins.

From Peterson's Perfect Personal Statements, 3rd ed. pgs 23-24

Top 10 statement pitfalls

1. **DON'T** submit an expository resume; avoid merely repeating information already provided elsewhere in your application.
2. **DON'T** complain or whine about the "system" or about your circumstances in life; however, constructive criticism is fine as long as it related directly to your career goals.
3. **DON'T** get on a soapbox and preach to the reader; while expressing your values and opinions is fine, avoid coming across as fanatical or extreme.
4. **DON'T** talk about money as a motivating factor in your plans for the future.
5. **DON'T** discuss your minority status or disadvantaged background unless you have a compelling and unique story that relates directly to it.
6. **DON'T** remind the school of its ranking among the various programs of its type.
7. **DON'T** waste your personal statement opportunity with a clichéd introduction or conclusion.
8. **DON'T** use a gimmicky style or format.
9. **DON'T** submit supplemental materials unless the school requests them.
10. **DON'T** get the name of the school or program wrong.