



PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Tips for perfecting your personal statement.

In this tipsheet, you'll learn about the purpose and potential of personal statements and we'll show you a clever example to help you get started.

What is a personal statement?

Personal statements are an often-requested element of professional and graduate school applications and can take the form of essays, letters or paragraphs of varying lengths. Personal statements provide you with the opportunity to place the rest of your application in a narrative context and they can help your readers understand your passion and motivation for applying to a specific program. Your statement should complement the rest of your application by giving readers a glimpse of the human being behind the data in your file

Schools often provide guidelines of what they expect to see in a personal statement. If a school does not provide you with guidelines, you may want to help readers understand more about:

- your motivations for applying to the program or choosing the career direction
- why you are interested in attending their school
- experiences that have helped you make your decision or sparked your passion for the field
- your personal suitability and what will help you be successful in the program

The beginning

Carefully review the guidelines put forward by your program of interest. The opening sentences of your statement are particularly critical in capturing the reader's curiosity and attention. You might consider opening with an (appropriately) amusing personal anecdote, an unexpected observation, or a bold and perhaps mildly provocative statement.

Here is an 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."

The middle

Use the middle paragraphs of your personal statement to provide a narrative around one or two of your life themes relevant to the field you wish to pursue. You might choose to include information about your interests, skills, qualifications, experiences and career goals that make you a good fit for the program. You may also wish to address any potential issues in your application, for example, poor grades related to academic difficulties after you experienced a death in your family.

The end

The end of your personal statement should provide a clean summary of the themes you drew on throughout the letter. Tie up loose ideas and end with a hopeful tone looking into the future.



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 positives in the personal statement; consider an addendum to explain deficiencies.
8. DO evaluate your experiences rather than merely recounting them.
9. DO enlist others to proofread your essay for grammar, 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., pages 23-24)*

Top 10 personal statement pitfalls:

1. DON’T write an expository resume that repeats information already 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 note your minority status or disadvantaged history without a relevant, unique story
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.

Want to learn more?

Check out our [Grad II: Personal & Research Statements](#) workshop for more information on writing an effective personal statement.

Career Services offers [Drop-in Career Advising](#) to answer quick questions related to all aspects of your career planning and job search - Monday to Thursday from 1:30pm to 3:30pm.

For more in-depth explanations, check the following resources in our [Career Information Area](#):

- *Peterson’s Perfect Personal Statements* by Mark Alan Stewart
- *Great Personal Statements for Law School* by Paul Bodine
- *101 Medical School Personal Statements that Made a Difference* by Dr. Nancy Nolan