



Personal Statement Guide

A personal statement, also known as a statement of purpose, personal essay, graduate school essay, or letter of introduction, is **an essay typically required as part of an application to graduate school**, for a scholarship, or for a variety of post-graduate service or employment opportunities. In general, the essay is approximately 1,000 words.

Two Common Approaches to the Personal Statement

- 1 The open-ended, comprehensive essay.** This approach gives you freedom to organize and approach the essay however you like.
- 2 The response to specific questions.** This approach requires that you fully answer the questions posed. Some applications let you choose from a list of prompts.



Bottom Line: Be sure to read the application instructions carefully and craft your personal statement accordingly. Pay special attention to any word limits.



SELECTION COMMITTEE

In preparing your personal statement, you need to convince the selection committee that you will be an excellent ambassador for their program through your future academic and professional contributions.

- If part of the admissions process involves an interview, it is likely that the selection committee will choose interview questions for you based on your personal statement.
- Along with other factors like GPA, test scores and letters of recommendation, your personal statement is an important criterion that a selection committee uses when comparing candidates. For this reason, you want yours to stand out!

The Goals of a Personal Statement

THE FOUNDATIONS

- Your goal in writing your personal statement is to compose an essay that reveals **who you are, what you care about, what has influenced your career path, and where you intend to go in the future**. Avoid the temptation to write an academic paper with you as the subject. This essay is a first-person narrative in which you include highlights from your life as well as your dreams for the future.
- There is **no one style or formula** for writing a personal statement; in fact, by granting you freedom to approach this task as you choose, your readers are hoping to see some **creativity**.
- As a selection committee reviews applications, one of the most important questions they want to answer is: “Do they have the (1) **ability** and (2) **motivation** to succeed in this endeavor?” Use your personal statement to assure your readers that you have both!
- The best way to show that you have the ability and motivation to succeed is to **PROVE IT!** Instead of claiming that you are interested in a particular field, share stories of the experiences you have already gained in this field. Instead of claiming that you are motivated, **share a story** about a time when you exercised tenacity or determination.
- If writing a personal statement for graduate school, use this essay to emphasize your **current research interests, the area of study in which you intend to specialize, and potential professional contributions**. Highlighting your research experience is particularly important, as you will likely be engaged in significant research during your graduate studies.
- Always **demonstrate “fit”** with the program to which you are applying. This means that you should include details about the program—perhaps a star faculty member with whom you would love to work, the mission of the program, practicum opportunities that make their curriculum unique, or their location—and **explain why** these elements are particularly important to you.

Questions to Ask Before You Write

(ADAPTED FROM PURDUE UNIVERSITY’S ONLINE WRITING LAB)

- What is special, unique, distinctive 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 convinces you that you are well suited to this field?
- 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 worked a lot during your college years, what did you learn (for example, leadership or managerial skills), 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 (for instance, great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, 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 or 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, communication or 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?



Tips for Writing a Personal Statement

- 1 Tell at least one story—ideally more.** Stories are powerful. If you include a story in your personal essay, you immediately become more memorable. Also, stories help you demonstrate through concrete experience that you have the character traits or skills you claim to have. Take the time to do some self-reflection and talk to people who know you well to identify the stories that have shaped you and encouraged you to pursue this particular goal.
- 2 Find an angle or “hook” that sets your purpose statement apart.** If you are like most people, your life story lacks significant drama, but you still need to make it interesting. Finding a unique perspective, image or theme could provide the singular focus you need. Once you identify the experiences and dreams you wish to share, examine them for a helpful means of organizing your thoughts.
- 3 Concentrate on your first paragraph.** You either capture or lose your reader’s attention with the beginning of your essay. The opening paragraph should grab your reader’s interest and introduce a framework for the rest of your personal statement.
- 4 Be specific.** Include colorful details or lines of dialogue to make your writing stronger and more memorable. If a specific class, book, professor, research experience or conversation guided you to your desired field, include these details.
- 5 Form conclusions that explain the value and meaning of your experiences.** When describing an experience, be sure to spell out what you learned about yourself, your field or your future goals. In other words, do not leave it to your reader’s imagination to guess how this experience shaped you. Your application to graduate school should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.
- 6 Be authentic.** Worry less about what the selection committee wants to hear, and focus more on giving them an accurate picture of who you are.
- 7 Reference your knowledge of the field.** The middle section of your essay might detail your interest and experience in your particular field, as well as some of your discipline-specific knowledge. Too many people graduate with little knowledge of the “nuts and bolts” of the profession or field they hope to enter. Confidently relate what you know about your discipline by using the language of professionals.
- 8 Make hard choices about what to include.** Your personal essay should not be a list of accomplishments; therefore, you will have to choose what experiences to highlight. Pick the most relevant and impressive.

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Tips for Writing a Personal Statement (cont.)

- 9 Carefully address possible shortcomings.** If you had a rough semester that affected your overall GPA, provide some context. However, be careful not to frame this shortcoming in a way that makes it sound like an excuse; instead, focus on how this experience helped you grow in maturity or perseverance. In some instances, it may be more appropriate to explain this shortcoming outside of the personal statement or in a separate Addendum.
- 10 Leave extraneous material out.** Every word counts, so delete anything unnecessary. Recent research or professional experiences trump those from high school or earlier. Also, avoid potentially controversial subjects.
- 11 Keep it professional.** While personal statements are supposed to be personal, avoid sharing information that is too personal (i.e. relationships, bodily functions or illegal activities). In other words, do not share anything that would make the admissions committee wonder if you have bad judgment.
- 12 Proofread, and ask others to proofread.** Be meticulous. Many admissions officers say that strong writing skills and command of language are important to them as they read these statements. Adhere to stated word limits, and avoid clichés.
- 13 Submit a different personal statement with every application.** Even if you apply to multiple programs, your personal statement should be different for every application. Each essay should reference something about the school or program to which you are applying, thereby proving that you have done your homework and know exactly why you are applying there.

Make an appointment via Handshake to meet with a staff member in the Compass Center about your personal statement. They can help you brainstorm stories to include, assist with the organization and flow, or proofread your final draft.

