

Personal statements are essays written with the purpose of giving admissions committees insight into who you are as an individual. These essays explain why you are applying to a specific program or continuing your education in a particular field. This handout outlines general steps for developing a personal statement, but always tailor your statement based on your discipline and the program application.

## Before Writing a Personal Statement

### *Identify the Kind of Statement You are Writing*

- Determine if you are writing centralized or individual applications.** Unless you are submitting your application through a centralized application system (e.g., MCAS for medical school), which distributes your statement to all selected schools, tailor your statement to individual program.
- Determine whether you are writing a personal statement or statement of purpose.** While some programs use these terms interchangeably, document titles may also indicate expectations. For example, a *personal statement* may emphasize personal content (e.g., background, experiences, or personal characteristics), and a *statement of purpose* may focus on your reasons for applying to a program (e.g., research interests or career goals). Read each prompt carefully to determine what information you are being asked to provide.

### *Research the Schools and Programs You are Applying To*

- Meet with advisors, professors, or professionals** who are knowledgeable about the programs you are applying to and the field you want to work in. Seek advice from those who have recently served on admissions boards or recently completed a similar program.
- Collect program information.** Look for online application materials, including personal statement prompts, examples, and any guidance which programs give for writing a statement. Examine faculty research within programs, noting possible mentors or research areas.
- Read and analyze prompts.** If provided with a question or prompt, consider why an admissions committee might ask that specific question. For example, if a prompt asks you to share how academic or work experiences have prepared you for graduate school, the question is *explicitly* asking you to connect your experiences to the program, but it is *implicitly* inviting you to share your personal strengths, such as how you pursue goals, overcome obstacles, or take initiative.

### *Reflect on Your Experiences and Aspirations*

- Consider how your personal, academic, and work experiences** have prepared you for graduate school and informed the work you want to pursue within your field of study.
- Think about your career goals and how graduate school will help achieve them.** Use research about your field and the programs you are applying to in identifying how graduate school will help you achieve your personal and professional goals.
- Note your qualifications or aspirations and how they match each program's objectives, culture, and values.** Consider your existing or desired research paths, coursework, communities, or personal connections.

- ❑ **Reflect on your experience working with diverse populations or how you might be a diverse candidate.** Since diversity can be defined multiple ways, be prepared to discuss your cultural, ethnic, or socioeconomic background or how your unique experiences or interests could contribute to the program.
- ❑ **Plan how you will bridge gaps.** For example, if you are applying for a graduate program in clinical psychology, you might include your interest in gaining clinical experience if only research experience is listed on your resume.
- ❑ **Make a list of what you want to include in your personal statement.** List how you might respond to application prompts. While you may not use your entire list in your personal statement, listed experiences or responses can help you quickly draft effective statements.

## Writing Your Personal Statement

- ❑ **If you are writing a longer statement** (between 500 and 2000 words), rather than simply restating your resume, use the prompt to identify and write about select experiences that emphasize your personal qualities, qualifications, and aspirations. Give the statement a sense of cohesion by using a thesis statement or guiding theme.
- ❑ **If you are writing a shorter statement**, address prompts or answer questions as directly as possible while highlighting significant experiences, characteristics, or goals that set you apart from other applicants. When possible, avoid repetition when completing shorter statements.
- ❑ **Use essay format** to engage readers, establish themes, and provide meaningful details that do not appear on your resume or transcripts.
- ❑ **Use the “show, don’t tell” approach.** Describe specific experiences that demonstrate your qualifications, rather than simply stating your qualifications. Use vivid language to make your personal statement engaging, particularly when you have plenty of words/length to work with.

**Telling:** Volunteering at foodbanks as a server has showed me how sympathy can help improve someone’s day.

**Showing:** As a frequent volunteer at the local foodbank, I quickly realized how unkind the world often is to the people I served. While the regulars valued a hot meal, they also valued genuine attention. I connected with John, one of the regulars, over a mutual love of reading. Every time we talked, he seemed to light up, excited someone was willing to listen. . .

- ❑ **If there are discrepancies in your academic record**, you may choose to address them in your personal statement. However, many schools ask for an additional statement to explain these types of situations. In such a case, you need not address discrepancies in your main statement.
- ❑ **Be specific** with examples and details to help make your statement unique.
 

**General:** I am an incredibly personable student and love to help others. I’m excited to be able to interact with the students at your school.

**Specific:** While at ACME Inc., I built lasting relationships with peers and assisted in training new employees. This experience increased my desire and ability to interact and assist classmates in. . .

- Avoid topics or experiences that are generic, negative, or controversial** as they can negatively affect how you are viewed. Some of these subjects include
  - Overtly political or religious experiences or viewpoints.
  - Being critical of others.
  - Narratives of saving or saviorism.
  - Unyielding dedication to a specific area of study (since you want to demonstrate adaptability and a desire to learn).

If a prompt asks about your experience in religion or in politics, or, if you decide to talk about these topics, **focus more on what you learned** rather than on attempting to convert others to your beliefs or point of view.

- Double-check the prompt** once you finish writing to ensure you have answered everything asked in a clear and purposeful way.

### Revising Your Personal Statement

- Plan on writing multiple drafts** of your personal statement, sometimes starting over several times to find the right tone and phrasing. Allot ample time for this stage.
- Get feedback** from those in your field of interest, including professors and professionals.
- Consider scheduling several **writing center appointments** to work on or review drafts. Tutors can act as general readers to let you know if your message is coming across clearly.
- Tailor your personal statement** for each application.

### Finalizing Your Personal Statement

- Proofread** your personal statement for typos, grammar, and punctuation. If you are struggling with grammar or specific phrasing, consider meeting with a writing tutor or hiring an editor.
- Check your **word count** or **page limit**, do not exceed the prompt requirements.
- Save your statement as a **PDF** to retain format AND **name your file** clearly and professionally.
- Upload and submit** your statement in advance of the deadline in case of technical difficulties.