

## Tips for Writing a Personal Statement

Most graduate and professional programs, fellowships, and internships require a personal statement essay. The personal statement is an especially challenging writing assignment for three reasons. One, since the personal statement is the key thing that sets you apart from other applicants with similar grades, test scores, and professional experiences, it can be the deciding factor in whether you are accepted. Two, although many institutions have personal statement instructions that seem very vague and open-ended (e.g. “Explain your reasons for wanting to be a nurse.”), readers of your personal statement will carry with them many solid expectations about what the essay should contain. And three, even though this checklist of expectations is quite substantial, you are still required to explain your story in as little as 2-4 pages.

Here are some tips for writing a successful personal statement.

### **Imagine your audience.**

Your personal statement will be read by at least one real human being. You’ve probably never met that person and will have no idea who they are, but the more fully you can imagine your potential reader, the better you may be at satisfying their readerly expectations. Consider:

- ✓ This person will be reading your personal statement as part of their job responsibilities, on top of their other challenging work. Don’t frustrate them with unwieldy, perplexing language or dense, directionless details.
- ✓ This person will be reading not just your essay, but a stack of them, all written by people who have the same goal as you. How can you stand out from the last two personal statements this reader looked at? How can you make sure they will remember *your* story days or weeks later, when the acceptance decisions are made?
- ✓ This person is the professional you hope to be. Don’t talk down to them by explaining things they already know, like facts about their institution or general details about the importance of their field. If you talk about such things, make sure the emphasis is on *you* and your reflection on those details.
- ✓ This person will be your future colleague. In a sense, they are choosing who they want to work with for the next few years. How can you make your reader interested in wanting to meet you?

### **Realize that the personal statement is only one piece of the puzzle.**

A personal statement is one part of an application package that also likely includes a CV/resume, grade transcripts, test scores, letters of recommendation, and demographical data. Think of each document’s goal and how each of these pieces fit together. Don’t waste valuable space repeating yourself in the personal statement. The CV is where you list your professional experiences and the job responsibilities you had there, *not* your personal statement. Your grade transcripts and/or test scores are where you demonstrate that you have an appropriate foundation of knowledge about the subject, *not* your personal statement. The goal of the personal statement is to paint a vivid and memorable portrait of you as a unique individual who is interested in and qualified for this field. Make sure you remain focused on that goal.

### **Consider your story’s overall message.**

The personal statement has to cover a lot of ground, but try to keep it focused on proving one or two clear things about your personality that show you are qualified. While brainstorming, consider working backwards:

1. List the key personality traits and skills successful professionals in your field possess. For instance, if you want to be a speech language pathologist, think about what practitioners of speech language pathology do on a daily basis. What personality traits make them successful at performing these tasks?
2. From that list of personality traits, which ones are most representative of who you are? Choose no more than three traits, and make sure you can prove that they represent who you *are* and not simply who you *wish* to be. Proving you possess these traits will be the running theme of your personal statement.
3. Finally, what are some vivid, memorable anecdotes that will prove to your reader that you possess each of these traits?

### **Show, don’t tell.**

A personal statement isn’t a thesis essay, but you must still persuasively prove your qualifications in it, and any persuasive essay requires evidence. While scholarly quotations and statistics might work as evidence in another type of paper, the evidence you’ll need to rely on in a personal statement is all anecdotal, and the most convincing way to share these stories with your readers is to *show* them the details rather than simply *tell* them the conclusions they should reach.

*Telling* a reader what to think about your story can be unclear, uninteresting, and unconvincing. It’s one thing to tell your reader that you’re a “hardworking leader with passion”—anyone can *say* that. Plus, how should we interpret those abstract terms? Is a “leader” someone who makes all decisions independently and never gives in, or is a “leader” someone who listens to subordinates and works side-by-side with them?

*Showing* a reader involves using sensory details to paint a picture of what *you* looked like, what *you* thought, and how *you* acted as a participant in your experiences. Your readers will better understand how you are defining a personality trait if you provide specific details that illustrate your experiences with those traits. Body language, emotions, physical interactions, internal thoughts, the environment where the story took place, visual details that stood out to you, meaningful words that were spoken—these are all details that can help your reader to see, feel, and understand your experience and why you consider it important. More importantly, a story told using vivid, concrete details will stand a better chance of being remembered by your reader when it comes time to make admissions decisions.

### **Cover all four “time zones.”**

Every personal statement should cover four “time zones” from your life story. What you say about each of these time zones should be unified around proving your overall message.

1. **The Past.** You’ll need to give a sense of who you are as a potential professional in this field. You have years of meaningful experiences to choose from—keep the ones you write about focused on the overall goals of your application. What were some inspiring moments that made you interested in this field? What are some experiences that have defined who you are as a person?
2. **The Present.** What have you been doing to guarantee that you will fulfill your dreams? What are some experiences that illustrate you possess the right mindset and temperament for this field? Avoid slipping into CV/resume mode here.
3. **The Near Future.** Getting accepted into a program is not the finish line—it’s merely entry onto the racetrack. In your personal statement, you will need to demonstrate that you are aware of the work that lies ahead, and you will also need to prove that the institution you’re applying to is a good match for your expectations. What specific goals do you hope to achieve at this institution? What research specialization are you interested in pursuing there, and why? Why do you want to be a part of this particular institution? Is there anybody at this institution that you’re truly excited to work with? What other opportunities are you planning to pursue if you get accepted?
4. **The Distant Future.** By accepting you, this institution will be investing in your future. Years later, when you have moved on from them, they’ll want to be proud of the person they’ve helped shape. They’ll want to know that they’ve contributed a good person into the field. What are your long-term professional goals? How do you envision the future of the field, and what role will you play in shaping that future?

### **Depth, not breadth.**

You’ve volunteered at three diverse, impactful organizations that have helped shape your worldview; taken a class taught by a legendary figure in the field; shadowed under two inspiring experts with decades of experience; and participated in a research group where you presented rather groundbreaking information at a conference attended by thousands. In your mind, these are some of the most important moments of your life, all of them lifechanging. You can visualize a vivid chain reaction of cause and effect. These experiences have made you definitively qualified to achieve your dreams. On the page, however, these are just a breathless bombardment of information, so quickly recounted that none of the details stick. As rich and meaningful as your life as been, you’ll need to choose only a few moments to narrate in an essay as short as this. One resonant moment from your life, captured in thoughtful, earnest, thorough detail, will be more effective than any comprehensive list of your successes.

### **Think outside the box.**

Many applicants think a personal statement should be narrowly focused on the field their interested in. For instance, if someone is applying to law school, she might think that every anecdote should be about lawyers, courthouses, and the Constitution. If the applicant has very meaningful anecdotes about these topics, that’s great; however, it’s perfectly acceptable to write about other

themes and interests if that subject material provides a better source of anecdotes about who you are. The would-be lawyer should still focus on proving she has the qualities it takes to study law, but she may accomplish that goal by talking about her trials on the soccer field, her success at studying the violin, or her experience coding video games. Not only is it acceptable to talk about other interests, but doing so may show that you are bringing a diversity of experience with you. For example, unlike other applicants, the would-be lawyer may be able to conceive of the law from a coder's perspective, which might bring fresh insights into the field. Thinking outside the box in this manner may also help you to stand out from all the other applicants who will be writing about the same subject.

### **Don't "show off."**

Many applicants think they must perform what they believe a professional in their desired field sounds like. This performance can take the form of awkward jargon, technical details, or name dropping. For example, in an application to dentistry school, a story about an emotional interaction with a patient might be interrupted by extensive anatomical details and technical procedures, as though the writer were being quizzed on biology rather than being asked to tell a personal story. In the humanities, an applicant might begin by describing their experience learning to play guitar yet jarringly pivot into thesis mode by analyzing a quotation from the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak. In any field, an applicant might replace their natural vocabulary with clunky, "impressive" words pulled from a thesaurus. Such attempts at showing off can distract from the real goals of the personal statement: to convey who you are, not who you think they want you to be.

### **Seek feedback, and revise!**

Have as many people read your personal statement as possible—friends and family members, Writing Center tutors, the professors writing your letters of recommendation, acquaintances on social media, the supervisor at your job, and so on. The more readers' perspectives you consider before submitting your final draft, the likelier it is you will be able to get your point across to the stranger who will be reading your application.

### **Good luck on your application!**