

Writing the graduate school application

Personal Statements: General Advice

What is the Personal Statement?

Most applications for scholarships, fellowships, and graduate or professional schools require a personal statement. While college transcripts, test scores, and letters of recommendation provide admission officers with important information about you, they do not provide a sense of who you are: how you see yourself, what you hope for yourself and for your work, how well you communicate, and so on. The personal statement is your chance to communicate who you are to the people who will read your application. A well-written, memorable essay can be a great asset to your application, while a poorly-written one can jeopardize your chances of being accepted to the institution or program of your choice.

Some applications state specific questions to which they want you to respond; others give more general directions or none at all. Almost all ask for an essay of a specific length (usually one or two pages). In short, you have at most a couple of pages to convince your readers that you are an intelligent, interesting, well-rounded person who would not only succeed in, but be an asset to, the program to which you are applying. Sound daunting? Try to think of your personal statement as an opportunity - albeit a challenging one - to let this group of people see the real you.

Determining Content

When thinking about content, determine first what makes your life meaningful and interesting. Some people might write about volunteer experiences or extracurricular activities; others might remember feelings or events involving family, friends, community, beliefs, or childhood memories. Whatever you choose to write about, you should do more than simply tell a story. You should explain why these events or people or memories define who you are. The people who will read your application will not be interested in the community in which you grew up unless it is clear to them how that community shaped you as a person.

In two pages, you cannot, and should not, try to write an autobiography. You cannot include everything that has been of significance in your life. If you try, you will simply be writing a summary of events without exploring their meaning. Make a list of what you think is most important; then read through it several times, eliminating all but the most important of these things.

Note: always think carefully before writing about personal problems that you have had. Although these events might have shaped who you are as a person, they may have the unintended effect of embarrassing your reader or making her uncomfortable. Always think of the impact on the reader while making your decisions about what to write about (and how to write about it).

It is occasionally advisable to address a point in your application that needs explanation. The review committee might hesitate to accept you because some part of your application is not competitive - for example, you have had a spell of poor grades. If you have a good reason for the low grades, you can help your cause by offering it. However, you must somehow offer your explanation without sounding like you are whining or making excuses. Try to see a redemptive element in your fall from the dean's list: perhaps bad or trying circumstances, which did nothing for your Chem. grade, taught you something about human nature, or taught you to respect someone close to you for the way he dealt with serious illness or bereavement. If you find it necessary to describe something painful, focus on the positive.

A good personal statement balances a discussion of your past experience with an explanation of your goals, plans, and aspirations. Do not write an essay entirely about what you plan to do, but do not ignore your plans either. If possible, show the continuity between your past experience and your future plans.

One final piece of advice: before determining the content of your personal statement, talk with the people who are writing your letters of recommendation. If they are well enough acquainted with you, they may be able to spot weaknesses in your application and to give you some direction. They might also agree to address in their letters the parts of your application that raise questions, thus freeing you to write your personal statement without having to address these issues.

Writing the Personal Statement

Getting Started

Begin working on your essay far in advance of the deadline. It seems incredible that these two short pages should require more time and more effort than that ten-page paper you wrote last week. But the personal statement will be harder than you think. Allow more than enough time for brainstorming, for starting over (and over), for drafting (over and over), for giving the statement to friends and advisors to read, for revising (over and over and over), and for final editing.

Answer the questions thoroughly and thoughtfully, and obey all of the parameters that you are given. Remember: your application will be one among hundreds. You don't want to waste the reader's time by giving her information that she didn't ask for. If your application materials ask you to answer a specific question, then answer that question exactly. Resist the urge to write just one master essay that responds to some approximation of all of the different questions. If there are specific questions, then clearly the readers are looking for specific information; if your essay does not give them that information, they will be less than impressed. Moreover, if the application specifies a one-page maximum, do not write two pages or half of a page. Respect the limits of the application form, and use the space you are given to its full advantage.

Keep in mind the purpose of your essay. Remember that the other parts of your application will tell the review committee about your schoolwork, your extra-curricular activities, and your intellectual ability. You do not need to repeat things listed elsewhere on the application. Nor do you need to try to prove that you are smart. You should have two goals: first, to show that you can communicate clearly and easily; and second, to convey a sense of who you are within the parameters of the questions asked.

Research

Do your homework. Applications may ask specifically why their program is ideal for you (or why you are ideal for their program). In order to answer this question, you must find out everything you can about the program: its strengths, its weaknesses, its faculty, its structure, and so on. Even if a school does not ask specifically why you are interested in its program, if you have researched the schools to which you are applying, you can use your knowledge and preferences for these programs to your advantage in your application essay.

Structure

In order to give your essay coherence, look for and bring out any common threads between the few topics you choose to cover. Work out a logical structure for the essay, and introduce the major themes early enough to give direction to the entire essay. Like any other piece of good writing, your personal statement should not cause the reader any disorientation or confusion.

The opening paragraph is crucial. You may be advised to use the opening paragraph to grab attention. Writers commonly use questions, quotes, or anecdotes in the opening paragraphs - but don't feel compelled to follow this advice. The opening paragraph not only grabs attention, but also establishes the tone for the rest of the essay; therefore, this paragraph must suit both your topic and your style. If you make a joke in your first line, but the rest of the statement shows that you really don't have a sense of humor, then the first line will seem incongruous. Moreover, you don't want the first sentence or paragraph to overpower the rest of what you have to say - either with its wit, its profundity, or its vividness. In short, the opening paragraph must complement the rest of the essay.

Similarly, when thinking about creative approaches to structuring your essay, use good judgment. You might wish to experiment with structures that are more interesting and creative than the obvious ones (the chronological, the topical, and so on). A creative approach will make your essay stand out from the pack. Keep in mind, though, that all of the above advice about consistency also applies to your essay's overall structure. Finally, make sure that the creative touches you make throughout your essay are indeed "creative." The problem of writing an interesting, attention-grabbing personal statement has been around for a long, long time. Make sure that you do not fall victim to cliché.

Style and Tone

The personal statement must not be abstract or vague in any way. Though the personal statement deals in abstractions, one of your greatest challenges is to write about these topics without falling into cliché, platitude, or generalization. Try to keep your writing as concrete as possible, using examples and images. Avoid the metaphorical and the grandiose. When explaining the significance of events in your life, watch your tone. You should be able to discuss something thoughtfully and still resist the temptation to "blow things up," or to invest them with too much meaning. Be wary of inflated or melodramatic prose that will seem ludicrous to any sensible reader. If you are judicious in your use of language, your reader will be impressed.

You must toe the line between being flat and predictable on the one hand, and too eccentric or flamboyant on the other. Be careful with the humor - it can be an asset or a handicap. If you are a naturally witty person, then your personal writing will be witty. Still, you don't want to give the reader the impression that you are a smart aleck. Choose your words with care and make every one of them work hard. Since you have very little space, it is important to write concisely. Use the correct word, not the one with the most syllables. You do not have to trot out vocabulary to prove your intellectual superiority; write with taste. Avoid clichés, pretension, arrogance, and melodrama. Be frank and mature.

Revision

Once you have written a draft, have people read it - friends or family members or professors. You are the author, but input from people who know you can often help you see how your statement may fall short of adequately describing you. Other readers might also be able to tell you when parts of your statement are too abstract, obscure, or summary. When you have produced a draft with which you are satisfied, sit down with a dictionary and grammar reference and proofread it. Running a spell-check on your computer will not identify all the errors. Your statement must have no misspelled or misused words, and no grammatical errors. You should follow even those grammatical rules that are no longer strictly enforced. Don't split your infinitives or end sentences with a prepositions; it's better not to take the chance.