



Writing a Personal Statement

Personal statements can be daunting because the prompt often offers little guidance on what to write. Understanding what the personal statement is and how to write one can make the process much easier.

What is a personal statement?

A personal statement is a short essay meant to introduce you, the candidate, to the university or program you're applying to. Personal statements are meant to accompany the quantitative metrics used by admissions such as your GPA or test scores. Test scores are objective, so admissions often ask for personal statements to gain insight into your personality, career goals, and the value you'll add to their program.

What types of personal statements are there?

There are two types of personal statements commonly used by admissions:

1. A general, comprehensive personal statement. This type of personal statement allows for more freedom because there is no specific prompt and you can decide what you want to write about. Law schools and medical schools often ask for general personal statements with their applications.
2. A personal statement that responds to a prompt or question. Applications for these personal statements may ask you to respond to one or more questions in your personal statement. Sometimes, the application may even ask for multiple, shorter essays instead of having you answer all the questions in one essay. Business and graduate schools often ask for these personal statements in their applications.

Who is my audience?

This is one of the most important questions to ask yourself before you start writing. Understanding your audience will help you appeal to the people who are deciding whether or not to admit you into the program. Your readers are most likely experts in your field of study (i.e. a marketing professor probably isn't reading an essay for an accounting program).

Don't use your personal statement as a way to show off your knowledge about the topic. Your audience has your resume and your transcripts. They know you have the intelligence and ability to do the work. Use your personal statement as a way to show them how your personality and skills will benefit their program. You want your audience to walk away feeling like they know you.

It may be hard to balance introducing yourself to the audience and not oversharing. It's best to focus your personal statement on the last few years, instead of trying to give your life story. Think about how your undergraduate years shaped who you are today. Or perhaps there was a significant event that set you on your current path. The goal is to share appropriate, relevant information with our audience when writing personal statements.

What tone should I use when writing my personal statement?

Personal statements are, as it says in the name, personal. This means using a writing style that is authentic to you, while balancing a fairly formal yet conversational feel. Think of the tone of a personal statement to that of your interview voice. During our best interviews, we're relaxed, enthusiastic, and specific. We're also not reaching for words or concepts we're not familiar or comfortable with. If it helps, think about what you would say to the person reading your statement if you were sitting across from them talking. What parts of your

story would you want them to know? What tone would you use while speaking to them? How do you want them to feel right at the end?

Can I write one personal statement and send it to multiple schools or programs?

While it may be tempting to write one statement that covers all the basics and then send it to multiple programs, you should never do so. Researching the program and incorporating your knowledge about it into your personal statement will set you apart from the other candidates, especially if the other candidates are sending the same statement to every program they're applying for. Sharing some of your knowledge about the specific program will also show your audience that you are genuinely interested in their program, not simply applying "just because." Any applicant can say that they're interested in the program, but very few candidates will take the time to research it. Think about email you receive. You can immediately tell the difference from a message sent to several people versus one that was written specifically to you.

What topics should I avoid?

There are some topics you may want to avoid writing about in your personal statement even if you think they'll separate you from the other candidates. Religion and politics are two examples of topics to avoid. You don't know the beliefs or political views of your audience, and you never want to assume that your audience is going to agree with you. Writing about a controversial topic could set you apart from the other candidates in the wrong way. You should also avoid cliché topics, reasoning, and wording in your writing. For example, instead of, "I want to be a doctor because I want to help people," look to explore a more personal reason you decided to become a doctor. Even if it is to "help people," why is it so important for you to help people as a doctor?

What are some questions to get me started?

1. Who do you see as your audience? How many essays do you estimate your audience will read? If you were the audience, what would you look for in a "strong" personal statement?
2. 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?
3. When did you become interested in this field, and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
4. Why are you interested in this specific school/program/field? (Do a bit of research on the school and program.)
5. How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
6. What are your career goals? Why have you set these goals for yourself? Why do these goals matter to you? How will the program lead to you accomplishing these goals? How do your goals differ from your fellow classmates who may have similar goals?