Advice for Writing Excellent Personal Statements

Personal statements are often the key component in a scholarship or graduate school application. They tend to be from 500-1000 words long. They are an essay about you. Nearly all applications have a personal statement requirement of some kind.

Most selection committees are looking at the personal statement for signs of who you are, what you have done, and why this scholarship or graduate program makes sense for you. All things being equal, an excellent personal statement will help secure an interview for you, if there is one, and may indeed help you win the award or gain admission.

This is your chance to shine, to make your personality, background, interests, and talents known to the selection committee. Writing an excellent, original, and winning personal statement may be one of the most difficult writing projects you’ll ever face. Give it the time, effort, and patience it deserves.

General Points

- Keep within the word or space limit. Don’t use too small a font.
- Make the first sentence and the last sentence count. These are the first, and last, words that will be read by the selection committee and are probably the most important.
- End your essay with a conclusion that refers back to the lead and restates your thesis.
- Write cleanly. Write well. Cut all deadwood. Every sentence should communicate something new.
- Get an audience. Have as many people as possible read and comment on your personal statement.
- Remember your audience for the final statement: professors who write your letters of recommendation, selection committees, and admissions committees. Those people read numerous documents each year. Your purpose is to distinguish yourself from the countless “others.”
- Hence, the Personal Statement has to stand out. It needs to be original, interesting, and possibly even humorous or witty. Give the reader hooks to remember you by.
- If you have overcome an obstacle, write about it. If something in your background is unusual, write about it.
- Have one or two provocative statements in which you believe.
- Get comments and revisions from the National Scholarships Director and other professors.
- Proofread, proofread, and proofread. Read aloud to yourself to discover errors. A final personal statement must be perfect in terms of spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Great candidates have lost out because of such mistakes.
- Write, re-write, and re-write. Only through multiple drafts and mentoring will you succeed. The reader should be able to read your personal statement ONCE, understand your main points, and remember you!
- Be organized. Remember the basic components of an essay: an introduction, topic sentences in paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- Be authentic. Be absolutely honest and sincere. A good friend or relative should be able to recognize the personal statement as yours if your name was removed.
How to Get Started. Starting a personal statement is often the hardest part…

- Don’t wait until you think you have the perfect idea. Start free-writing, outlining—whatever it takes to get words on the paper. Think of this as a long-term project. It doesn’t have to be perfectly written on the first sitting.

- Be creative! Take risks. Use a metaphor, analogy, or motif to give your paper cohesion. These things will help you stand out. (See the “Getting Creative with Personal Statements” handout.)

- When a good idea strikes, write it down, even if it hits at 3 AM.

- Let the statement sit and “mature” over several weeks. Good personal statements take time. Writing it on the night before it is due won’t work.

- Consider starting with an anecdote, real-life example of your life. Think of the personal statement as a story that reveals your accomplishments and who you rather than an academic essay.

Still having trouble? Here’s another way to begin.

- Consider the three most important areas of your life. What are your three passions? What are the three areas of your life to which you devote the most time, energy, and effort? What are the major influences in your life? What have you learned from your life experiences? Where do you see yourself in five years? In ten years? What defines who you are? One area should be your academic discipline.

- Next, think of three stories that would best reveal those three passions. Tell a story about each of those passions. You may need to write more than three stories in order to discover your very best stories. Think about life-changing experiences. Through those stories, the reader will see who you are. They will see you living out what is most important to you. They will learn enough about you to be able to ask you questions. Include details and anecdotes. Be as specific as possible.

Some Cautions

- Take care in writing about religion, ethnic background, poverty, discrimination, and various hardships. Talking about such things is fine, as long as they relate to your motives and career goals. Keep in mind, however, that most competitive scholarships and graduate schools are selecting their scholars on the basis of accomplishment, not endurance. Remember that the admissions or selection committee will likely be composed of people of different religious faiths and/or secular-minded individuals.

- Avoid famous quotations.

- Don’t write an autobiography or resume in prose.

- Don’t tell the reader about your personality characteristics—they figure out what kind of a person you are by reading about your experiences.

- Don’t give weak excuses for your GPA or test scores.

- If you are having a hard time thinking of achievements, community service, activities, and other examples of your passions, you should take this as a strong hint that you don’t have enough in your background and should develop these areas of your life.

- Don’t begin with clichéd references to childhood, e.g. “When I was 3, I knew I wanted to be a doctor…” or “I was born in” or “My parents come from” etc. You don’t want the committee to be envisioning you as a three-year old holding a stethoscope to your teddy bear, for example. You want your committee to see you as a young adult, well trained and full of promise.

- In the end, no amount of advice or examples can dictate how you should write your own personal statement. It has to be your invention. Just try to be yourself.