

GUIDE TO PERSONAL STATEMENTS & ESSAYS

During the graduate and professional school application process, you will likely be required to write a statement or essay. The requirements for these statements and essays will vary from program to program, but some general rules do apply. These writing pieces give you an opportunity to explain parts of your personal, educational, and professional background that have influenced your decision to pursue an advanced degree at a particular institution and within a specific program. Admissions committees base a large part of their decision to accept or deny candidates based on these admissions essays. This is because a good essay can paint a three-dimensional picture of you and your experiences, more so than test scores or GPAs.

Depending on your program, either a personal statement or a statement of purpose will be a required document for admission. If applying to professional school, an essay on a specific topic will likely be required. The personal statement should focus on connecting your experiences, education, and motivations to the program you have selected.

Reflect

Depending on what the program asks you to write about, you will likely have to address these types of issues in a relatively concise framework. If you keep a journal, it may be helpful to look back at themes that have guided your life experiences to create this framework. When beginning your essay(s), ask yourself and reflect on:

- ❖ **What in your life makes you want to pursue this program?** – Starting out, make a top 5 list of experiences/moments/stories that are most relevant to your decision to pursue this particular aspect of higher education and most illustrative of your ability to succeed in that chosen program.
- ❖ **Personal Circumstances** – Do you have anything “extra” to explain about why you are different from a typical candidate? Can range from explaining, “struggling in the beginning of college career” to a background that is unusual but makes you particularly well suited for your area of study.

Many programs will ask candidates to talk about their own unique diversity story. If you have a story that involves overcoming adversity that you want to include in your personal statement, ask yourself the following questions first:

- ❖ Are you personally comfortable sharing this information with a committee you have not met?
- ❖ Are you able to explain how your narrative of overcoming is directly relevant to your potential success in this particular program?
- ❖ Are you able to balance the narrative so that the result of that adversity is a net positive in terms of how others who do not know you may perceive you (victor, not victim)?

If you are not comfortable sharing, or if the story does not relate to your decision to go to graduate school then it would be best to omit it.

Write Your Story

Application committees often say that “In other words, applicants have to demonstrate their commitment to the career... through the description and discussion of specific, concrete first-hand experiences rather than just repeating the clichés that they enjoy helping people” (Ding, p.372).

How have you demonstrated your skills and abilities throughout your work and academic experience? Find specific examples and write a story. An essay is much more compelling when you give strong examples that connect through a concise theme.

When writing your essay(s), ask yourself and focus on:

- ❖ Establishing your academic and professional qualifications; demonstrate your abilities through work experiences
- ❖ Discuss your interests and motivation in studying in the target field specifically at each school
- ❖ Explain why the target population matches well with your interests and goals and what contributions you hope to make to the field
- ❖ Explain your future study and career plans

BEST PRACTICES

There are several different strategies to keep in mind as you begin writing your personal statement or essays.

- ❖ Do not procrastinate! Give yourself plenty of time to organize your thoughts and write a successful essay about you and your educational objectives. Plan to produce a minimum of three drafts and receive feedback from multiple readers.
- ❖ Be concise and selective. Focus on common themes and specific goal statements, rather than providing a biography or a list of accomplishments. You will not want to provide a summary of your resume, but an expansion on your select accomplishments.
- ❖ Emphasize that the information you are providing demonstrates your potential for this kind of advanced study (just as you must do in a job search, don't forget to "sell your skills") and why you are a fit for your field and for this program.
- ❖ If you have a specific professor that you would like to work with, mention them (as long as you have emailed them first) and why you are interested in their research or work.
- ❖ Learn about the mission of the program, if you find it is something that you agree with and connect with then mention that. This is a good way to tailor your personal statement to each program.
- ❖ Follow instructions! Answer the question, and all parts of each question.
- ❖ Proofread, proofread, and proofread! Visit Career Development or Writing Resources

Career Development Resources

Career Development is here to help! From our website resources to our events to our one-on-one appointments we are here to help you every step of the way. Be sure to check [Handshake](#) and our social media regularly for upcoming events regarding graduate school. You can also use Handshake to schedule one-on-one appointments to discuss any stage of the graduate school process or request funding.