

Writing Personal Statements and Discussing Yourself in Cover Letters

You may be asked to write a personal statement for certain career paths (such as in writing or academic fields) and knowing how to write about yourself can help when writing cover letters as well.

Personal statements generally fall into two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement
 - a. This allows you great freedom in terms of what you write and it's often used on standard medical or law school applications forms.
2. A response to a very particular question
 - a. Business and graduate school applications often ask specific questions and your personal statement should respond directly to the question being asked. Some school applications (specifically business) may use multiple essays, typically asking for responses to three or more questions.

Prep Work

Know Your Audience

- What does the prompt ask you to focus on or cover?
- What do you know about the program/position you're applying to? What values do they seem to have based on their website?
- What do you know about the field or research area you're going into? What things (experiences, research, interests, qualities) do you think this discipline values?
- Imagine the work you would do in the career you're hoping to get into: what does that work involve? What things would you need to do on a day-to-day basis?

Prepare Your Materials

- Are there any documents (transcripts, your resume, application forms) that will help you write your statement? Keep them in front of you to refer to during your writing process – it will make brainstorming and forming the statement much easier.
- Is there important information (such as names and titles of former employers, advisors, or professors) that you will need to include? Make a list of these to refer to so you're not trying to recall this information while under pressure.

Brainstorming Stories to Tell

Brainstorm as many story ideas as possible, because this will give you more options to pull from and keep you from getting stuck. Stories that you might tell can include (but are not limited to):

- Heritage stories: Are there interesting moments you can share that explain who your family is, where you're from, your cultural heritage, or some other important aspect (or aspects) of your identity?
- Academic stories: Was there a time when you were intrigued or inspired to learn about a specific thing? Was there a group project or research project that caused you to ask questions and pursue ideas? Pull from these moments – both big and small
- Mentorship stories: Who were the key people who inspired you in some way? Did a professor support you? Did a coworker or friend inspire you to pursue something?
- Stories of struggle: What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your story? This category is powerful when done well, but it's best to avoid the "overcoming" narrative (ex: I struggled but overcame X). These stories function best when they grapple with ideas, experiences, and values while offering complex solutions – not easy answers.

Questions to ask yourself before you write

Still feeling stuck? Here's some questions to consider to help get you brainstorming.

- What details of your personal life might help a committee or evaluator better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it and yourself that has made you curious and convinced you this is suitable path for you?
- What skills (leadership, communication/interpersonal, analytical, etc.) do you possess?
- What excites or drives you, or keeps you asking questions?
- What do you want someone who's never met you to know about you?
- What are your values and what guides you?

Writing the First Draft

Writer Anne Lamott in her book *Bird by Bird* talks about first drafts as:

...I'd start writing without reining myself in. It was almost just typing, just making my fingers move. And the writing would be terrible... I would eventually let myself trust the process – sort of, more or less. I'd write a first draft that was maybe twice as long as it should be, with a self-indulgent and boring beginning.

She describes these as "shitty first drafts." Freeing yourself to write anything and everything down the first time around helps get your mind thinking through what you really want to say. Your first draft is going to be rough and messy – that's okay. That's

great, even. It will lead to your second or third draft be wonderful. It's not expected or even necessary to get it right the first time.

Writing Cover Letters with Personal Flavor

Cover letters are less personal and will not include many stories in them. But there are still aspects of them that are similar to personal statements. How you frame your story regarding work shares a lot in common with how you frame your stories about life experiences in general. Some things to help your process:

- Embrace the “I”: Unlike resumes, cover letters will use the first-person voice. It can bring up feelings of strangeness and self-consciousness to use the first person in writing – often we are taught this is wrong for formal papers, or it makes us feel egotistical and ashamed to describe our accomplishments or work this way. While you should avoid starting every sentence with “I,” putting yourself and your presence in your words is invaluable. These are your experiences
- Make your writing distinctive: use specific, concrete examples with strong details. You don't have to be too lengthy – your space is short. But adding flavors of insight and observation can go a long way.

General Writing Tips

- Tell a story with an angle: finding a way to share your experiences in an interesting way can be challenging. Finding an angle or “hook” for the reader is vital. Can you draw the reader in with your first sentence? Can you frame your experiences in a way that feel exciting and/or dramatic?
- Show and tell: Ignore the writing advice of “show, don't tell.” Do both. Show what you experienced and tell how you felt. There will be more showing than telling, but using both can elevate your statement.
- Try to avoid language that is too grandiose or tentative. “I think,” “I hope,” “I will undoubtedly,” and “I am absolutely” may weaken your stance and voice. Consider how you are using these statements and when. Avoiding clichés is also recommended.
- Write what you know: This is about you and your experiences. Try not to compare yourselves to anyone else while you write. Focus on your experiences and what's important to you.
- Subjects to avoid: It's generally best to not talk about high school experiences if you're beyond your freshman year in college. Some resources recommend avoiding controversial subjects such as specific religious and political issues. We won't tell you to do that. Use your best judgement based on where your applying but don't censor yourself or your experiences if they are important and relevant.

- Edit and proofread: Make sure your not duplicating information that's included elsewhere in your application or elsewhere in your statement. And of course make sure that your writing is free of grammatical and spelling errors.

Partial Examples

Grad School

My interest in science dates back to my early years of middle school where I participated in Science Olympiad. Having the opportunity to apply what I was learning in school to an extracurricular activity was exciting– I excelled at rock and fossil identification and even medaled in a state competition. This opportunity taught me skills I utilized throughout high school and in my undergraduate career.

I have had the opportunity to be exposed to a wide range of natural sciences where I have participated in research led by faculty members.

Cover Letter

I have had a variety of work experiences, starting in customer service and nonprofit administration, which helped me develop strong communication, patience, and engaged listening. Through my work in public service, I have had the opportunity to lead projects, train team members, engage in professional development, and develop my own presentations on voter registration strategies. My education background in liberal arts fostered curiosity and a love of learning which I carry throughout my life.

Fellowship

At this moment in my career and exploration of my writing voice, the Core Apprenticeship program would be invaluable. As a recent graduate from Augsburg University, I have discovered what stories I yearn to tell - stories of complicated queer women, worlds where magical realism can reveal truths and experiences otherwise overlooked, the ways power structures affect how people communicate, and how people work to express their thoughts and emotions and get their minds, hearts, and guts to work together. In my transition from degree work towards forming the habits and skills of an early career playwright, this apprenticeship is the natural next step.

Artistic

As a young artist I am continually rethinking myself. I am drawn to the works of Paula Vogel and Sarah Ruhl and particularly admire their writing styles and theatrics. I want to make theater that moves people – not just emotionally but also to physically change something in their lives. My writing is disturbing – in the root of the

word, “to unsettle, disquiet.” I am drawn to stories that grapple with difficult situations, issues that have no easy answer. I am caught between being many different people in my life and feel I continually struggle to get my sea legs on an ever-changing ocean. With these feelings driving my writing, I’m working through the idea that “art should disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed” and exploring what kind of comfort and disturbance my vantage can provide.

Need help writing personal statements? Visit the [Augsburg Writing Center](#) for general writing support. For more specialized career advice and insight, visit the [Strommen Center](#) or make an appointment on [Handshake](#)!

This document is adapted from resources found on [Purdue OWL](#), [Cornell John S. Knight Institute](#), and [IU Writing Tutorial Services](#).