

TIPS FOR WRITING A STRONG PERSONAL STATEMENT



WHAT IS A PERSONAL STATEMENT & WHY ARE THEY USED?

A Personal Statement is a written component of a student's application to a graduate or professional degree program that allows a student to explain their reasons for applying, and usually serves as the answer to a specific prompt that is given, such as "How will completing the ____ program at ____ college help you achieve your professional goals?" When no prompt is provided, the goal is to tell your story which creates a more holistic view of who you are and your candidacy.

WRITING STRATEGIES

Take time to reflect before writing

Reflect on your own experiences to help generate ideas and themes for your writing.

Reflection Questions to Consider

- What personal skills/traits do you possess?
- What is unique or distinctive about you?
- What obstacles have you overcome?
- How have your experiences influenced you?
- What interests you about this school/career/path/field?
- What might you need to explain (ex. work history)?
- How has your interest in the area evolved over time?
- Why are you personally motivated to apply?

Show, don't tell

- **Weave a Structured Story:** Narrate (not summarize) your academic or professional background. Tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end - not in terms of the progression of your life, but rather answering the questions through themes and specific experiences.
- **Quality over Quantity:** If there is no maximum word count listed, longer is not necessarily better.
- **Prioritize Content:** Due to word count limits, you cannot use every idea you think of. Focus on a few significant experiences or moments (or just one) that demonstrate your interest, motivation and readiness.

Make it personal

- Write a story only you can write (could include a story about a family member or mentor, or a salient identity you hold)
- Organize your reasons for applying to the program around a common theme that is important to you, such as innovation, social justice, or a specific topic you want to research further through graduate study.

Example

For example, your personal statement could focus on a particular patient or client population you want to support, and/or what specific challenges a specific population faces within the existing systems and how you will address them as a future provider.

Weak: "From my experience growing up as the child of immigrant parents, I learned about many things, such as immigration rights, employment discrimination based on racial and socioeconomic identity, and how a lawyer can help. I want to be a lawyer so I can address these important issues."

Strong: "My parents' experiences finding employment in the US after immigrating led to extreme financial difficulties for my family. The combination of the language and legal barriers my parents encountered stunted the growth of their independent business. As a future immigration lawyer and lifelong bilingual resident of Washington State, I want to address the unique legal challenges faced by immigrant families in the Seattle area, and provide assistance when language barriers complicate these challenges further."

Introduce yourself to the reader, and share what makes you stand out as a candidate.

Answer the question(s) thoroughly

Why you? Why this? Why now?

- **Answer the Specific Question(s):** Don't try to capture every single reason you are applying, or describe every relevant experience you have had.
- **Be Specific:** Provide evidence that you will be successful as a graduate student.

Share your Motivation

Possibilities for explaining your motivation to attend a particular graduate program, pursue a specific career (such as dentistry, law or social work), or attend a specific university include:

- **The school's mission statement:** Ex. *"I want to attend a program that specifically focuses on training future teachers with a specific focus on social justice and equity in public schools because I want to teach in a public school district"*
- **Specific classes or emphases offered:** Ex. *"I want to take classes on ____ which will help me achieve my goal; only this program is offering these classes"*
- **Faculty or resources available at that institution and how they would help you achieve your goals:** Ex. *"I want to conduct research on indigenous PNW plants and Dr. B is a known expert on this topic"*
- **Professional outcome you are looking for from that specific program:** Ex. *"I would be able to become a ____ by completing this program"*

Be prepared to pre-write and rewrite!

- **Brainstorm before beginning writing:** Come up with plenty of ideas so you have options, but also realize you can't use everything you think of. Prioritize what is most salient.
- **Make an outline:** Make a plan for what you plan to express in your personal statement, and an order that makes sense - chronological order? Stories that show different aspects of the same theme?
- **Plan on writing multiple drafts:** Seek feedback from peers, family members, career coaches, TA's, alumni, etc. and incorporate feedback into new drafts.

PERSONAL STATEMENT VS. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

A **Personal Statement** is a story about who you are whereas a **Statement of Purpose** is about what you want to do.

Some schools and organizations use these terms interchangeably. Do your research on their meaning and goal.

BASIC FORMATTING

- Varies but typically 1-3 Pages or 650 words
 - Double-spaced
 - 1" Margins on all sides
 - 12 Pt. Font
 - Times New Roman or similar common font
- Be sure to check with your specific application information to confirm what is needed and what format is required.*

THINGS TO AVOID

- **Using the same personal statement for every graduate program you are applying to:** Prompts usually differ. Answer the specific question asked by each. Failing to address the specifics asked of you does not demonstrate strong investment or intentionality. The exception to this would be when you are only permitted to submit one personal statement to an online system that will be used for all applications in that field (ex. Most medical schools use the AMCAS to collect and distribute applications).
- **Making an argument without providing examples:** Ex *"I want to fix the systemic barriers faced by people of color in higher education."* While systemic barriers are absolutely important, this particular statement is vague and does not hold much meaning. What barriers are being faced and how do you want to fix it?
- **Using generic language or statements:** Using statements such as *"I want to be a caring and compassionate doctor that puts my patients' needs first."* Most applicants intend to focus on care for the patients. This is not unique to you and therefore does not make you stand out as a candidate. Another common example is saying that this degree or program is your calling or what you have always wanted to do. Back up any argument for why you should be admitted with solid evidence, such as a past internship or job in that field.
- **Using passive voice instead of active voice:** Keep the focus on you and what actions you did, instead of being the recipient of the action. For example instead of saying *"Being a Resident Advisor taught me about balancing deep empathy with strong attention to my own self-care"* say *"As a Resident Advisor, I practiced deep empathy when supporting first year residents, while also prioritizing my own self-care."* Rather than focusing on your own learning, focus on the actual skill demonstrated and how you applied it.