Write Your Personal Statement

A personal statement is an intellectual narrative about a selection of specific and relevant accomplishments to the proposed graduate program, fellowship or professional position. It provides the reader a sense of the candidate’s priorities and judgment, allowing them to know the writer more personally.

The personal statement is just one, but very important, part of an application. It is important to strategize about what you want and need to convey and in which component of the application it can be most impactful.

Each personal statement must be tailored to each specific application. Pay close attention to the prompt, as some things you may include in a personal statement for one application may make more sense to include in another part of the application when applying to another opportunity. For example, when you have only a personal statement to write, it may make sense to include something about your career goals. However, if a research or project statement is required, that may be the more appropriate place.

Writing & Editing Suggestions

Many of your application reviewers are busy reviewing many applications so they will likely skim your statement. Write in a way that your primary points are clearly and succinctly conveyed. Think about what is sought and factor this into what you write. Be sure that your personal statement adheres to word or character limits while addressing the prompt and all embedded questions. It is imperative to write multiple drafts and have many people read your statements, providing feedback. As you edit your writing, consider the following suggestions:

• Give specific, detailed examples to illustrate each of the points made in the essay. Make it relevant; if it’s not relevant, then it doesn’t belong, no matter how interesting.

• Show yourself in action, rather than simply listing credentials and skills. This requires the use of “I.”

• Be sure topic sentences (first sentence of each paragraph) lay out an idea that is then developed and illustrated by the paragraph that follows. So, if a reader is skimming, will the person follow the gist of your argument by reading only those first sentences?

• Your opening sentence should catch the reader’s attention. Be sure your last sentence pulls ideas in the essay together. Don’t just summarize. Conclude with something specific and visionary.

• Make sure your essay is enjoyable to read; show momentum and build up to its most important insight.

• Be sure there is a thread connecting the different parts of the essay.

• Edit your statement! Remove any points that remain vague, overly general or incompletely illustrated. Cut out unnecessary words and avoid clichés. Experiment by cutting adjectives and adverbs, especially intensifiers such as “unique,” “overwhelming” and “definitely.” The resulting sentence usually has more power and punch.

• What sentences or ideas best identify your passion in life? Could the essay begin with or more fully highlight these sentences and ideas?
Brainstorming Your Essay
As you begin planning your essay, there are some questions you could ask yourself to provide some direction on responding to the prompt:

- Reflect on some questions that may help you describe yourself. What is special, unique or distinctive about you or your life story?
- What details in your life shaped you or influenced your goals?
- When did you become interested in this opportunity and what have you chosen to do to reinforce your conviction in pursuing this opportunity?
- What do you know about this field and how did you learn it?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there gaps or discrepancies in your academic record worth explaining?
- Have you overcome unusual hardships or obstacles?
- Have you made any mistakes or have any regrets that taught you something important about yourself?
- What personal characteristics do you possess that would indicate success in the opportunity you are pursuing? How have you demonstrated these characteristics?
- What skills do you possess?
- Why might you be more successful and effective in this opportunity than other applicants?

Sources: Writing Personal Statements Online – https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingpersonalstatementsonline/
Purdue OWL – Writing the Personal Statement – https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/