

Writing a Personal Statement

What is a Personal Statement?

A personal statement is an essay submitted to a graduate school, internship, or scholarship program as part of the application process. The personal statement is what separates you from the other applicants to a program. Most of us do not have perfect GRE, LSAT, or MCAT scores. Thus, we can use the personal statement to highlight our unique traits, abilities, and experiences.

What do they want from me?

A personal statement should express something unique about you through the use of a strong personal voice. Applications will often ask you to answer questions about your academic experience, your future goals, your personality, and your career goals. Even though the applications to most programs are very different, there are a few simple rules you can follow when writing your personal statement:

1) Show something unique about yourself.

In the highly competitive world of graduate admissions, writing about how you like science and want to help people will not get you into med school. Ask yourself what personal experiences make you unique. Have you worked in a job that taught you something profound about yourself? Can you think of a situation that highlights your compassion and patience? The personal statement should showcase why you deserve a scholarship or admission to a program; you need to use your essay to explain why you're more qualified than other applicants.

2) Answer the question(s) completely.

Writing the personal statement isn't just an exercise in self-promotion. You must also show that you are capable of reading directions and following them. If the application asks you to write about your previous work experience, don't write about your childhood dream of becoming an astronaut (unless being an astronaut is part of your work experience). If the application asks more than one question in a prompt, make sure you address all of them. Some applications allow you to answer why your standardized test scores might not be predictive of your future performance. If your test scores aren't the best, take this opportunity to explain why you're still qualified.

3) Make your stories relevant.

If you tell a story in your personal statement, make sure you connect it to the prompt. Provide enough detail so that anyone reading your story will understand why it is significant and how it makes you stand out. However, you should also be careful about providing too much detail. Only relate what is significant to your main point and of interest to your reader. The people who review personal statements have to go through thousands of them, so one of the worst things you can do is be redundant.

4) Pick an overarching theme.

Rather than relating a number of unrelated incidents, pick a story that highlights your personality and values. For instance, you might want to show admissions officers that you are a community-focused individual. Rather than writing about the many different volunteer positions you have held, you could write in-depth about one or two meaningful volunteer experiences and how you changed and grew from them.

5) Remember what is appropriate in personal statements.

In your personal statement, you should avoid discussing money as a motivator, complaining about unfortunate circumstances in your life, and preaching to your reader. You should also beware writing about your race, religion, sexuality, or class unless you connect these issues to your overarching theme.

6) Do not exceed the word limit by more than 100 words.

There is always some leniency with word counts. However, adhering to a word count shows that you can follow directions and write in a concise fashion.

Format

Although there is no set format for personal statements, there are some useful guidelines to keep in mind when writing yours. First, make sure your personal statement has a clear beginning, middle, and end. Your first paragraph should grab your reader's attention and make them interested in you as a candidate for their program. Make sure each of your body paragraphs is relevant to your overarching point and highlights something new. Each new major idea should have its own paragraph.