

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 personality, academic experience, future goals, and 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.

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 medical 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 highlight why you deserve a scholarship or admission to a program; you need to use your essay to explain why you are more qualified than other applicants.

Answer the Question(s) Completely

Writing the personal statement is not 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, do not 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 are not the best, take this opportunity to explain why you are still qualified.

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 relay to your reader what is significant for your main point of interest. 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.

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.

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 of writing about your race, class, religion, or sexuality unless you connect these issues to your overarching theme.

Do not Exceed the Word Limit

There is usually some leniency with word counts. However, adhering to a word count shows that you can follow directions and write in a concise fashion. It's a good rule of thumb to never exceed a word limit by more than 100 words.

How Should I Format a Personal Statement?

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 the attention of your readers 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.