


Toppel Career Center

PERSONAL STATEMENT GUIDE





Graduate schools often require a personal statement or statement of purpose as part of the application for admission. Some schools request the applicant to address specific information in the personal statement while others leave the document unstructured and the applicant is free to address a chosen topic. The importance of your personal statement varies from school to school and program to program. You want to demonstrate that you are an applicant who would be a strong addition to their program and university.

Types of Personal Statements

1

The general, comprehensive personal statement allows maximum freedom in terms of what you write and is the type of statement often prepared for standard medical or law school application forms.

2

The response to a specific question or series of questions is another format that Business and graduate schools may use. It's important to study the questions carefully, and reflect on and answer these questions.

Getting Started

What is your purpose?

The main goal is for the admissions committee to admit you. Therefore, before you begin, determine your purpose for writing the personal statement. Focus your content so the document is cohesive and does not include extraneous material.

How do I determine the content?

Pay attention to the audience (committee) throughout the statement. Remember that your readers are made up of professionals in their field, and you do not want to make obvious statements or tell them how they should act or what they should be. You are the amateur at this point.

What is my approach/style?

The personal statement is unique to you. It may help to think of it as a chronological story outlining the reasons you are applying to the graduate program. The reader wants to see the human being behind the written application, test scores, and transcript. Keep in mind that you will go through several drafts, and you should plan accordingly.

Information to Include

Plan your outline. This will help you create a document that is organized and flows effectively. By considering the following, you can get a sense of how you will put the document in order.

- Demonstrate eligibility and preparedness for graduate study
- Illustrate purpose for graduate study
- Communicate intended future use of graduate study
- Express views about specific research interests (if relevant)
- Highlight previous experience and academic work that makes you a competitive candidate

Address these questions in the personal statement.

What influenced your decision to go to graduate school in this discipline?


What have you done academically (or through other experience) to prepare yourself for this graduate program?

How will you give back to this program once you are done?

What are your goals that this degree will help you achieve?

Brainstorming Questions

1. What is special, unique, distinctive and/or impressive about you or your life story?
2. What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
3. When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field?

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4. How have you actively learned more about this field? This can include registering for specific classes, working with faculty, or joining clubs or professional organizations.
 5. If you have worked a lot during your college years, what skills have you acquired or enhanced that can transfer into your graduate program of interest?
 6. What are your career goals/aspirations?
 7. Have you had work published, internships or study abroad experiences that are relevant?
 8. Have you been challenged to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (e.g. economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
 9. What personal characteristics do you possess (e.g. integrity, compassion, persistence) that would improve your prospects for success in this field? What experiences allowed you to display these characteristics?
 10. What leadership, communication, or analytical skills do you possess and how have you demonstrated these skills?
 11. Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school – and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
 12. What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

Tips for Success

- Follow the format that is determined by Admissions Committee
- Create an outline for your document
- Get to the point early on and catch the attention of the reader
- Tell a story and make it interesting to the reader (write what you know about)
- Be objective, but reveal information about yourself
- Evaluate and form conclusions that explain the meaning of your experience; be specific when providing examples
- Use good transitions between your paragraphs to enhance the flow
- Have knowledge about the specific university/graduate program
- Avoid controversial topics
- Strive for depth, not breadth, and narrow your focus to one or two ideas, themes, or experiences
- Write well and correctly



Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Too many “I” statements
- Spelling and grammar errors
- Canned or clichéd responses
- Telling your life story: focus on your interests and goals
- Discussing money as a motivating factor
- Writing one statement for all schools (with the exception of pre-med)
- Boring or uninteresting content
- Procrastinating (it is evident to the reader if you have waited until the last minute)
- Rehashing information on your resume or application
- Dwelling on crises or using excuses
- Sounding like every other applicant
- Submitting supplemental materials or referring to online materials (unless requested by the school)
- Using gimmicky style or format (be professional)

Final Reminders

Visit the Writing Center for a review of grammar and writing style

See an advisor at the Toppel Career Center to critique the content

Proofread, Proofread, and Proofread again



Personal Statement Checklist

Introduction

- ☐ The first paragraph grabs the reader's attention.
- ☐ A clear, main theme can be identified.

Body

- ☐ Essay does not summarize information found elsewhere in your resume or application.
- ☐ Essay contains a high level of detail and concrete examples.
- ☐ Essay offers personal reflections, rather than gimmicks or clichés.
- ☐ Transitions are used between new ideas.

Conclusion

- ☐ You conclude all ideas that were addressed.
- ☐ Your essay leaves the reader with a lasting impression.

General

- ☐ Your personal statement shows what makes you unique.
- ☐ You discuss what influenced you to apply to this program and how you have prepared.
- ☐ Each idea builds on one another.
- ☐ Your personal statement is concise and to the point.
- ☐ If applicable, you address the prompt or questions asked.
- ☐ You discuss how the degree/program will help you pursue your goals.
- ☐ You adhere to the word/character limit.
- ☐ If applicable, you tailor your personal statement to a specific program or school.
- ☐ There are no grammatical or spelling errors.
- ☐ Personal statement has been critiqued/ reviewed by the Toppel Career Center, the Writing Center, and a faculty/staff member.