

Writing Personal Statements

Writing a good personal statement is challenging, but it's incredibly important. Usually, you have 500 words or fewer to convince a selection committee that you're smart, driven, empathetic, sincere, likeable, humble, mature, and aware of the challenges that await you. Your personal statement helps the selection committee understand who you are as a person and what you'll bring to their program.

When selection committees sit down to look at applications, they have to weed lots of them out. The first weed out is easy—they eliminate any applications that are incomplete, that don't have the right test scores, and/or that have questionable GPAs. They also weed out personal statements that exceed the word limit or that do not directly address the question on the application. You want to have a kind of "last man standing" outlook on your application. You have to overcome all of the selection committee's possible objections so that you make it to the final round.

Many schools post examples of good personal statements. Take the time to do a little research to see what the school tends to look for in a personal statement.

Keep in mind that when the economy is bad, programs are flooded with even more applicants, so you have to prepare an even better personal statement under those circumstances.

Accepting a student into a program or awarding them a scholarship is a financial risk for the granting party. You have to demonstrate that you're a good risk. You do that by showing that you understand what it takes to finish the program and to succeed once you finish.

What You Need to Strive for in Your Personal Statement

As you start working on your personal statement, you should

- Develop a "hook"
- Follow the length and format requirements exactly
- Answer the writing prompt directly
- Send exactly what they request
- Be honest
- Sound age appropriate
- Sound likeable
- Demonstrate that you'll finish the program

Develop a “hook”—that is, have something that grabs the selection committee’s attention and makes it hard to rule you out. You may want to ask someone you know well how they would describe you. Think about any “defining moment” experiences you may have had. Choose a topic that highlights you as a person. Think about how you would tell your story to a friend. Most of all, be honest and interesting.

Do not go over the word limit for any reason. Follow the length and format requirements exactly. Even going over by one word is enough to get your application tossed into the “no thank you” pile.

Answer the writing prompt directly, especially if it’s specific. Tailor a statement for each application you send out. Don’t just send the same statement with each application. Your statements may look really similar, but they need to meet the requirements for each specific application.

Send exactly what they request. Sending more than the selection committee asks for gives them another opportunity to weed out your application.

Be honest. Sound age appropriate. You aren’t possessed with the wisdom of the ages. Show the panel that you understand you still have lots to learn. Let them know you’re up to the task.

If your grades or your test scores have been spotty, the personal statement isn’t the place to discuss it. Don’t talk about or excuse past poor behavior. These issues are for the interview process. When that time comes, be honest.

You want to sound likeable. But don’t go overboard trying to sound funny. Humor is hard to convey in writing, and what you find funny might not seem that way to the selection committee.

Demonstrate that you’ll finish the program and that you’ll be a good representative of that program.

What Selection Committees Look for in Personal Statements

Selection committees are looking for outstanding examples of

- Leadership
- Innovation
- Research activity
- Scholarship
- Willingness to take risks
- Sense of social responsibility
- Volunteer service
- Special talents

Selection committees are looking for leaders, innovators, researchers, scholars, risk takers, socially responsible individuals, and students with special talents. You have to do more than just say these words. You have to *show* the selection committee that you *are* those words.

What Got You Interested in Your Field or in This Program in Particular?

Demonstrate what you know about the program. Do some research. Nothing irritates a selection committee more than an applicant who has no idea what the program is about. If you can, use the type of language professionals in the field use. If you're unsure what that language is, try asking a professor.

Explain how you got interested in the program and in your intended field of study. If you're applying for a graduate program or a research internship and there's someone at that institution you want to study with, say so. That's a compelling reason for the selection committee to grant you admission, especially if you do more than just say, "I hear Professor X works for your university."

Be original. For example, if you're applying to medical school, everyone will say they want to become a doctor because they like to help people. The selection committee has heard that a thousand times. You have to think about your unique perspective and what else you bring to the table that no one else can.

Show the selection committee that you've given thought to what you'll do once you finish your program. Have a plan for the future, even if it's relatively brief.

What Else You Should Do to Write an Excellent Personal Statement

Here are some other things you should do in your personal statement:

- Use active voice, even in the sciences
- Use word variety
- Be accurate
- Be professional
- Do not use profanity for any reason
- Use good quality paper
- Use a good quality printer
- Proofread meticulously

Active voice is shorter and more emphatic. It makes you look like an active scholar. Just to review, the passive verbs are any form of "to be": am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been.

Check your personal statement for word variety. Make sure you've called the program or the scholarship by the right name.

Do not use profanity for any reason.

Use good quality paper and a good quality printer. Your application has to look absolutely pristine. Think about how a messy application would look to someone who doesn't know you.

Most of all, proofread your personal statement. Have someone else look at it for you. You have to ensure your application and your personal statement are error-free.

Why You Should Clean Up Your Online Presences Before Sending in Your Application

Here's the deal—many members of selection committees will go online to find out more about you. It's up to you to ensure your online presences make you look like a mature, responsible, intelligent person who'll be a good representative of the program or scholarship.

Post the same picture of yourself and the same description of yourself on all your social media presences. You want people to know that they've found you, not someone else with your same name. Take down anything that might be a liability, like pictures of you drinking anything or doing anything that could be construed as in questionable taste.

Get a LinkedIn profile; LinkedIn is the top networking website. Having a profile on that website establishes you as a professional. Take some time to build your profile, and try to get recommendations from professionals who know you well. "Brand" yourself with the title other professionals in your field use to identify what they do.

If your work is visual like art, graphic design, or writing, consider building a professional portfolio on a website like Weebly or Wix. Having good representative examples of your work can propel your application forward because it shows you're actively involved in your chosen field.

How to Get Letters of Recommendation

Good letters of recommendation are essential. Choose recommenders in your major field who will give you glowing recommendations. A letter from a professor or a professional in your chosen field will carry more weight than a letter from a teacher you just like.

Ask for sealed letters of recommendation. A "sealed" letter means that you haven't seen what the recommender wrote. Sealed letters tend to carry more weight with selection committees because ostensibly, the recommender is more honest in his or her assessment of you. If there's an option to waive your right

to review what recommenders write, opt to waive your right to review the recommender's materials. That's the same as having sealed letters, even if the application is all online.

Give the recommender as much lead time as possible. Provide all the information and/or materials the recommender needs, including pre-addressed, stamped envelopes and contact information. *This is your job.*

Tell the recommender what you want to major in as well as any accomplishments you'd like them to highlight.

Write the recommender a handwritten thank you note for helping you, and keep them up to date on what happens. Remember that when someone recommends you, they're putting their own reputation on the line. They've invested in you, and you owe it to them to express your gratitude by keeping them up to date on what you're doing.

Sample Business School Personal Statement

I'd never really thought of myself as a leader until I got involved in our campus's chapter of Alpha Kappa Psi. Because the chapter had been essentially dormant for decades, I thought being an officer would be easy; I could do nothing and still put it on my résumé. One day, on a whim, I emailed our membership (a grand total of 19 members) about IBM's upcoming campus visit. Eighteen of the 19 members showed up. I started to wonder what else I could do to re-activate our chapter. By implementing a consistent stream of information on email and social media, I increased our membership by 600% in just 18 months. That's when I realized that I not only like leadership, but that I have a natural affinity for it.

Sample Research Inclusive Personal Statement

Pancreatic cancer has robbed me of three family members, all of whom died before the age of 50. Those deaths have inspired my ambition to help find viable treatments for pancreatic cancer.

As a research assistant at the chemistry department, I helped conduct more than 100 experiments that targeted drug delivery in pancreatic cancer patients. My mentor and I presented our findings at the _____ Research Conference. Despite this success, I know I still have much to learn about cancer, and I also hope that my past research experience will lead to other successful research. The fight to end cancer—all cancers—is long and arduous. But I am determined, and I look forward to the hours of study and experimentation ahead of me. I know I can't save the world, but if I could help one person to survive pancreatic cancer, I will have been successful.

Sample Literature Studies Personal Statement

I "fell in love" with Charles Dickens when I was just six years old, right after my parents took me to a screening of the 1968 film "Oliver!" I was completely mesmerized by the story, and I started telling everyone I met that Dickens was my favorite writer. To my memory, no one ever pointed out that I'd not yet learned to read.

My fascination with Dickens in particular and in Victorian studies in general has led me to form a book club where we read 19th century novels in their original installments. As an active member of the local chapter of the Dickens Fellowship, I also wrote and directed our chapter's celebration of Dickens's birth centenary in 2012. Your Victorian studies program is the ideal fit for me because it represents the type of active stance on Victorian studies that I've always pursued.

Sample Computer Gaming Graduate Program Statement

The motivating force for me to pursue a career in digital game development is to bridge a connection between parents and their children. My parents divorced when I was two years old. Consequently, I didn't have much of a relationship with my father. One weekend when I was at his house, my dad brought home a video gaming system. Over the years, video games were the connecting thread of our relationship. Until he passed away in 2012, we continued to evolve our gaming and to strengthen our relationship with each new system.

For me, gaming is personal because of its potential to connect people. I have met more people through gaming than through any other event in my life, including people of all different ages, ethnicities, and geographic backgrounds. I look forward to the day when I can say I helped others create new friendships through my career choice.

Sample Engineering School Personal Statement

"We've ruled your first flight 'stuck.' You have 30 seconds to re-launch," said the Science Olympiad director. This put me in a difficult predicament; I had to decide whether or not I should do the risky flight. This tough decision forced me to be analytical of the situation and to think on my feet. If I were to go with the risky flight, I could potentially cost my team multiple places in the standings, but if I was able to do well, I had a chance at getting top ten in the event. After weighing the risks and the benefits, I decided that I would go with the risky flight. I knew that I had a sound design for my helicopter, and through my experience on the event, I decided that I had a better shot at getting a decent time with my untested helicopter than I did prepping my other helicopter.

The risk paid off, and my team won second place overall. This potentially negative situation made me realize that I want a career in mechanical engineering because it plays to my strengths, including my ability to think on my feet and to take calculated risks.

Sample Statement for Dental School

Shortly after they came to America from the Ukraine, my father had to have all of his teeth pulled. My father couldn't afford dental care in the Ukraine, and he also had no education on the importance of it. Consequently, it was hard for him to understand why I kept asking to get braces when I was a teenager. The orthodontist we went to explained to my parents that straight teeth not only look more attractive, but that they were, in fact, important in a person's overall health.

One of my goals in going to dental school is to set up a practice for first and second generation U.S. immigrants who may not be able to afford dental care. I

want to educate them on the importance of strong, straight teeth and to help them realize the positive impact dental health can have on their overall wellbeing.

Sample Statement for Physician's Assistant School

When a military colleague introduced me to the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization, I felt a calling to join. Since this organization is consistent with my morals, I applied for, was vetted and approved for the responsibility to mentor a child, whom the organization refers to as a "Little." My "Little" and I spend countless hours hiking, bowling, creating, playing, and growing together. He is a positive influence in my life, and we continue to communicate and get together. I am committed to remaining his "Big" until he is able to overcome any disadvantage he faces.

My aptitude for mentoring propelled me further into healthcare. Physician's assistants must continually educate themselves and their patients on the most current patient care practices. Physician's Assistants must also be able to multi-task, possibly playing a role in rural health, minority outreach, family practice, or veteran assistance. In my late 20s, I pursued the continuation of my education and worked toward a bachelor's degree in biology. Not only am I a full time student, I also work, volunteer, shadow various medical professionals, and run the University of North Texas's Pre-Physician's Assistant Club as President.