THE WRITING CENTER

University Academic Success Programs

“The secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest component.” –Wm. Zinsser

**WRITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS for APPLICATIONS**

Why do I need to write a personal statement for my application?

* To help you stand out in the crowd of applicants
* To give you a chance to overcome gaps or inadequacies in your record
* To show the “real person” behind all the other application materials
* To demonstrate your ability to succeed in a rigorous environment
* To show your independent thinking skills
* To demonstrate your values

What should I say in a personal statement?

An effective personal statement should answer these questions:

* **Who are you?**
* **What’s special about you?**
* What’s likable, interesting, & impressive about you?
* Why do you want to study \_\_\_\_\_? How did you decide?
* What contribution can you make to this program?

What a personal statement is NOT:

* A collection of admirable but vague ideas:

--“I want to help others.”

--“ My goal is achieving greatness as a nutritionist.”

-- “Going to graduate school will make me a stronger person.”

--“I love kids.”

* A shopping list of your accomplishments

How should I start ?

**Make sure you understand and follow exactly the instructions on your application.** Check to see if the personal statement must include specific information. Make sure you understand formatting and length requirements. Keep these instructions available as you write, and refer back to them often to make sure you stay on track.

Next, prepare a list of experiences that have strongly affected you. Briefly write down what made each of them important. Choose one that you can discuss in terms of a value or an observation that has shaped you. This key value or observation will form the **focus** of your statement—the main point.

Choosing an experience for your focus:

* It should be a **unique experience or insight** (not necessarily life-shattering).
* You should feel fairly strongly about the event and its effects on you—it should be a recognizable “turning point” for you. **How did you change?**
* It should be truly **representative of *you***, not what you think might impress.
* The focus should be **able to sustain the whole personal statement**, not just a small piece of it.

Experiences that get overused in personal statements:

* Athletic injuries
* Study abroad
* Current historical events
* High school

If you use one of these, emphasize some new and original element. Remember, admissions committees read hundreds of personal statements. Yours must be memorable.

Experiences to consider for your personal statement’s focus:

* Events or moments that changed your perceptions
* Challenging or difficult decisions
* Learning processes that had lasting effects
* Disappointments or failures
* Fears that you conquered
* Discoveries
* Events that significantly altered your circumstances
* Relationships that changed you

**You have a compelling story.** Tell about something that has formed you into a potential agent for change.

Once I have an idea, then what?

After you select an experience as your focus element, write about it. You are now DRAFTING. Do not worry about grammar and punctuation yet—that part comes later. For now, get ideas down on paper.

Describe the experience as specifically as possible. Put your reader into the moment.

* Who was there?
* When did it happen?
* Where did it happen?
* What happened? In what sequence?
* What caused the experience?
* What did it feel like? Look like? Smell like? Taste like? Sound like?
* What were your emotions and thoughts at the time?
* What did you do? Or not do?
* How did you decide what to do?
* What was the outcome?

Now write about what the experience meant.

* What did you learn? What insights or understanding?
* When did you recognize that you had learned or understood something important?
* How did you apply what you learned or understood?
* What are your emotions and thoughts now?
* Would you do anything differently if you could? Why?
* What have you changed about yourself and/or your values?
* Why was the experience or insight so important to you?
* Why did you make any changes in yourself and/or your values?
* Have these changes affected others? In what ways?
* Why do you think this was a defining experience for you?
* How will you apply your insight or understanding in the future?
* How does the experience connect with your plans for study?

THE AUDIENCE for a PERSONAL STATEMENT

Your statement will be read by a group charged with making selections. However, they each read personal statements as individuals. Imagine *one* person at a time as your reader, not a big vague crowd.

Your reader:

* Shares your excitement about the program you are applying to.
* Knows all about the program, so don’t explain it in your statement.
* Is aware of major trends, social issues, and current events, so don’t point out that, for example, there are major challenges in providing healthcare to all Americans.
* Will not appreciate being preached to—stick with telling about YOU.
* Has read your other application materials; don’t repeat information.
* Wants to say “yes” to your application and needs ways to remember YOU ,
* But will use any editorial stumbles (misspellings, grammatical errors) as a reason to say no.

Now you should have some material to work with as you craft a more polished version of your personal statement.

How can I make my personal statement better?

After you write a draft, first consider the order of the paper. Some organizational patterns:

* Chronological
* Least important to most important

Another way to organize your statement is to open with a statement of the value or quality that you want to emphasize about yourself. Then tell your story (WHAT?) Then tell what the experience meant and means to you or what it illustrates about you (SO WHAT?)

**Polishing your writing style**

* Review the verbs of each of your sentences. Cast your sentences into *active voice* (noun + verb sequence) as much as possible. Get rid of “has been,” “is,” “will be” structures as much as you can.
* Never, ever use a word that you don’t already know or that you would not use in normal conversation. You need to seem like a real person; using fancy words will make you seem pompous or affected.
* Get rid of vague qualifying words:  *very many some kind of*
* Get rid of these words and phrases: *personally I feel In my opinion I believe Needless to say*
* Always put a noun after *this* or *those. “This situation” “Those experiences”*
* Keep your sentences uncomplicated. Remove redundant words, recast into active voice, and make sure you really do need every word. Remov~~ing~~  e words ~~here and there~~ ~~is the best way~~ to edit your statement ~~down~~ to the required length.
* If you are not sure how to punctuate a sentence, try re-framing it to get rid of the issue altogether.
* Remember that the spell checker will not consider context and cannot distinguish between homonyms. It will not tell you whether you should use *their, there,* or *they’re.* If you have spelled a word correctly, the spell checker will not flag it, even if it is the wrong word.
* Use first person as needed—after all the statement is about you. But don’t start every sentence with “I.”

**An essential step**

Before you send out your personal statement, have *at least* one other person read it carefully both for content and for editorial issues. Ask your reader to be demanding and thorough; now is not the time for tender feelings. Another reader will see what is actually on the page, not what you think is there.

**PERSONAL STATEMENT CHECKLIST**

\_\_\_\_\_ I have read and reviewed the instructions for the personal statement.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have developed one or two main ideas.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have provided specific details to illustrate my point.

\_\_\_\_\_I have not included clichés or broad generalities.

\_\_\_\_\_I have met the length requirement.

\_\_\_\_ I have run the spell checker.

\_\_\_\_I have reviewed spelling on my own.

\_\_\_\_I have removed every unnecessary word, sentence, and phrase.

\_\_\_\_I have had one or more persons read and respond critically to my drafts.

\_\_\_\_\_I have proofread the final version several times.