Writing a Personal Statement
For Graduate or Law School Applications

Personal statements are perhaps the most important aspect of your graduate school applications. More often than not, the admission committee will weigh your personal statement more heavily than your GPA, transcripts, and GRE/LSAT/MCAT score combined. That being said, it is so incredibly important to put as much time and care into your personal statement as possible.

There are generally two categories of personal statements:

1.) A general, open-ended personal statement
This “prompt” allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you want to write and is the type of statement you will be asked to prepare for standard medical or law school applications.

2.) One or more required responses to specific questions
Often, business and grad school applications ask specific questions to gauge how good of a fit you’d be for that specific program. Your statement should be directly reflective of the questions being asked, and while some applications will ask for multiple essays, if your application does not, the statement should be in one cohesive essay.

Questions to ask yourself before you write

- What’s special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influence your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- 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? What insights have you gained?
- How have you learned about this field through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences? Have you had conversations with people already in the field?
- If you worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals in the field?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain? For example, maybe you have awesome grades, but mediocre GRE scores, or perhaps you have a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning. Don’t be afraid to explain reasoning behind why things are the way they are.
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships in your economic, familial, physical, etc. life?
- What personal characteristics do you possess that would improve your chance for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school – and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicant?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to consider you?
General advice to follow

- Answer the questions being asked: If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar. Don’t be tempted to use the same statement for all applications. It is important to answer each question being asked in relation to the program you’re applying for.
- Tell a story: Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do it to bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you’ll be putting yourself at the head of the pack.
- Be specific: Don’t, for example, state that you’ll make an excellent doctor without backing it up. Your desire to become a lawyer, engineer, etc. should be logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement.
- Find an angle: If you’re like most people, your life story lacks drama. So, figure out a way to make it interesting by finding an angle or a “hook.”
- Concentrate on your opening paragraph: The opening paragraph is the most important because you’re grabbing the reader’s attention. This paragraph also becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.
- Tell what you know: The middle section of your essay might detail your interest and experience in your particular field, as well as some of your knowledge of the field. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field and use the language professionals use in conveying this information. Since you will have to select what you include in your statement, the choices you make are also an indication of your judgement.
- Don’t include controversial topics if you can help it: There are certain things best left out of personal statements. For example, references to experiences or accomplishments in high school or earlier are generally not a good idea (unless you’re talking about how you’ve known since 3rd grade that you wanted to be a doctor). Don’t mention controversial religious or political issues unless they’re directly related to your career path.
- Do some research: If a school wants to know why you’re applying to it rather than another school, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other programs. If the school setting would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention!
- Sell yourself, but avoid clichés: A medical school applicant who writes that she is good at science and wants to help people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from often-repeated and tired statements.
- Write well and write correctly: Be meticulous! Put a lot of thought into what you write and then proofread it very carefully. Many admissions officers say that good written skills and command of correct use of language are important to them as they read through statements. Express yourself clearly and concisely, and make sure you adhere to stated word limits!
- Finish off with reasoning for your choice: Make sure you touch on why you want to go to that specific institution, rather than just sending in a typical generic essay.

Last but not least, have someone else read your essays before you submit them! It’s never a bad idea to get a new set of eyes on such an important document.

If you want the pros to take a peak, connect with a Career Advisor at your college’s career center, or stop by 511 Goodell at Central Career Services.