How to Write a Personal Statement

A personal statement or graduate school essay, is your opportunity to sell yourself in the graduate school application process. Your goal is to help the admissions committee understand YOU personally and see what sets you apart from other applicants. Although requirements vary from school to school, with some programs requesting only one or two paragraphs and others requiring multiple essays, personal statements generally fall into one of two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement:
   This allows you freedom to write what you want to write; however, you can run into the pitfall of being too broad.
2. The response to very specific questions:
   Your statement should respond specifically to the question or questions being asked. This type of statement makes it easy to formulate what you want to say, but can stifle creativity.

WHAT IS A PERSONAL STATEMENT:

WHAT IS A PERSONAL STATEMENT:

A personal statement or graduate school essay, is your opportunity to sell yourself in the graduate school application process. Your goal is to help the admissions committee understand YOU personally and see what sets you apart from other applicants. Although requirements vary from school to school, with some programs requesting only one or two paragraphs and others requiring multiple essays, personal statements generally fall into one of two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement:
   This allows you freedom to write what you want to write; however, you can run into the pitfall of being too broad.
2. The response to very specific questions:
   Your statement should respond specifically to the question or questions being asked. This type of statement makes it easy to formulate what you want to say, but can stifle creativity.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU WRITE:

Writing a personal statement can often be the most difficult part of the application process. Before beginning, spend some time reflecting on your life experiences, events, and achievements relevant to your career choice and application to graduate school. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is unique about you or your life story?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What in your life has shaped you or influenced your goals?
- When did you become interested in this field?
  - How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
  - What have you learned about this field that has deepened your interest and your belief that you are a good fit?
  - What insights have you gained?
  - If you have worked or had internships or leadership experiences what have you learned and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain?

Visit our website: www.sc.edu/career
What personal qualities, values and skills do you possess that would improve your likelihood for success in the field? How can you convey and demonstrate that you have these characteristics?

What makes you a superior candidate for graduate school and what is going to make you more successful in the profession or field than other applicants?

Why should the admissions committee be interested in you? What are the most persuasive and undeniable reasons you can give the committee to admit you into their program?

**QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU WRITE:**

**GETTING STARTED:**

**Tell a story:**

Use the opening paragraph to grab the readers attention. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement. If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable.

**Tailor your essay:**

Many schools ask similar but different questions. If you are applying to several schools you may think you can use the same statement for all applications. Do not do this! It is important to answer each question by tailoring your answer to the question. It is equally as important to mirror yourself to the culture of the institution, for example if the college is well known for community service or research point this out as a value of yours.

**Find an angle:**

For most people, life is not like a soap opera or reality television show. Figure out a way to hook the admissions committee.

**Be specific:**

Use specific examples to validate your statements and ideas; if you state that you would make an excellent lawyer back it up with specific reasons why you believe that to be true. Include details about your experiences in your field of interest. Be specific as you can using industry lingo. Refer to job shadowing, internship, work, research and leadership experience as well as classes and conversation you may have had with people in the field. You can also draw from seminars or conferences you have attended as well as books you have read.

Your desire to enter into your chosen field should be logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement. Use sensory details to help set scenes, make sure your reader is right there with you. Share your emotions because this will give the admissions committee a better idea of who you are.

**Be thoughtful and honest:**

Remember a strong personal statement is reflective; it demonstrates that you have thought about and gained a clear understanding of your experiences and what you want in your future. It does not simply tell the admissions committee what you think they want to know; but, it gives them a clear and compelling picture of you instead! You are the focus of the personal statement, it is all about your achievements, your obstacles, your goals, your values.
AVOID COMMON MISTAKES:

Do not include some subjects:
Do not mention potentially controversial subjects (for example, controversial religious or political issues), and do not discuss money as a motivating factor even if it is true for you.

Research, if needed:
If a school wants to know why you are applying to it rather than another school, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. Do you have current faculty that went to this institution? Does the school setting provide an important geographical or cultural change for you? Is there faculty doing research that is of interest to you? All of these may be worth mentioning in your essay.

Be meticulous:
Type and proofread your statement very carefully. Many admissions officers say that good written skills are important to them, so express yourself clearly and concisely.

Follow directions:
Answer only what is asked and stay within word limits.

Avoid informality and clichés:
Avoid slang, clichés and contractions. Keep your writing formal.

Do not over share:
The essay is not the place to unload frustrations or provide a detailed overview of your childhood. Ask yourself would you feel comfortable discussing this in a face-to-face interview. If you are still unsure ask a Career Center expert.

Avoid making excuses:
The admissions essay is a place where you can add a personal touch to your application. It is where you can provide context for your accomplishments. Although you can use the essay to explain poor grades, keep your explanation succinct; do not make your admissions essay an explanation. Admissions committees have heard it all and although they may empathize with your situation, their concern is locating applicants who will excel in their programs; therefore, you should focus on your strengths rather than explaining your weaknesses.

Be honest:
Do not exaggerate your qualifications or experiences.

Know your deadlines:
Allocate enough time to have a few people proofread your personal statement, and for you to make revisions. Ideally, you should allow enough time to go through the proofread/revision process three times and still be well under your deadline.

Sources:
Writing Personal Statements and Scholarship Application Essays A Student Handbook, by Joe Schall

Purdue Online Writing Lab http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/