

Personal Statements (Undergraduate)



What is a personal statement? What should it do?

A personal statement is a short essay most graduate or professional schools require with your application that explains why you want to be admitted into that program, how your experience makes you a qualified candidate, and how you hope the program would contribute to your life professionally and academically.

Your personal statement is your chance to convince the school you are applying to that you will be an asset to its program. Your transcripts, resume/CV, letters of recommendation, and test scores will also speak to your qualifications, but your personal statement will give the committee reading your materials a sense of you as someone who is motivated, experienced, unique, and excited to achieve goals and to keep learning. In other words, it gives you the chance to elaborate on and describe how you stand out above the other applicants. What do you have to offer that they don't have?

Some programs might simply ask you to "write a personal statement," while others might give more detailed prompts. Whatever the prompt is, make sure you address each part of the prompt thoroughly.

How can you get started on your personal statement?

- Look over your resume or CV. What experiences stick out to you as ones worth explaining to the committee in more detail? Which ones are unique to you that would make you stand out as a candidate?
- Take a close look at the website for the program you are applying to. Do they give any extra clues as to what they are looking for in their applicants?

What are some common features of a personal statement?

Every personal statement looks different, but here are some strategies that could strengthen your statement:

- Keep in mind that the personal statement is an argument and a story at the same time. You are arguing that you are qualified, but you are using key moments in your story as evidence to make that argument.

Personal Statement

Common features (cont.)

- If the story of what inspired you to enter the field shows your dedication to the field, who you hope to be in the field, or that you are intentional and have initiative to thrive in the field, then the committee wants to hear it. Any experiences, people, mentors, teachers, or courses that inspired you could be included.
- What experience do you have relating to this program? Even if your experience is limited, it can strengthen your story to mention meaningful volunteer work, shadowing, observing, or classes that helped you discover you had skill and/or satisfaction in the field.
- What are your hopes and/or plans for your future in this field? Mentioning this can show that you are forward-thinking, intentional, and that you plan to grow and thrive in the field.
- If you are applying to a graduate institution, you may want to mention a professor or two with whom you are interested in working. This requires research to discover what faculty at that institution share your interests. Be sure to give specific reasons why you want to work with them.
- Mention something specific about the institution/program that attracts you to it and/or makes you think you will thrive there and contribute to the institution.

Final tips

- If you aren't sure how to structure your statement, ordering your points chronologically often flows well (e.g., 1) Initial inspiration, 2) Experience, 3) College courses, 4) Hopes for the future, 5) Faculty you hope to work with).
- Avoid general, vague, or "throat-clearing" introduction sentences. The committee reads a lot of papers, so see if you can grab their attention (without being obnoxious). Don't be afraid to be direct and jump straight into your story.
- Make sure you are showing your qualifications without "bragging." Instead of stating your qualifications directly ("I am very hard working"), try telling stories or giving examples that *show* your qualifications.
- If you're not sure whether or not to include part of your story, think about its purpose. Does it show that you have valuable experience in the field? Does it show that you will be a dedicated member of that program? Does it show that you are motivated? Does it show that this field is meaningful to you?