

# Personal Statements and Statements of Purpose

## What is a personal statement?

A personal statement is a narrative that describes aspects of yourself that have not been illuminated in your application. Writing a great personal statement can be challenging! A strong personal statement does not just reiterate the achievements on your résumé or curriculum vitae; rather, it should detail your academic and professional development alongside a compelling narrative of what inspired you to apply for a particular program. Pay close attention to any particular questions asked by the program or word limits.

## Pre-Writing and Self-Reflection

- What is special, unique, distinct, or important about your academic and professional journey? Use specific examples. Ground your essay in specific experiences rather than just facts. Be wary of vague explanations.
- Who has influenced you greatly (thinkers, critics, mentors, professors, writers, scientists, etc.)?
- What personal details might help the committee better understand you and help set you apart from the other applicants?
- What experiences and/or education have made you want to pursue this degree program?
- How are you pursuing your interest (e.g., education, volunteer work, professional experience)?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?
- Under what conditions do you do your most creative work?
- When have you been so immersed in what you were doing that time seemed to fly by while you were actively absorbed?
- What appeals to you most about this program in general (i.e., the field of study) and more specifically (i.e., the particular department or program)? What makes you and your interests a good fit?
- What has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well-suited to this field?
- Always talk to a professor or mentor about the larger stakes of your project or your professional development. Seek out sound advice about the intellectual questions you plan to ask in advanced study.

## The two most important things to consider:

**1)** Define your "Ah ha!" moment-the point when you knew you wanted to pursue further research or study in a given area or field. Think about questions that you want to answer in your future research and the larger contribution you think you will make to the field and community.

**2)** Read as many sample personal statements as possible. A poet would NEVER sit down to write a poem without having read and studied numerous others. The same goes for a personal statement! You need to master the genre before you can craft a successful statement.

## Rules to Write By

- Concentrate on your opening paragraph; make sure you stress compelling reasons for the admissions committee to be interested in you.
- Treat your statement like a job interview. You have 5 minutes to impress.
- Set yourself apart from other applicants.
- Balance personal and analytical thought in your statement. Catch the reader's attention in your first paragraph with personal information, and remember to sell yourself throughout your statement.
- Be selective. Write clearly and concisely. Adhere to word limits.
- Consider the past but look to the future. Show the committee where you have come from (undergraduate institution, awards, honors, research, volunteer) but also stress your future goals. You want to show how important the program, internship, or fellowship is to your continued development-and show them where you plan to go!
- Use active first person when you write: "I am eager to" "I am interested in" "I would like to pursue."
  - Use positive language:  
**DO:** I am productive with my time.  
**DON'T:** I do not waste my time.
- Try to write with verbs rather than adjectives. Think, "Show, don't tell." **For example**, rather than saying, "I am a great leader and very dependable and experienced," say, "Not only my coursework, but also my research roles, departmental involvement, and professional development during this past year have prepared me to start doctoral studies with a strong academic focus." Then explain. Use evidence!
- **AVOID:** clichés or overly sentimental stories, high school accomplishments, slang or informal writing, an arrogant tone, or being overly general! Use specific examples to support your application.

---

### *Attribution*

*This page was created with contributions by:*

- *Connors Writing Center (University of New Hampshire),*
- *Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center (Hamilton College), and*
- *Quality Writing Center (University of Arkansas).*

### *Other useful resources to which you might refer:*

*Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL):* <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/>

*University of Wisconsin-Madison:* <http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/apessay.html>

*University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill:* <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/resources/handouts-demos/specific-writing-assignments/application-essays>