

Personal Statements

What is a personal statement?

A personal statement is the most important component of a graduate school application, with the purpose being to persuade an admissions committee that you are a candidate that should be chosen for their program. The personal statement is a short essay that should tell who you are, what has influenced you on your career path thus far, your professional interests, and where you plan to go after graduate school. It should also show how the program you are applying to matches your interests and how it will be helpful in reaching your career goals.

Know what you are writing

An application essay can be referred to by different terms, depending on where you are applying. In writing an effective application essay, it is important to determine whether your program is requesting a "statement of purpose," "personal statement," or "letter of intent. The content of each selection is similar. Each option will require you to talk about your intention to study at that school, and why you will be a good fit; however, there are a few components that make each different. This handout will provide you with tips that will be applicable to writing any type of personal application essay, though here are some helpful tips in understanding the differences:

- **Letter of Intent:** A letter of intent is similar to a cover letter and should be formatted the same way. It is different from a personal statement in that it is formal letter, ideally addressed to the decision-maker regarding your application. The basic content will look the same as a personal statement or statement of purpose, though often it is shorter, being about one page in length.
- **Graduate Personal Statement:** A personal statement tends to be the essay with the most leeway and focus on personal character. It should discuss why the applicant would be a good fit for the program, but focuses most heavily on individual achievements and experiences. This essay should be about two pages in length.
- **Statement of Purpose:** The biggest difference between a statement of purpose and a personal statement is that a statement of purpose tends to focus more narrowly on the program you are applying for and discussing why exactly you would be a good fit for that particular school. This essay should also be about two pages in length.

Helpful Tip: Some programs may require more than one of these pieces, and some programs may use these terms interchangeably. If you are wanting more clarification on what you should be writing, it is perfectly acceptable to call an admissions counselor at your selected school and ask for more details. Furthermore, some schools may have their own questions that they would like you to answer. Sometimes they would like you to answer their questions via a personal essay, and sometimes they would like the questions answered in a more particular format. Calling for clarification can never hurt.

Formatting your essay:

Introduction

“Don’t be cookie cutter:” Substitute weak, overly used words with more creative, powerful alternatives. Any candidate can open an essay saying, “Since I was young, it has been my passion to serve others.” Instead, tell the reader how your unique experiences have piqued your interest and equipped you for the career you want. Formulating a bold, distinctive introduction can be a daunting place to start. Try writing the body of your essay and come back to the intro later.

Body

Be Specific: For example, it is too vague to say that you aspire to be a psychologist because you enjoy helping people when you could help people in a large variety of occupations. Provide evidence demonstrating that you have confirmed your interests and that earning an advanced degree will help you achieve your professional aspirations. Describe courses, professors, research, service projects, internships, shadowing or extra-curricular activities that have shaped your goals.

One Size Does Not Fit All: Outline why you want to attend *this* program versus other alternatives. Each school has its own values, mission and faculty, so discuss what about these components led you to this program, and why you will thrive in their environment.

Be Concise: Generally, personal statements should be within two pages. Eliminate unnecessary “fluff,” and be to the point with what you want the reader to know.

Conclusion

Go out with a bang: You do not need to discuss how you plan to revolutionize your field and change the world, nor do you need to reference any grand philosophical truths you have received from your experiences. Rather, stay grounded, and focus on how you want to make a contribution and why it is personally significant to you. You could end your essay reviewing what individual perspective you can bring to the institution, or perhaps with a strong statement about why the school is your top pick. The final paragraph should offer cohesion, closure, and a lasting impression.

Dos

- Start with an outline of the core ideas you would like to focus on
- Use first person and active voice
- Keep it professional (use black type and appropriate font styles)
- Ask someone to proofread your application
- Review your draft application carefully before completing the final copy
- Save a copy of your application and statement for future reference
- Tailor your personal statement to each school you apply to

Don'ts

- Use the "I've always wanted to be a _____" approach
- Use a catalog of achievements. You don't want a master list of everything you have done if it doesn't speak to you as a person.
- Avoid referencing high school accomplishments
- Use common clichés, quotes, or gimmicks
- Lecture the reader. For instance, do not write "Organizational skills are important in this field," when most graduate admissions members already know that.

Examples of Words and phrases to use WITH explanation

significant	enjoyable/enjoy	meant a lot to me	remarkable
interesting	feel good	stimulating	rewarding
challenging	appealing to me	incredible	useful
satisfying/satisfaction	appealing aspect	gratifying	valuable
appreciate	I like it	fascinating	helpful
invaluable	it's important	meaningful	
exciting/excited	I can contribute	helping people	

Where to go for help

- If you need some help figuring out what content to write about or reviewing what you have already written, schedule an appointment with the **Career Development Center**.
 - Check out our webpage @ <https://www.hamline.edu/cdc>
 - Call us @ 651-523-2302
 - Email us @ workshop@hamline.edu
- If you want to improve your writing and receive feedback on grammar, format, and writing technique, visit the **Writing Center**.
 - Check out their webpage @ <https://www.hamline.edu/offices/writing-center/>
 - Call them @ 651-523-2912
 - Email them @ writingcenter@hamline.edu
- Once you have done a draft (or two or three), show it to people you trust such as faculty, family, friends, etc. It will be helpful if those who review your statement know you well and have excellent writing skills

Additional Resources

<https://blog.petersons.com/tag/statement-of-purpose/>
<https://www.gradschools.com/get-informed/applying-graduate-school/essay-writing>
<https://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools/write-graduate-school-essay.aspx>
<https://www.essayedge.com/personal-statement>

Senior Year Timeline

September-October

- Write draft of personal statement/statement of purpose
- Meet with writing center and Career Development Center for feedback on your personal essay

November-December

- Finalize and submit statement of purpose according to the graduate program's requirements

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