

The Personal Statement (or Personal Essay)

What is a personal statement?

A personal statement (or essay) is an original short paper that you write about yourself and submit as part of an application packet to graduate school, scholarship committee or prospective employer. The length and content of the paper will vary. *Generally*, a personal statement focuses on life experiences, reflections, lessons learned, plans and long term goals.

The purpose of a personal statement is to supplement your resume, CV or application form. Think of it this way: A resume tells your reader what you have accomplished; your personal statement explains who you are—your ideas, qualities and ambitions. In other words, a personal statement allows the reader to learn more about you and draw inferences about your potential for future success.

Keep in mind that selection processes are competitive! A well-written personal statement will set you apart from all of the other highly-qualified applicants.

Effective Essays:

1. answer the stated question(s) and follow instructions exactly
2. offer a “hook” to capture the reader’s attention
3. keep the reader engaged with a unique theme
4. demonstrate the application of knowledge and skills
5. have a consistent format and are free of typos and grammatical errors

The best essays are:

insightful reflective straightforward candid concise

General (open-ended) essays are those without specific questions. For example, the instructions may state, “Submit a three page personal statement as part of your application packet” Other essay instructions may require the applicant to address one or more specific questions. It is important to follow content and formatting instructions *exactly*.

Getting Started: Turn to page 2 of this handout for personal essay writing strategies.

Strategy for Constructing a Personal Statement

Note: If specific instructions or questions are provided, make certain that you address them in your statement! The following strategy is for an open-ended personal essay (when questions to answer are not specified.)

1. Start with an engaging “hook” or introductory paragraph. Your goal is to capture your readers’ attention and convince them to continue reading. To do this, launch a theme in the first paragraph. You will weave the same theme through the balance of your essay.
2. Identify 2-3 main points to include in your essay. The points must work together to paint a picture of you. Beyond your resume (or CV) and application form, what do you want your reader to know about you? Plan to develop one paragraph per point, saving your most powerful point for last.
3. Start each paragraph with a topic sentence. Use vivid details and poignant examples to illustrate your ideas. Continue your theme without being repetitive. Provide transition language between paragraphs.
4. Your final paragraph ties the previous paragraphs together. Avoid summarizing what you have written. Reflect on what you have learned from these 2-3 points, or what they mean, or where they lead you. This conclusion brings closure to your theme.

Based in part upon these sources:

UC-Berkeley. The Personal Statement <http://students.berkeley.edu/apa/personalstatement/index.htm>
EssayEdge.com. Admission Essay 101 <http://www.essayedge.com/college/essayadvice/course/>

How to find a theme for your opened-ended essay

- Reflect on key experiences (negative & positive) that shaped your career or research interests.
- Do not dwell on failures or negative experiences, but use them to illustrate how you have learned, changed, persevered, or overcome odds.
- Who are you mentors? Whose work do you follow?
- How has volunteering or service learning changed your thinking or goals?
- What social needs or international issues capture your attention? Why?
- Have other countries or cultures intrigued you? What aroused your curiosity?
- What are your “lessons learned” from working with a mentor? From internships? Group projects? Class assignments?
- Share your goals and/or vision for the future. What do you want to accomplish? How will you contribute to your profession? What societal problem would you like to help address?

Be subtle, but also weave in:

- Personal characteristics that will lead to your success (e.g., motivation, self-direction, dependability, persistence, communications, leadership, team player.)
- Tangible, transferable skills such as research, scholarly or technical writing, interviewing, teaching, painting, debate, lab equipment, etc.

Final Tip: Web sites, a college fellowships office or campus writing program may have examples of personal essays that you may review!