A personal statement is just one of the many documents turned in when pursuing higher education. Whether you’re applying for a scholarship or to a professional residency, you’ll have to write a personal statement as a part of your submission packet. This handout will guide you through the process of writing a strong personal statement to advance your career.

**General Advice**

**Purpose**
Personal statements provide the opportunity for reviewers to get to know you in your own words. These essays demonstrate your personality and your ability to self-reflect. They are often a significant determinant of reviewers’ decisions to accept or reject you.

Generally, personal statements fall into two categories: the **comprehensive** personal statement, in which you talk about yourself and why you’re applying, and the **response to specific question(s)** personal statement, in which you answer a prompt.

**Length**
Sometimes personal statements are limited to a few brief paragraphs. Other times you might be asked to write several responses spanning many pages. Regardless, always conform to the length guidelines.

**Audience**
Your audience will change depending on what you are applying for: it could consist of faculty, staff, other students, etc. Regardless, most reviewers typically sift through piles of applications, scanning initially for the most qualified candidates. After this primary distinction is made, the documents are read more closely. For this reason, you will want to make a good first impression by writing in a way that engages your audience.

**Make It New**
Write a new personal statement for each application. Admissions committees can tell when material is being recycled. Plus, most programs won’t be asking the same questions. Even if the responses requested of you elicit similar answers, you still want to write directly to the phrasing of each prompt.

One of the biggest mistakes applicants make is not actually answering the question(s) being asked.
Some Questions to Consider

Before you begin writing, spend some time thinking through your motivations and goals. Since you only have a limited opportunity to express yourself, you’ll want to intentionally plan out your responses beforehand.

Taking a personal inventory is an excellent way to explore who you are, why you’re applying, and how acceptance will not only benefit you and your future career aspirations but also benefit those accepting you in both the short and long runs.

Why you?

If there is ever a time for shameless self-promotion, it’s in your personal essay. Reviewers are interested in getting a feel for who you are and what you’re like aside from your credentials. What’s distinctive about you and your story? How and when did you become interested in the field you’re pursuing? What have you learned already? What do you hope to learn through admission into the program? Why should they choose you over the other candidates?

Why them?

While nobody likes a suck-up, it is appropriate to let your readers know why, specifically, you’re applying to their program. Demonstrate that you’ve done your research by communicating your familiarity with who they are and how they work. Also, feel free to share what originally sparked your interest in what they have to offer.

Where have you been?

Your personal statement should have a through line (see Fig. 1), which starts with your past experiences. Chances are that whatever you’re applying for is just another step on the way to your dream career. While you don’t want to simply regurgitate your résumé in prose form, you can and should mention previous educational, work, and research experiences in your personal statement which are relevant to your application. Often, these are used to help illustrate the claims you are making about yourself through anecdotal examples.

Where are you now?

Your past experiences should naturally help you establish the next stop on your through line: where you’re at right now. Are you fresh out of undergrad? Returning in pursuit of a second career? Going through some other major life transition? Think about the reasons you’re choosing to apply at present, how this decision will affect both your professional and personal goals, and what this timing says about you and your motivations.

Where are you going?

The through line continues well into your future. What do you hope to accomplish and how will acceptance into this program help you to do so? Are you planning on pursuing additional...
education beyond the scope of what you’ll learn here? What other experiences are you interested in obtaining on the road to your ultimate career? Don't be afraid to demonstrate that you have a well thought-out purpose.

Personal Statement Structure & Organization

Select a Focus
Before you begin writing, select the theme or centering idea of your essay. It might be helpful to think of the theme as your thesis—essentially answering the questions, “What am I actually trying to say here? What's the takeaway? What is my claim about myself?”

Most of the time, themes of personal statements have an abstract quality, articulating a value or observation which you then support with examples from your own experiences. If you're having trouble picking a focus, try reviewing the answers to the questions above—you will likely begin to see a pattern revealing your underlying message.

Find Your Angle
Most personal statements tend to focus on similar ideas. For example, almost every doctor wants to practice medicine in order to help people. The key is to figure out what makes this larger, universal idea unique to you. Maybe a friend or family member was a victim of medical malpractice or maybe you would like to take your specialized training and skills back home to a population that desperately needs them. Whatever the case may be, you need to hook the reader by making your story interesting. Your angle is what makes your life story different from everyone else's.

Create a Frame
Once you have a focus and an angle, you are ready to create your frame. Just like picture frames give shape and structure to photographs, literary frames give shape and structure to essays. These frames help your readers know how to look at your illustrations.

You can also think of frames as two bookends, neatly sandwiching your main points. The most common way to frame your essay is to begin with an illustration that introduces both your main theme and your unique perspective but in a concrete and detailed fashion. You can then refer back to this story at the end of your essay as a tangible illustration of your main points, leading to your concluding statement.

Introduction: When I decided to volunteer at my local children's hospital as a crafts volunteer in high school, I never imagined I would discover my passion for pediatric medicine.

Conclusion: I have learned that your true passions follow you wherever you go and that it is much easier to embrace instead of evade them.

Use Transitions
Since transitions help guide readers from one idea to the next, it might be helpful to think of them as a bridge. You want to make sure that each new paragraph's topic sentence somehow relates back to the concluding statement of the paragraph that came before it so that the reader can easily move between points.

Transitions come easier when you have a clearly defined frame as well as a sound logical progression. Examples of ways to organize your essay include chronological order or simply, ordering your
thoughts from the most important to the least important.

*Note:* For more information on transitions, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

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### Personal Statement Dos & Don’ts

**Do: Write an interesting essay**

Reviewers like to be engaged, so your first sentence is critical. Begin with a strong lead and then use the momentum you’ve created to carry you through to the end. With so many pieces to read, personal statements that are genuinely thought-provoking and entertaining are also refreshing. Share with the reader something that most applicants cannot honestly say.

**Do: Strive for depth, not breadth**

Narrow your focus to one or two ideas and use experiences as examples for support. If you try to cover too many ideas, you run the risk of not fully developing your experiences effectively and creating a response with disconnected content.

**Do: Evaluate experiences**

Instead of just listing and describing experiences, tell why they matter. What did you learn? How have you changed? What will you do differently or the same in the future? You should know yourself and be able to accurately articulate the ways in which you’ve grown to others.

**Example:** Though I didn’t realize it at the time, my failure to get into business school would ultimately lead me to the rewarding work of nursing.

**Do: Be Strong**

Be strong and confident in your statements. Show that you are *going* into this field, not *hoping* to go into this field. Also, be clear about what it is that you will gain from the programs you are applying to.

**Weak:** I hope to learn this if I am admitted to your residency program.

**Strong:** I look forward to learning this as I begin my residency at your institution.

**Do: Show**

Don’t simply state what you know. Demonstrate how you know it! Bring the reader along with you as you think, feel, and learn. Use sensory details and don’t be afraid to share your emotions. Let readers in on your experiences. Take them there through vivid descriptions.

**Telling:** I led a class on nutrition.

**Showing:** I weekly taught a rowdy group of eighth graders the importance of choosing fruits over fries.

**Do: Stay positive**

Remember, you’re selling. Be confident and focus on your strengths. While it can be beneficial to acknowledge your weaknesses—especially when demonstrating personal growth—the focus should be on the reasons they *should* choose you.

**Negative:** Biology has always been a challenge for me.
**Positive:** Though I struggled with my biology courses early in my college career, I have made great improvements which can be attributed to my increased attention to detail, development of more productive work habits, and genuine love for science.

**Don’t: Write what you think they want to hear**

There’s no way to know this, and you’ll probably assume wrong. Plus, if you do this, you’re likely to write generically, causing yourself to blend in instead of standing out.

**Example:** Your website says you are looking for applicants who can manage multiple accounts. I have experience with managing multiple accounts. The first time I handled multiple accounts...

**Don’t: Simply summarize your résumé**

If you’ve already said it, you don’t need to say it again. No one wants to read a résumé written as prose. Let each piece of your application packet serve its own purpose.

**Example:** At my previous job, I was responsible for managing student employees, coordinating schedules between department chairs, scheduling meetings, and preparing agendas.

**Don’t: Generalize**

Words like “meaningful,” “challenging,” and “rewarding,” have become so commonplace they’re almost devoid of meaning. Pinpoint exactly what thought, emotion, or feeling you’re trying to convey and then support it with specifics.

**General:** Some experiences are more rewarding than others. I have had many such experiences in my life.

**Specific:** My experience as a volunteer at the children’s hospital allowed me to see the importance of quality patient care. I value positive interactions with patients. Oftentimes, a positive attitude and optimistic outlook can make all the difference.

**Don’t: Complain or preach**

Whining is a strict “no-no” as is unnecessary expression of your opinions—especially on controversial topics such as politics or religion. You’re not writing to teach anyone anything. You’re simply introducing yourself.

**Example:** I want to change the way hospitals are run. Right now, there is so much emphasis on financial gain. Patient care is often not the top priority. Even if people are not able to pay for the services they need, we should be giving everyone the same quality treatment. Their health comes first, and the monetary gain of the institution should always be secondary.

**Don’t: Use clichés**

Be original. Also, don’t be afraid to jump in and start talking about your topic. Traditional introductions and conclusions are often unnecessary. Just stick to your theme, angle, and frame.

**Cliché:** All of my previous experiences have been the stepping stones on the path to my future career.

**Original:** I am sure of my decision to pursue a career as a pediatric surgeon. I have actively sought out volunteer experiences and academic opportunities that have prepared me for this next step. I am committed to the study of medicine and will continue to do all I can to ensure that I am a competent, skilled, and compassionate doctor.
Don’t: Force connections between ideas
Be genuine. Don’t exaggerate a simple experience into something deeply meaningful if there is no honest connection. Some things should be taken at face value, and not doing so can make you sound less authentic.

Exaggerated: My time volunteering in Guatemalan orphanages shaped the way I view medicine: it really does take a village to raise a healthy child.

Authentic: Volunteering at a Guatemalan orphanage allowed me to see the ways that preventative care can help reduce future health issues. As the organization I worked with provided more nutrient rich foods to the residents, we saw a significant decline in common health ailments.

Don’t: Use gimmicky or unconventional writing styles
Keep your writing formal as opposed to blog-like. Don’t use unconventional writing styles such as referring to yourself in the third person. Also don’t try to impress with linguistic prowess or unnecessary use of technical terminology.

Example: You pick this personal statement up from the stack and start to read, noticing immediately that it directly addresses you, the underpaid and overworked Director of Graduate Studies. This personal statement is different. That’s because Jane Doe, its author, is different.

Things to Keep in Mind

Use Your Voice
Unless the application process involves an interview, your personal statement will be your only opportunity to advocate for yourself. Let your personality come through along with your passion. Show reviewers you’re not just a piece of paper but an actual person!

Just One Part
Each document in your submission packet should work together to create a holistic image of who you are. Want to highlight an element of your résumé that might be overlooked? Need to explain a discrepancy in your transcript? Care to share how the professors writing your recommendations helped to shape you? Personal statements can be used to do all of this.

Revise, Edit, & Proofread!
Personal statements take time and energy. Plan ahead to give them the attention they deserve. Write several drafts and then resource advisors and peers for constructive feedback. Read out loud when you edit, and give copies to several different friends and family members to proofread. Double-check grammar, punctuation, word choice, sentence structure, and style. Also, make sure you stay within the given word limits.

Note: For more tips on these stages of the writing process, please see our “Revision,” “Editing,” and “Proofreading” handouts.

References

