

Guide to Writing a Personal Statement

Purpose of the Personal Statement

The personal statement is a required part of an application to professional schools such as medicine, dentistry, other health programs, law, business, education, social work, public policy, international affairs, counseling and most other professional degree programs. It is your opportunity to present your qualifications and reasons for choosing a professional education and career. You should discuss how your interest in the program and career developed and how you have pursued that interest while in college. Your statement should persuade the admissions committee that you will be a successful student and that you have the potential to contribute to the profession.

Preparing to Write Your Statement

What do you want the admissions committee to know about you? Imagine the statement as a discussion with an admissions officer. Before you begin to write, spend time reflecting on what you know about yourself. You should think about how family members, professional or others have influenced your decision. It may be useful to develop lists or an outline of what you want to convey. You might list qualities and skills you believe you possess. Is there evidence of these in your record of experiences? These might include:

- Experiences working with people
- Independent study
- Research experience
- Education abroad
- Significant work experience
- Internships
- Teaching experience
- Courses taken
- Student government or organization leadership
- Community service or volunteer experience
- Special emphasis within your major and/or minor

If you present your experiences in a one-dimensional manner, by merely describing them rather than explaining their significance to you, your essay will not distinguish you from others or define your individual character. It is critical that you reflect on the meaning of your values, skills and interest so that you can write an essay that will reveal to the reader who you are, and not just what you have done. Write about your experiences in a way that conveys how they sharpened your perceptions, taught you important lessons, or clarified your goals. Developing various themes (of community involvement, the role of teamwork, the power of persistence, etc.) might provide a framework within which you can discuss your various experiences and how they reflect concepts you have come to value. Unify these ideas through your discussion of your decision to pursue a professional education.

TIP: Keep notes on the insights, skills and motivation your experiences and observations have helped you develop. Save your reflections in a log or journal to draw from later when writing your statement.

Suggested Content

Personal background - What distinguishes you as an individual? What are the most significant experiences, events or relationships that reveal something about your value system or about the types of challenges you have experienced?

Development of your interest - How did your interest in this type of professional degree program and career develop, and when did you decide to pursue advanced education? If there were significant role models or other individuals who have influenced your career goals, describe how. What appeals to you about the program?

Related experiences - What are your future goals, ideals, or objectives with the profession? In what type of setting do you imagine yourself working? If applicable, which area of concentration within the program or profession would you like to pursue, and why? How have you prepared for this future? Describe any skills (e.g., artistic, computer, or language skills) or knowledge that demonstrates the depth of your experience in the field. Explain how these skills or knowledge apply.

Obstacles and inconsistencies - Be open about any obstacles you may have encountered and overcome to arrive at this point of your application (illness, family tragedy, unusually large workload, refugee experience, etc). If there are any inconsistencies in your academic record (markedly low grades one term) or admission test scores, explain those in a brief, factual, positive, non-apologetic, non-defensive manner.

Conclusion - Summarize by uniting key elements of your statement (e.g., motivation, strengths, and goals).

Style

Set professional tone - Avoid slang and “gimmicky” writing. Focus on informing, not entertaining.

Organize effectively - Feature early in the essay what is most important. End with what you want the reader to remember most about you. Develop major ideas in an orderly fashion; use examples where appropriate. Brief essays of this type do not require introductory paragraphs. Launch right into what you want to say. Begin and conclude on a positive note.

Be concise - Use words economically. Avoid redundancies. Look at each sentence you have written and ask yourself why it is important. What does it say about you? Choose simple, clear words.

Be clear - Think about the person reading your essay. Will he/she understand your references you make to individuals, institutions or programs? Avoid using jargon and obscure acronyms. Watch your use of proper names. For example, saying that you were a tutor for “AAC” won’t be understood by anyone not at TU, yet writing that you worked for the “Academic Achievement Center at Towson University” takes up a lot of space. Indicating that you were a tutor through the “campus tutorial center” would suffice.

Keep it simple - Use active, not passive, voice. Put the “doer” (you) in charge. Use “I worked on,” rather than “I was afforded the opportunity to work on.” Also, use easy-to-read font or typeface.

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