

## Writing the Personal Statement

The personal statement is an important document in your application packet. Admissions committees not only read them, they remember the memorable ones! A strong personal statement can be make-or-break for your application process.

**What is it?** It's a combination of things:

- It is a business document: you are selling yourself, and need to know how to do so persuasively.
- It is an argument: you are showing the reader that they need and want you in their program, but rather than convince with reasons, you are often arguing using narrative.
- It is an assignment, and your target audience is looking for you to show them that you know how to give what is asked for.

**Consider your audience.** Beware of Web sites and other sources that simply tell you to “tell your story.” Which story will you choose and for which purpose?

Medical and Law Schools	Science Programs	Humanities MA Programs	Humanities PhD Programs	Diplomatic Service Scholarships
Want to know you as a person	Want to know your work as a researcher and your work ethic	Want to see that you are interested in further study and know your long-term goals	Want to know how you will succeed both in and beyond the program	Want to know you as a person

Remember that your resume tells them that you can do good undergraduate or graduate work. Now they need to know that they are choosing a winner, one who can perform at a higher level and will finish!

### Five Standard Topics:

1. your motivation for your career
2. the influence of your family or early experiences
3. the influence of extracurricular, work, or volunteer experiences
4. your long-term goals
5. your personal philosophy

### Activity One:

Below is a list of attributes that applicants to professional programs highlight in their personal statements. On the right is a list of indications of the attribute. Read through the list and

- Check off those attributes you want to highlight.
- List possible stories you can tell about yourself, your family, your extracurricular activities, your goals, or your personal philosophy that express these attributes.
- Write one paragraph of introduction to one of these stories.

	Attribute	Indications of this attribute
	realistic self-assessment	acknowledging limitations

	resourceful	seeking help when appropriate
	accountable	accepting responsibility for learning
	cooperative	working well with others
	persistent	completing tasks
	resilient	accepting disappointment and moving on
	supported (emotionally)	not isolating self from others
	focused	concentrating on task at hand
	active learner	integrating and applying new information
	flexible	willingness to change
	efficient	making good use of time
	organized	systematically taking care of business
	purposeful	setting long- and short-term goals

- Think carefully about your reasons for wanting to go to your chosen program. If you want to help people, for example, then why medicine instead of teaching, social work, firefighting?

Prepare yourself to write several drafts and to show your drafts to several readers. Choose

- someone who understands and appreciates the purpose of your essay
- someone who will ask you to clarify any questions the essay raises
- someone who is not afraid to critique your essay and tell you if it has faults
- someone who is a great proofreader

As you can see, this might not all be the same person. The more people you ask to read your drafts, the better you can make it. Listen, but don't necessarily take all the advice you are given. If you want to be the reader of your early drafts, put the draft away for awhile before you revise.

**Activity Two:** Now that you have written a paragraph (or maybe two), look back at it and see if and how it depicts the attributes you want to get across in your statement. Does it demonstrate these qualities rather than just claim that you have them?

Do:

- Make your first paragraph powerful and interesting so that readers will want to know more. It might be the most relevant piece of writing you ever do, and the most significant.
- Show, don't tell. Imagine all the essays your admissions committee will get and how weary readers will be of essays that tell them: "I am motivated," or "I am a hard worker." Demonstrate these qualities.
- Most graduate schools expect your essay to be almost perfectly punctuated and grammatically correct. You can put this step (editing) off till last, but don't skip it.
- Limit the amount of space you use to describe laboratory experiments. A blow-by-blow account is not a good personal statement.
- Use the essay to clarify lower-than-expected grades or gaps in your record.
- Think of and highlight those aspects of your experience or philosophy or personality that will set you aside from other applicants.
- Make sure you use an excellent printer for your final copy.
- Keep a copy of your essay. Keep your early drafts, numbered, in case you decide to go back to something you discarded earlier.
- Think of your educational delays as strengths, times when you had experiences that shaped you in some way that makes you stand out.

Don't:

- Don't ever let anyone else write your personal statement – or even parts of it – for you. Admissions committees are experts at judging what is genuinely yours, and if they are seriously interested, they will care about what sounds like you.
- Don't repeat what's evident in your grade transcript or CV/Resume
- Don't boast. There's a difference between reporting achievements and bragging.
- Don't repeat information that is available elsewhere on your application.
- Don't go over your length limits.

Resources:

Keith Russell Ablow, M.D. *Medical School: Getting in, Staying in, Staying Human*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.

Evelyn W. Jackson, Ph.D. and Harold R. Bardo, Ph.D. *Write for Success: Preparing a Successful Professional School Application*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Champaign, IL: National Association of Advisors for the Health Professions, Inc.