

Writing a Winning Personal Statement

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For any student facing the task of applying to graduate or professional school, few requirements are as agonizing as writing the personal statement. This essay gives the admissions committee subjective information about the applicant and can be an essential factor in the decision whether or not to admit a student. This handout will give you some helpful guidelines for beginning this type of essay.

The personal statement for most professional and graduate school applications is one of two types:

- 1. General comprehensive** - This sort of question allows the maximum latitude for personal expression. EX: "Please give us any information you feel may be relevant to the decision process such as personal, leadership, or educational experiences."
- 2. Question prompted** - These are very specific questions and offer less latitude for response than the general question type. EX: "What qualities do you possess which would be an attribute in a lawyer?"

The first and most important step to follow is to **read the question(s) carefully and make every effort to understand and respond thoroughly.**

Before you write, ask yourself the following questions. They will help you to decide what should go into your statement.

1. What is special or unique about your life that sets you apart from other applicants?
2. When did you become interested in your field and what have you learned about it and yourself that has furthered your interest?
3. How have you learned about this field?
4. How has work experience contributed to your personal growth?
5. What are your career goals?
6. Are there any academic discrepancies that you need to explain?
7. Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles (economic, familial, physical, etc.)?
8. What personal characteristics do you possess that would help you succeed in your field or profession?
9. What skills (leadership, analytical, communication, etc.) do you possess?
10. What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the committee to be interested in you?

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When you write, remember to do the following:

1. **Explain yourself.** Remember that the committees are looking for thoughtful, persuasive explanations of career choices as well as statements that reveal the applicant and add a dimension not available from other sources.
2. **Be specific.** Why would you make an exceptional lawyer, doctor, businessman etc.? Be logical; use specific experience and factors.
3. **Make yourself memorable.** Your essay should be fresh, lively, and articulate.
4. **Concentrate on your opening paragraph.** This is where you can capture the reader's attention or lose it.
5. **Type and proofread carefully!** You want to come off as a professional.
6. **Try to evaluate your essay from the readers' viewpoint.** Consider what they are looking for in an applicant; how do you come across?
7. **Have some one else read your essay such as a professor or Career Center counselor.** More than one perspective is a must.

Do not include....

1. High school accomplishments or experiences unless they are extraordinary or pertinent.
2. Potentially controversial subjects such as religion or politics.
3. Information otherwise available such as GPA.

Finally, don't try to guess what the admissions committee is looking for; *don't write what you think they want to hear*, because they have heard it too many times before. This is an obvious ploy admissions people can detect. One should also keep in mind that admissions committees are looking for applicants who best fit their programs; therefore, be sure to take the time to research the school and the program and mention how your particular skills/background/character will enhance their program.