

UNDERSTANDING THE PERSONAL STATEMENT: LAW, MEDICINE, MASTERS DEGREES

Let's be honest: the personal statement is a strange and awkward genre of writing. We are here to help! What follows is everything we have learned over many years of working with students on personal statements, to help you begin writing with confidence and with a stronger understanding of what programs will be looking for.

Thinking About the Big Picture.

A helpful way to think about the personal statement is as an interview where you get to control the questions you're being asked. Your main purpose is to help the reader walk away understanding why you'd be a good fit for their graduate program.

In broad strokes, the prompts you'll see introducing the personal statement will fall into one of two categories:

1. *The general, comprehensive personal statement:* This allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write and is the type of statement that allows you to tell your story and why you want to pursue a graduate program. Your task here is to create your own "theme" or "arc" that ties together your life experiences into an answer to the implied question "Why do you want to do this, and why should we let you do it here?"
2. *The response to very specific questions:* Often, business and graduate school applications ask specific questions, and your statement should respond specifically to the question being asked. Some business school applications favor multiple essays, typically asking for responses to three or more questions. Your task with this kind of essay is first and foremost to answer the question you're being asked, while still communicating what you want to communicate about yourself.

Understanding the type of essay you're writing will help you zero in on the best strategies for writing, and the most important points to include. Whether you have a general, open-ended prompt, or a specific one, your goal is to present yourself and provide information in a way that leaves your reader thinking, "I think I understand who this person is, and I think she'd be a great fit for our school!"

Useful Things to Ask Yourself.

- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) have led you to this decision? Why do you think you'd be a good fit for this program, and for this future profession, based on your experiences and what you have learned from them?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field?
- How have you learned about this field? Have you tried to learn more through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, or prior to college, what have you learned through working (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are the common threads between your work history, your education, and your future career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, and/or persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

Tips for Getting Started.

Answer the question you are being asked, and follow the directions.

- If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar, but don't be tempted to use the same statement for all applications. It is important to answer each question being asked, and if slightly different answers are needed, you should write separate statements for each. It is also important (crucially so) that you stick within the stated word limit. Don't give them a reason not to read your essay.

Tell a story.

- “Show, don't tell” is a cliché, but it's a cliché for a reason. Think of your statement as a conversation between you and your reader, where you get to tell them a story about who you are and what is important to you. You want to engage the reader with lively writing, but at the same time, if you try too hard to be entertaining just for the sake of sounding entertaining, you risk coming across as inauthentic. Telling a story that illustrates why you are passionate about what you want to do can help you connect with the reader through the thing you have in common: interest in and respect for the field and program to which you're applying.

Be specific and give concrete examples.

- Saying “I am passionate about medicine” tells your readers a conclusion you've come to yourself – but without letting them in on the thought process that would allow them to come to the same conclusion themselves. Saying “My experience volunteering at the geriatric unit at St. Luke's Hospital helped me to really see the crucial role physicians can play in increasing quality of life for aging patients, providing not only care but companionship,” shows that you understand the job, and helps them see your passion without you having to name it yourself. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story, and your story should be grounded in specific experiences and details.

Start strong.

- You only get one chance to make a first impression. The first paragraph is your chance to grab the reader's attention. It's also your chance to set up the framework or argument for the rest of the statement. Even though a personal statement is a different kind of writing than, say, an academic essay, it is still fundamentally an argument, because your goal is to convince the reader of something, and to use evidence to do so. Think of your first paragraph as your “thesis” – your “here's why I'm awesome” hook to grab their attention, and, through that hook, introducing a core theme or argument that tells them why they should want you in their program, and your reason for wanting to go.

Do your homework.

- Schools want to know about you, but more importantly, they want to know that you know about them – about the field you're applying to enter, broadly, and about the program to which you're applying, specifically. Make sure you've done your research to find out what you're getting yourself into. And, make sure you can speak in your essay to what sets this

program apart from other universities and/or programs. If the school setting would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention.

Proofread. Proofread. Proofread.

- Be meticulous. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Proofread your essay very carefully, and ask at least one other person (ideally a person you know to have very good grammar) to proofread for you as well. Many admissions officers say that good grammar and a clear command of language are important to them as they read these statements.