

Personal Statements

an overview

What is a personal statement?

If you are applying to graduate school, a professional program, an internship, or a study abroad program, you may be asked to submit a personal statement as part of the application process. Personal statements give readers (often the faculty or supervisors in the program) the opportunity to get to know applicants better and to learn more about them than their cover letters, résumés, or transcripts convey. They are persuasive pieces of writing, written in first person with a natural voice. A strong personal statement will convince readers that you are a good match for the program—that your qualities, skills, experiences, interests, and goals align with the mission, objectives, and work of the program or its faculty. Moreover, because application processes are competitive, a successful personal statement will set you apart, highlighting what is unique about your background, skillset, and aspirations. For a sample personal statement annotated by a UWC writing consultant and more resources on personal statements, visit [this link](#).

Types of personal statements:

- **Common applications.** For some types of programs (such as medical school), applicants are able to apply to multiple institutions at once via a common application. Personal statement prompts on common applications usually ask applicants to describe their motivations for entering the field or profession, their relevant educational and life experiences, and their goals for the future. They may also give applicants a chance to explain any irregularities in their academic records (such as bad grades, failed courses, or time off from school).
- **Program-specific applications.** Some programs require applicants to submit tailored personal statements. As with common applications, specific programs often ask applicants to discuss their motivations, experiences, and goals in their personal statements. However, they may also ask applicants to demonstrate desired qualities or skillsets (e.g., “Tell us about your experiences interacting with diverse populations,” or “Describe a time you experienced conflict in the workplace and how you responded”). Additionally, these prompts often require applicants to describe why they are interested in the specific program.
- **Statements of purpose.** Some academic programs request a statement of purpose rather than a personal statement. These two types of application essays share many similarities, but statements of purpose tend to focus more on applicants’ academic plans and goals. In statements of purpose, applicants may discuss their research experiences and interests, which faculty members they hope to work with, and/or possible topics for a thesis or dissertation.

Typical structure of a personal statement:

Personal statements usually range from 500-1,000 words (1-2 single-spaced pages), though some may be longer or shorter, depending on word limit. Review the prompt carefully, as it may offer clues as to how you should organize your personal statement. You can use or adapt the following structure for many personal statement prompts:

- **Introduction.** The introduction offers readers a first impression of the applicant. For that reason, it may be useful to open with a brief anecdote, scene, or image that introduces you and your connection to the field. Make sure to avoid stories that your reader will consider common or cliché, and make sure to keep the focus on yourself. You can use any moment from your life, as long as it demonstrates qualities and skills that will help you succeed in the program and/or in your profession. You may wish to conclude this paragraph by connecting your story with the purpose of your personal statement (e.g., “This is one of many experiences that has prepared me to pursue a career in counseling”).

- **Body paragraphs.** Depending on the word limit, you should have space for 2-5 body paragraphs. Each should have a clear focus, addressing a single relevant experience or, at most, a pair of related experiences. In contrast with a résumé or CV, the goal is depth, not breadth. Consider formative life events, jobs, internships, community service, travel, capstone projects, leadership positions, and research experiences. If necessary, you may dedicate a paragraph to explaining irregularities in your academic record. In each body paragraph, try to answer these three questions: (1) What exactly did you do? (2) What did you learn about yourself, your field, other people, or the world—or what skills did you develop through this experience? (3) How will you apply the qualities, skills, or insights generated by this experience in your profession or your program?
- **Program-specific paragraph.** If you are writing a program-specific personal statement, you should dedicate at least one paragraph to describing why the program is a good fit for you (and vice versa). Avoid summarizing information from the program’s website or focusing on aspects of the program that are common to all programs within the field. Instead, explain what, in particular, draws you to the program. Does the curriculum offer something special? Does the program offer unique internship or practicum opportunities? Would it allow you to work with a desired population or in a preferred setting? Are there specialized facilities or institutes that cater to your interests? Are there faculty members whose research interests align with your own? Also, consider what you might bring to the program. For example, if you are bilingual, you might discuss how that would allow you to better serve clients on clinical rotations.
- **Concluding paragraph.** The final paragraph of your personal statement is a good place to shift your focus to the future. Here, you might talk about short- or long-term goals. How do you see yourself growing in the program? What areas of expertise are you eager to cultivate? How do you plan on using your degree (or whatever experience you’re having in the program)? Where do you see yourself in 10 years—is there a population you see yourself working with, or a setting you see yourself working in? This might be a good place to touch on your professional philosophy. What values will guide your work as a student, intern, and/or professional? As you wrap up, make sure to thank your readers for their time and consideration.

Pitfalls to avoid:

- **Vague generalizations.** Avoid sweeping statements about the field you are entering (e.g., “Good teachers empower students to achieve their full potential”). Ask of every sentence: Could this appear in someone else’s personal statement? If so, replace it with something only you could write, using specific examples and personal details. Ask of what you’ve written: Why? In what way? What does this concept represent to me?
- **Unsupported claims.** Make sure to support your claims with evidence. Even better, follow the creative writing adage “show, don’t tell.” For example, you won’t need *tell* your readers “I’ve got great time management skills” if you *show* those skills in action with descriptions of your experiences.
- **Clichés.** Keep an eye out for readymade phrases like *for as long as I can remember, make a difference, meant to be, and passion for helping people*. Clichés won’t set you apart, and they may have the unintended effect of making you sound insincere or inauthentic. As with vague generalizations and unsupported claims, replace clichés with specific examples and detailed descriptions that only you could write.
- **The “life story” and “résumé” traps.** You won’t be able to fit your whole life story into your personal statement, and you should leave long lists of qualifications to your résumé. A personal statement gives you the opportunity to explore a few key experiences with depth and nuance. So consider: Which experiences were most influential, and which are most relevant/applicable to the program? What do your readers need to know about you, and what do you want them to know about you?
- **A one-note impression.** Just as personal statements can be too broad, they can also be too narrow. If you spend the whole statement talking about a single experience or a similar series of experiences, your readers won’t see all that you have to offer. When choosing what to write about, aim to show readers a good cross-section of experiences. Consider: How can I show myself in different roles, environments, and time periods? How can I emphasize the variety of skills and qualities I possess?