

Writing the Personal Statement

A **statement of purpose**, or **personal statement**, is a brief and focused essay about one's career or research goals, and is frequently required for applicants to universities, graduate schools, and professional schools. A statement of purpose (SoP) is a concise essay about one's career goals, identified means to achieve them and accomplishments so far towards those goals. It is a required document when applying for admission to most professional programs in the United States. Often, SoP is used as a yardstick to assess the capabilities of a prospective student in terms of critical thinking, analytical abilities, interests, aims and aspirations. It is a good way for an applicant to communicate with the admissions committee. Most admissions committees look for a short, crisp and ideologically clear SoP.

It is also known as a Graduate School Essay. Other universities sometimes call it a "Letter of Intent", "Letter of Intention", "Statement of Intent", "Statement of Intention", "Statement of Interest", "Goals Statement", "Personal Statement", "Personal Narrative" or "Application Essay". The name can be just a name but often it influences content and length of the essay. Every university has its own regulations, but most of the time it will be 1-2 pages. Try to think about writing no more than 1 page as most people won't read a second page, so it is about 750-850 words.

The personal statement, your opportunity to sell yourself in the application process, generally falls into one of two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement:

This allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write.

2. The response to very specific questions:

Often graduate school applications ask specific questions, and your statement should respond specifically to the question being asked. Some applications favor multiple essays, typically asking for responses to three or more questions.

Questions to ask yourself before you write:

- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- 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? What insights have you gained?

- How have you learned about this field—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, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your 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, 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?

General Advice

Answer the questions that are asked

If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar.

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. In every case, be sure your answer fits the question being asked.

Tell a story

Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do is to bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you'll be putting yourself ahead of the pack. If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable.

Be specific

Don't, for example, state that you would make an excellent doctor unless you can back it up with specific reasons. Your desire to become a lawyer, engineer, or whatever should be

logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.

Find an angle

If you're like most people, your life story lacks drama, so figuring out a way to make it interesting becomes the big challenge. Finding an angle or a "hook" is vital.

Concentrate on your opening paragraph

The lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab the reader's attention or lose it. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.

Tell what you know

The middle section of your essay might detail your interest and experience in your particular field, as well as some of your knowledge of the field. Too many people graduate with little or no knowledge of the nuts and bolts of the profession or field they hope to enter. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field and use the language professionals use in conveying this information. Refer to experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other source of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it. Since you will have to select what you include in your statement, the choices you make are often an indication of your judgment.

Don't include some subjects

There are certain things best left out of personal statements. For example, references to experiences or accomplishments in high school or earlier are generally not a good idea. Don't mention potentially controversial subjects (for example, controversial religious or political issues).

Do some research, if needed

If a school wants to know why you're applying to it rather than another school, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. If the school setting would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention.

Write well and correctly

Be meticulous. Type and proofread your essay very carefully. Many admissions officers say that good written skills and command of correct use of language are important to them as they read these statements. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Adhere to stated word limits.

Avoid clichés

A medical school applicant who writes that he is good at science and wants to help other people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from often-repeated or tired statements.

Writing the Personal Statement: Top 10 Rules

1. Strive for depth rather than breadth. Narrow focus to one or two key themes, ideas or experiences
2. Try to tell the reader something that no other applicant will be able to say
3. Provide the reader with insight into what drives you
4. Be yourself, not the 'ideal' applicant
5. Get creative and imaginative in the opening remarks, but make sure it's something that no one else could write
6. Address the school's unique features that interest you
7. Focus on the affirmative in the personal statement; consider an addendum to explain deficiencies or blemishes
8. Evaluate experiences, rather than describe them
9. Proofread carefully for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage, and style
10. Use readable fonts, typeface, and conventional spacing and margins

Writing the Personal Statement: Top 10 Pitfalls

1. Do not submit an expository resume; avoid repeating information found elsewhere on the application
2. Do not complain or whine about the "system" or circumstances in your life
3. Do not preach to your reader. You can express opinions, but do not come across as fanatical or extreme

4. Do not talk about money as a motivator
5. Do not discuss your minority status or disadvantaged background unless you have a compelling and unique story that relates to it
6. Do not remind the school of its rankings or tell them how good they are
7. Do not use boring clichéd intros or conclusions
 - "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is..."
 - "This question asks me to discuss..."
 - "I would like to thank the admissions committee for considering my application."
 - "It is my sincere hope that you will grant me the opportunity to attend your fine school."
 - "In sum, there are three reasons why you should admit me..."
8. Do not use unconventional and gimmicky formats and packages
9. Do not submit supplemental materials unless they are requested
10. Do not get the name of the school wrong
11. Do not incorporate technical language or very uncommon words

When you are not answering questions, use this basic format

- 3-5 paragraphs
- Opening paragraph will always be a very personal story from high school or early college days (or earlier) that shows your interest and/or aptitude in the specific area in which you are applying. Do not drag it out. Set the scene in one or two sentences. Tell what happened in 2-4 sentences. End with telling your response to the situation and your feelings about it. This should be a total of no more than 8-10 sentences. It is a summary which is concise and to the point.
- Paragraph 2 (could be 2 paragraphs): Connect your example with the place you are applying. What about that place or internship appealed to you directly? What else have you done that is linked to that particular program? Don't ramble about everything you've done because they will see that on your resume. Simply summarize those things that apply directly.
- Paragraph 3 (or 4): State your short-term and long-term goals. Your short-term goal is NOT to get into this program! These are professional goals like: "I need to get my pharmacy degree and work in two or three different pharmacy settings such as drugstores and hospitals before I start working on my PhD in pharmacology. I need the PhD in order to do the research my heart longs to do to find a medication to ease the suffering of those like my sibling."
- Close with a brief summary of your background and goals in one or two sentences. This reaffirms both your preparation and your confidence in your choice of this program.
- Remember this is not an academic paper; it is a sales pitch. Use "I" and make it sound like you (but in good English). Have someone help you with words that mean what you want to say. Have someone check it for grammar and punctuation. Use spellcheck and grammarcheck on your computer and fix anything that is underlined in red or green!
- If it is printed out and handed in, use white 8.5" x 11" paper with one inch margins all around. Put your name in the top right-hand corner. Use Times New Roman either 11 or 12 and double space.