

Writing Personal Statements

Some applications ask more specific questions than others. There is no set formula to follow in shaping your response, only choices for you to make, such as whether you should write an essay that is more autobiographically focused or one that is more professionally focused. From application to application, requested personal statements also vary widely in length, ranging from a couple of paragraphs to a series of essays of a page or so each. Personal statements are most important when you are applying to an extremely competitive program and you are a marginal candidate and need the essay to compensate for low test scores or a low GPA.

Context Considerations:

How are personal statements read, and by whom? It's most likely that your personal statement will be read by professors who serve on an admissions committee in the department to which you are applying. It is important in developing your personal statement to carefully consider this audience. What are the areas of specialty of this department, and what might it be looking for in a graduate student?

Additionally, since personal statements will most often be read as part of your package, they offer an opportunity to show aspects of yourself that will not be developed in other areas of your application.

Obviously, it is important that personal statements are not simply prose formulations of material contained elsewhere in the application. It may be helpful to think of the statement as the single opportunity in your package to allow the admissions committee to hear your voice.

Often times, committees are sorting through large numbers of applications and essays, perhaps doing an initial quick sort to find the best applicants and then later reading some of the personal statements more thoroughly. Given that information, you will want your statement to readily engage the readers, and to clearly demonstrate what makes you a unique candidate apart from the rest of the stack.

Process for Writing the Personal Statement

1. Analyze the question(s) asked on a specific application.
2. Research the school and/or program to which you are applying.
3. Take a personal inventory (see ** below). Write out a 2-3 sentence response to each question.
4. Write your essay.
5. Revise your essay for form and content.
6. Ask someone else preferably a faculty member in your area to read your essay and make suggestions
7. Revise again.

Personal Inventory Questions

1. What makes you unique, or at least different from, any other applicant?
2. What attracts you to your chosen career? What do you expect to get out of it?
3. When did you initially become interested in this career? How has this interest developed? When did you become certain that this is what you wanted to do? What solidified your decision?
4. What are your intellectual influences? What writers, books, professors have shaped you?
5. How has your undergraduate academic experience prepared you for graduate/professional school?
6. What are two or three of the academic accomplishments which have most prepared you?
7. What research have you conducted? What did you learn from it?
8. What nonacademic experiences contributed to your choice of school and/or career?
9. Do you have specific career plans? How does graduate or professional school pertain to them?
10. Think of a professor in your field that you've had already and that you like and respect. If this person were reading your application essay, what would most impress him or her?

Adapted from University of Delaware Career Services Handout