

Writing a Personal Statement

A personal statement is your introduction to the selection committee and should convey who you are and what “makes you tick”. It determines whether you are invited to an interview and provides the committee with material that they will draw questions from if you are selected for an interview. In reviewing your statement, the selection committee is looking to understand the origins and depth of your commitment to your life’s goals. It is the heart of your application.

A personal statement is an essential piece of creative writing that puts a “human face” on your application. Remember that the committee does not know you and this is your opportunity to let them know who you are, how you have evolved, and why you want to pursue your goals.

A personal statement is:

- **A picture:** Your personal essay should produce a picture of you as a person, student, and a potential scholarship winner.
- **An invitation:** The readers must be invited to get to know you, personally.
- **An indication of your priorities and judgment:** What you choose to say in your statement tells the committee what your priorities are.
- **A story or more precisely, your story:** Be creative, everyone has a story to tell but we are not all-natural storytellers. This requires serious self- reflection.

A personal statement is NOT:

- An academic paper with you as the subject
- A resume in narrative form
- A journal entry
- A plea or justification for the scholarship

Helpful Tips for Writing a Personal Statement

*“The best advice I received about writing the application was to ‘freewrite.’
I just sat down at the computer and filled up the page. This made it much easier to tell my story”
~2001 Truman Scholar*

Start Early:

Plan your time out well. A personal statement will take many drafts of writing. Give yourself permission to write badly at first, this will allow you to get all your feelings and important information down on paper. There is plenty of time later to organize and edit. Plan on writing in the spring and summer for fall applications.

Reflect upon your accomplishments and interests:

Make a list of everything you have done as an undergraduate: papers, research, experience, activities, memorable conversations and also write down details about your personal background. Select parts of your list that will have the potential to eventually become the building blocks of your essay. Share your ideas with family, friends, faculty, and the Graduate School Advisor to help decide what aspects will make the most compelling essay for you. You cannot reveal everything about your self in 1000 words, so you must decide what personal characteristics you would like to emphasize in your statement.

Research your fellowship and graduate programs carefully:

Think carefully about the approach you should take. You should avoid using the same essay for several competitions, so make sure to tailor your essay(s) to the specific characteristics of each program. Describing the attributes, experiences and interests you have that mesh with the program’s goals or mission is the best way to show that there is a fit between yourself and the program/award. Look at sample essays to gain a general sense of the approaches candidates have taken to the personal statement.

Drafting the essay:

The easiest way to begin is to start writing. Do not start with the object of “writing the personal statement” instead write honestly and truthfully about yourself and the significant moments and people in your life.

Think strategically about yourself. Do not worry about format, spelling, or grammar; just write down what naturally comes to you. Your essay should grab the reader's interest and give them a sense of your personality. Try to be specific; vague or abstract generalities are not helpful in telling the reader about you. Sometimes we take our experiences for granted and think the reader understands the underlying intricacies of these experiences. Give your essay to someone who knows you and ask him/her if you are giving an accurate description of yourself. Try to avoid language or prose that is too flashy or clever. Reflect on the true nature of your strengths, talents and accomplishments, and you will not need to exaggerate on any of the details. Make sure you are honest and the writing is a true reflection of who you are.

Revising and finalizing your essay:

Give your essay to multiple readers to edit. Because it is impossible to determine who will evaluate your essay it is important to have a variety of people read it in advance. Get help with copy-editing, which means working with the stylistic details of your writing, refining sentence structure and deciding what words best fit. Be sure to proofread meticulously! Simple typographical or grammatical errors can sabotage your candidacy. Remember to utilize the writing center and other library resources.

Questions to Ask Yourself

Reflect on some specific questions that may lead you to a more general expression of yourself:

- What errors or regrets have taught you something important about yourself?
- What ideas, books, theories, or movements have made a profound impact on you?
- To what extent do your current commitments reflect your most strongly-held values?
- Under what conditions do you do your best, most creative work?
- To what extent are you a typical product of your generation and/or culture?
- How might you deviate from the norm?
- What are the most important characteristics, values, goals, and ambitions, life experiences and service activities that define who you are?
- Why do you want to study at this institution and how will it help you become a better scholar, person, leader?
- What is unique, distinctive, and unusual about you? What would help the committee to understand you better?
- Why are you motivated to pursue the path you have chosen?
- What events, people, or family history have shaped and influenced you?
- What would help the committee better understand you and sets you apart from other applicants?
- When did you first become interested in your field of study? What have you learned since then? What have you learned about yourself?
- What drives you – in your field of study, your projected career, and your life?
- What kind of contribution do you want to make and how?
- If your interest has changed over time, how has your prior interest contributed to your understanding of/approach to your current interest?
- Have you overcome adversity to get where you are?
- How might you contribute to the academic community you intend to join?
- In five years where do you see yourself working and what do you envision yourself doing?
- Discuss an activity or experience that has helped you clarify your long-term academic goals.
- Discuss a need of society that you will address in your career.
- Which famous person do you most identify with and why?
- Describe your hometown and explain its impact on your beliefs or values.

Remember that your personal statement is authentic. Do not make the mistake of trying to guess what the committee is looking for, and do not write what you think they want to hear. They want to know you. You want to grab the reader's interest and make them want to meet you for an interview. Get a sense of the experiences you wish to share and if you write honestly you will have written a personal statement.

Reading published autobiographies can help you to find additional ways to engage your audience. The following are examples of different ways to address content you have in your personal statement.

When and Why You Fell in Love With Your Major

Naipaul, V.S. Reading and Writing: A Personal Account. New York: New York Review of Books, 2002, chapters 1-3

A Project or Accomplishment that Demonstrates Your Creativity, Talent and Passion for Your Work:

Codell, Esme Raji. Educating Esme: Diary of a Teacher's First Year. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1994, pp75-9.

A Person Responsible for Shaping Your Values

Gates, Henry Louis. Colored People. New York: Random House/ Vintage Books, 1994, chapter 3 (“Wet Dogs and White People”)

An Event that Motivated You to Take Up a Cause

St. Aubin de Teran, Lisa. The Hacienda: A Memoir. Boston, New York, and London: Little, Brown and Company: 1997

An Obstacle You Have Overcome

Styron, William. Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness. New York: Random House/ Vintage Books, 1992.

An Engaging Introduction

Orlean, Susan. “The Maui Surfer Girls” from The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup.

Reconstructed Dialog

Sedaris, David. “Jesus Shaves” from Me Talk Pretty One Day. Boston, New York, and London: Little Brown and Company, 2000.

Metaphor

Levi, Primo. “Zinc” from The Periodic Table. Raymond Rosenthal, trans. New York: Schocken Books, 1982.