

California State University
Northridge Career Center

How-to-Guide for Writing Personal Statements

What is a personal statement?

A personal statement is an essay about you! A successful essay reflects on your achievements, opportunities, and obstacles in life. A personal statement is typically required when applying to universities as an undergraduate, a transfer student, and a graduate student. Sometimes a personal statement is required for scholarships, jobs, internships, fellowships, and research programs.

Your personal statement addresses your past, present, and future by explaining who you are, how you got to this point, and where you are headed. On average, the essay is around a page long, which means that you have a limited space to creatively illustrate your achievements, your goals, and your influences. The essay also allows you to explain your academic record and any inconsistencies.

How should I begin?

What is expected of your essay?

- *Know what the committee is looking for.* In general, those who read your personal statement are specifically looking for:
 - How you explain achievements that are not in the other parts of your application
 - How and why those achievements or events shaped your interests, goals, etc.

Prepare materials

- *Read over the entire application.* What is the purpose of the personal statement? Is it for graduate school, a scholarship, a summer internship? Read about the program's mission statement and keep in mind what characteristics for which they are looking.
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What should I write about?

Reflect

- *You are the focus.* The essay should be about you. Questions to think about when reflecting:
 - Why are you a strong applicant?
 - What makes you special?
 - What is impressive about your experiences or life?
 - What influenced your goals?
 - Did you experience any personal or family problems that shaped your character?
 - How did you become interested in this field?
 - How have you already learned about this field that prepares you for the next step?
 - What are your future goals?
 - What skills/characteristics of yours will contribute to your success in the field?

Know your reader

- *Who is reading your essay?* Your personal statement will sound more authentic and sincere if the reader can connect with you through your essay. Often, the application will mention who will be reading your materials and you should keep that person or committee (and what they are expecting from you) in mind when writing.

What should I keep in mind when writing my personal statement?

The first draft

- *Just start writing.* Beginning the essay can be the hardest part of the process, so once you have something on paper you can work from there. Just remember, you have to be okay with rewriting your statement a few times and possibly erasing everything you just wrote.
- *Don't limit yourself in the first draft.* The first draft, as messy as it is, is an important step in perfecting the final draft. Don't limit yourself to a word or page limit; don't worry about style or grammar. Just write. Address a few experiences in detail; outline achievements or a personal moment that influenced your goals.

General tips to remember for all drafts

- *Answer any questions the personal statement asks you to address.* Even if you have written a stellar personal statement, it won't matter if it isn't on the right topic. Refer to the questions often to remind yourself of them and have others read your essay to make sure all questions are answered.

- *It's okay to write in first person.* It will make your essay more personal than and not as vague as third person. However, just don't start every sentence with "I."
 - *Watch out for repetitiveness.* Did you already address certain experiences or achievements in another part of your application? Don't repeat information that has already been provided. For example, there is no need to state your specific GPA or course titles in your essay since they're on your transcript.
 - *Go into detail about a personal moment.* This will distinguish you from others and it is important for your essay to be memorable and unique. This doesn't mean to write in purple prose – melodramatic and flowery writing – which many applications specifically state not to use in your writing. It just means telling a story about a specific experience in your life.
 - *Quality, not quantity.* Each paragraph should be focused since the personal statement is generally no longer than a page. Don't go into too many ideas in a small amount of space. Discuss a particular idea that you can explain in a detailed, yet concise manner.
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What should my personal statement look like?

Format

- *The introduction.* The opening of the essay is your chance to establish a tone and spark the reader's interest with a hook, whether it's an anecdote or a quote from someone. This doesn't mean to include unimportant details since you have limited space. Be concise and make sure you capture the main point and theme of your essay.
- *The body paragraphs.* This is considered the most important part of the essay because it's where all your details are supporting the point you made in your introduction. The first sentence of each body paragraph should be a strong transition and in each paragraph your ideas should develop.
- *The conclusion.* Since this is your last paragraph, this is the time to re-affirm the points and theme of your essay, but not to repeat or summarize the rest of your essay. Think about placing your experiences you wrote about in a larger frame in the conclusion, like where you hope to go next and how the program/job/internship can help you succeed along the way.

Organization

- *Follow the guidelines.* Typically, a personal statement should be in Times New Roman (or a similar font) on a standard paper size with one inch margins. However, check the application to make sure you are not required to use specific spacing, etc.
- *The five paragraph essay.* Remember writing the five paragraph essay – an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion – in high school? The

personal statement should be in a similar format. You should have a clear introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

- *A consistent tone.* Maintain the same tone throughout your essay. Writing in first person, you should come across as sincere and honest.
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How do I know when my personal statement is complete?

Revision

- *Rewriting.* Don't think you can get away with submitting a first draft. Revision is key; it makes a big difference in the coherence of your essay.
- *Editing.* Use your first draft to find the most important points. Drop repeated thoughts and ideas that don't fit with the theme of the rest of your essay.
- *Keep it organized.* Make sure your essay shifts clearly from paragraph to paragraph. Ideas shouldn't jump around throughout the essay; rather, they should lead from one to the next in unification.

Feedback questions

- *Get a second opinion.* Have friends, peers, and the Career Center read your personal statement. They can offer feedback and may read your essay from a different angle of which you weren't aware.
 - *Have questions ready.* When sharing your essay with others, ask your readers specific questions to ensure that you get constructive feedback. Here are some questions you can ask:
 - What do you think is the overall theme?
 - Where is the essay most and least persuasive?
 - Do the paragraphs have a logical transition?
 - Do the paragraphs consistently move from issue to issue?
 - Did I use appropriate adjectives in descriptions?
 - Were there grammar or spelling mistakes?
 - What could make my essay stronger?
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Writing a personal statement for undergrad...

When applying for undergraduate admission, the focus of your essay should address what shaped your interests, how you will fit in the student body at that university, your experiences in high school, in your community, and with your family.

Writing a personal statement for veterans...

For a veteran, discuss your military service and how those experiences affected your educational goals. Sometimes, schools want to know how you are affiliated with the military and if you are eligible for benefits.

Writing a personal statement for transferring undergrad universities...

As a transfer student, you should already know your intended major. In your essay, discuss the college education you have already received, your intended major, and how your interests in that field developed. Mention the classes in that field that you have taken thus far that led you to your choice. Also describe any involvement in student clubs or activities.

Writing a personal statement for graduate school...

At this level, you generally know what your plans are for the future. Like the undergrad essay, you should also discuss your experiences, challenges, and characteristics so the reader can get a good idea of who you are. However, you should also go further and discuss your future plans. Explain why you want to continue your studies and what you plan to do afterward. It is also important to mention field experiences, like internships, research programs, and extracurricular activities.

Writing a personal statement for a job/internship/fellowship/research program...

This type of personal statement is different from a school admission essay. Your focus should predominantly be about why you are a good fit for the position. Evidence to support this should be provided with experiences, strengths, goals, and skills.