

Writing Effective Personal Statements

Structure of a Personal Statement

The personal statement generally falls into one of two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement: This allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write and is the type of statement often prepared for standard medical or law school application forms.
2. The response to very specific questions: Often, business and graduate school applications ask specific questions. Your statement should respond specifically to the question being asked.

What to Ask Yourself Before You Start

1. What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
2. What details of your life might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
3. When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field?
4. If you've worked a lot during college, what have you learned (ex. leadership or managerial skills), and how has it contributed to your growth?
5. Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain?
6. Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships in your life?
7. What personal characteristics 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?
8. What skills do you possess?
9. Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful in the profession—than others?

Exercise: 20 Steps to a Personal Statement

Your Journey: List 6 things led you here.

You're Unique: List 6 things that make you stand out from other candidates.

You Have Experience: Describe 6 powerful experiences you've had that relate to psychology.

Apply Your Knowledge: Describe 2 experiences that have impacted your decision to pursue psychology.

Writing the Personal Statement

- **Make a List:** Describe all of the items that you would ideally like to mention in your personal statement. Do not omit anything. You will organize and cut later.
- **Start Cutting:** Refer to your list and prioritize important items. If an item does not effectively fit into the statement or is not deemed important, cut that item.
- **Create an Outline:** Once you narrow your points, create your outline using the format below.

Part I: Introduction

The Hook: This could be a story, quote, surprising statement, etc. that sets the stage for the rest of your statement. The purpose of the hook is to spark the reader's interest.

Thesis Statement: The hook should transition into a thesis statement, which describes the overall theme of the personal statement. It is important to stick to one theme.

Part II: Body

This is the bulk of your statement. It should address the thesis statement and answer the question posed on the application. Using your theme, you should address why you would be a good candidate for school and how you know that you will succeed.

Part III: Conclusion

Conclude the statement by summarizing everything that was previously addressed. The last sentence or two should relate to the hook. The reader should not be left hanging.

BEGIN TYPING: Using the outline as your guide, type your personal statement. Do not worry about editing at this point. This will be done in the next step.

EDIT, EDIT, EDIT: Click on the spell check button. Read your statement aloud to ensure that your paper makes sense and flows correctly. Next, take the time to review your writing with a fine tooth comb and correct any spelling/grammatical errors. Then circulate your statement amongst several people.

Writing Tips

- **Be specific:** Make your statement stand out by illustrating your assertions with examples. Avoid generalized statements such as, “I would be a great psychologist because I have an excellent work ethic.” Instead, write a story about yourself that illustrates this point.
- **Go beyond the application:** Most of your academic and professional history will be noted on your application. The purpose of the personal statement is to give the Admissions Committee a glimpse into your motivation and ability to become a psychologist.
- **Answer the questions that are asked:** If applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar. Don't use the same statement for all applications.
- **Tell a story:** Demonstrate through concrete experience. Don't bore the Admissions Committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you'll put yourself ahead of the pack.
- **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 paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab the reader's attention or lose it. It's a framework for the rest of the statement.
- **Tell what you know:** The middle section might detail your interest and experience in your field. Too many people graduate with little knowledge of the nuts and bolts of the field they hope to enter. Be specific in relating what you know. Use the language professionals use in conveying the information. Refer to experiences, classes, books, seminars, etc. and why you're suited to it.
- **Don't include some subjects:** Certain things are best left out. Leave out experiences or accomplishments in high school or earlier. Don't mention potentially controversial subjects.
- **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 the school apart from other universities/
- **Write well and correctly:** Ask multiple people to read your personal statement. Someone may catch a grammatical or spelling error. Another person may let you know that one of your points is unclear.
- **Avoid clichés:** Graduate schools do not want to hear that you want to “help people.” This statement is overused and not a strong enough reason to admit you into the school. Remember, the personal statement's purpose is to set you apart from other candidates.

Resources: Old Dominion University Career Management Center (2008), Purdue University (2008).