



OWLS Writing Guides: PERSONAL STATEMENT

The PERSONAL STATEMENT is a short essay submitted as part of most applications to undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools, or for a job, promotion, internship, or scholarship. Generally, the essay's purpose is to introduce you to your readers and give them reasons to accept you as a student or colleague.

The essay is written in response to a writing prompt, which may be fairly general and open-ended, or more specific to the institution, field, or position you are applying for.

A couple of examples (from University of California application):

Tell us about a personal quality, talent, accomplishment, contribution or experience that is important to you. What about this quality or accomplishment makes you proud and how does it relate to the person you are?

What is your intended major? Discuss how your interest in the subject developed and describe any experience you have had in the field — such as volunteer work, internships and employment, participation in student organizations and activities — and what you have gained from your involvement.

As these examples suggest, the personal statement is personal, reflective, and analytical. It should demonstrate that you have carefully reflected upon your life and academic experiences, that you've examined your personal qualities and intellectual interests, and that you can discuss how these relate to the pursuit of your goals.

Remember, every element of the personal statement is a representation of you, from the thoughtfully developed thesis to the correct placement of an apostrophe. Your readers will be looking to see how well you can present yourself, and in turn, represent their institution as a student or colleague, so take special care with this essay.

This handout will give you some advice to follow as you prepare and write your statement.

Follow directions

- ⇒ Read the essay prompt carefully and understand what you are being asked to write.
- ⇒ Answer only the question posed by the prompt, and answer every part of the question.
- ⇒ Follow the guidelines given for length and format. Stay as close to the specified word count or page length as you can.
- ⇒ If you are applying to several schools or for several positions, always write a separate statement for each application. Even if you find that different applications ask similar questions, there are bound to be key differences.

Gather ideas before you write a draft

- ⇒ Ask yourself lots of questions: Why do you want to pursue this field, go to this school, study this major, or hold this position? How did you first become interested in it? What specific experiences have you had that are relevant to this pursuit? List relevant classes, internships, seminars, extracurricular activities, community volunteering, work experience, conversations with people in the field, and so on.
- ⇒ What is it about you that might make your readers choose you over the other applicants? List your particular skills, personal and academic achievements, obstacles, personal qualities, values, goals, and so on. How do these bear upon your desire to pursue this field or position, as well as your fitness as an applicant?

- ⇒ Review your other application materials. While the personal statement should not repeat information that your readers can find elsewhere in your materials, it can provide context for information they will see, for example, in your resume or academic records. Write down some specific examples from your experience that might further illuminate information listed in your resume or academic records.

Find a clear focus, and strive for depth, not breadth

- ⇒ Taking care to answer the assigned prompt, focus on an overarching theme, a main idea or impression that you want to get across to your readers, and use your experiences and other specific information to develop that single theme and tell your story.
- ⇒ This essay should not be a list of accomplishments. Resist the urge to cram as much as you can into the allotted word count.

Use a clear, conventional essay organization

- ⇒ Your essay should have an introduction, several body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- ⇒ The introduction should grab your reader's attention and present your thesis, the overall theme of your essay.
- ⇒ Order the material in the body of your essay logically, usually building toward your most important point.
- ⇒ Use transitions to move your readers from one part to the next.
- ⇒ Make your concluding idea a memorable one. Do not summarize what you've already said. Leave your reader with something new to think about.

Be specific and concrete, not general and abstract

- ⇒ Give concrete examples and detailed experiences to develop your theme.

Don't just state, evaluate

- ⇒ Write an analysis, not a summary. Don't recite your experiences without assessing and evaluating what these experiences meant to your personal or academic development.

Use an appropriate style and correct grammar

- ⇒ Your words and sentences should be clear and concise. The personal statement is relatively short, so make every word count. Don't try to impress the reader with fancy words and overly complex sentences.
- ⇒ A personal statement is personal, reflective writing, so naturally you must write in the first person (using *I* and *me*). However, your style should not be chatty or informal. Your voice and style should honestly represent you, but you on your best behavior. Adopt a semi-formal tone, avoiding slang, contractions, colloquialisms, and other marks of informal writing.
- ⇒ Grammar, punctuation, usage, spelling, and mechanics should all conform to conventional rules. Proofread carefully.

Work through several drafts and get feedback from others

- ⇒ Leave yourself time to draft and revise, and revise some more.
- ⇒ Get feedback from others, such as a tutor in the writing center, as you revise.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE: Purdue University OWL (includes examples of personal statements and advice from admissions officers) <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/1/>

ADDITIONAL ON-CAMPUS HELP: The Career Development Center, 208 Danna Center, x3860.