



# Graduate School: Writing the Personal Statement

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The **personal statement**, your opportunity to sell yourself in the admissions process, generally falls into two categories. The general, comprehensive personal statement, which allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write, is the type of statement often required for law or medical school applications.

**The statement of purpose** is to demonstrate to the admissions committee your reasons for applying to graduate school and should include the following points:

- Why you want to study the field you've chosen
- What your experience is in the field
- Why you want to study this field at this school
- What you plan to do with your degree in terms of your future career plans

The two main goals of the personal statement are to *be persuasive* and to *be personal*.

**Persuasive** is about how right you are for the program and how right the program is for you. You should demonstrate the pattern in your life that has led to your decision to apply to this program; your aim is to focus in on the part of your life or the one consistent theme in your life that has led to this decision. Part of demonstrating why you are right for the program involves demonstrating that you understand what the program is and where it will lead you.

**Personal** involves honesty and distinctiveness. Feel free to acknowledge personal challenges you have faced but focus on facts and the future. Depending on the type of program you are applying to, you may have more of a personal story rather than focusing on professional qualifications.

## Before You Write: Think First and Ask Yourself the Following Questions:

- What is special, unique distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) that might help the admissions committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- How have you learned about the field – through classes, readings, seminar, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example) and how has this work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores) or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?

- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion and/or persistence) do you possess for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school – more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

### Answer the Questions that are Asked...

- Read the prompt *carefully* to make sure that you are responding to the specific question being asked.
- Don't be tempted to use the same statement for all applications, but rather tailor your essay to the particular program/school.

Keep in mind that the admissions committee typically spends 1-5 minutes per essay and that this is your opportunity to showcase how you both think and write. The opening sentences are particularly critical in capturing the reader's curiosity and attention. Your introduction should entice the reader to read on.

- Tell a brief story that has an angle. The statement is your opportunity to bring to life all of the facts contained in your application. Choose a single theme, a turning point, an important lesson, a self-discovery, a defining moment or experience that corresponds directly to the question. For example: Relate a particular experience and explain how it contributed to your sense of social commitment; talk about what you learned about yourself from a particular experience that has made you a better person; demonstrate your tenacity by discussing one or two situations in which you succeeded in the face of adversity. Remember your topic should demonstrate either directly or indirectly why you are applying to the program and why you are a good fit.
- Utilize concrete experiences that demonstrate your leadership capabilities and positive qualities.
- For **statements of purpose**, mention faculty members and their work that is of interest to you and also indicates that you have taken some time to research the program.

Do your homework on the school and weave into your statement indications that you possess the attributes most desired by the admissions committee. In general, admissions committees are looking for:

- 1) How well you present your experiences and goals
- 2) How well your accomplishments support your long-term goals; and
- 3) How your rationale for pursuing this program and degree fits into your career plan.

In the process of writing (and rewriting multiple drafts), solicit feedback from a career counselor in the Career Development Office, your faculty advisor or someone from the writing center. And before completing your final draft make sure you enlist others to proofread for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage, and style.