
Writing Personal Statements for Graduate Universities & Professional Schools

Getting into to graduate or professional school nowadays is a very competitive task. Admission requirements include academic records, work experience and a written admission essay or personal statement. A personal statement is something you should really want to write because it is your opportunity to distinguish yourself from hundreds of other applicants with comparable test scores, work experiences and personal interests. Contrary to popular belief, writing a personal statement requires time and many, many drafts to share your intellect and character (for the very first time) with the admissions team of your chosen graduate or professional school. Personal statements usually fall into two categories:

- 1st - the general personal statement
- 2nd - the response to very specific questions asked by your graduate or professional school

Begin at the Beginning

It is sometimes hard to write concise and articulate prose, but nonetheless it is the task at hand. Remember this written statement provides the admission committee with vital information about you, but it also provides them with a snapshot of what you learned in college, your command of the English language and your ability to think and organize your thoughts in appealing, clear and concise prose! Regardless of whether your personal statement falls into category one or two, you need to approach the writing of the statement with a brainstorming session or a list of questions to ask yourself before you write.

Sample Questions

- What might help the evaluating committee better understand you? What is special, unique, distinctive or impressive about you or your life story? Think, "What language you should use to be descriptive, engaging, interesting, clear and thoughtful."
- What details of your life have shaped you or influenced your goals. How has your college education contributed to your professional and personal growth?
- Why are you interested in your chosen field? What things have stimulated or reinforced your interest? What are your career goals?
- If you worked during your college years or if you had an internship or service learning opportunity, how have these experiences contributed to your growth? (Remember, this is not your resume so do not recant in chronological order your work experiences. This is your time to be selective, and to share your insights particularly those that reinforce your convictions and commitment to your field.)
- What personal characteristics do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in your field or profession?
- Why are you a stronger candidate than other candidates? Think in terms of documenting personal characteristics or special skills that will most assuredly contribute to your success in your chosen field or profession?
- What seem to be your chosen graduate schools' preferred candidate characteristics?

In addition to these probing questions, do a little reflective thinking. Are there gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that need an explanation? Do you need to say something about your exam scores (mediocre LSAT or GRE scores for example or a little GPA problem early in your college years) Did you endure obstacles that you need to share or unusual hardships that may help the committee better interpret what they see in your academic or employment records.

Write On!

Once you have completed the brainstorming process and reflective thinking, then you are ready to write your first draft. You need to approach your first draft with the following things in mind:

- Your admission committee reads hundreds upon thousands of personal statements. Many of them bore the committee out of their minds!!!! If you have written “I always wanted to be a ... , or I was born in... , or The first time I ... ,The reason I have chosen law is... you could be on your way to putting your committee to sleep! The Associate Dean for Admissions at Cornell University Medical School said, “We look for originality because nine out of ten essays leave you with a big yawn. (Steltzer 81)
- Don’t start too far back in your personal life history and don’t focus on telling all of your failures or problems in life because the committee may finish your essay wondering “Given the negative experiences this person has endured, are they able to create and sustain success?????
- Don’t be too naïve or idealistic as this tends to convey ignorance about the true nature of your field or profession. Hold back on the platitudes: I want to make a difference in the world.
- Avoid personal biases about the touchy subjects: religion, ethnicity, politics, and sex. If you have character weaknesses, or you are arrogant and opinionated, this is not the time to “share”. Be careful with humor. Check it out on other people before you include it in your statement.
- Don’t be predictable, one-dimensional and remember “Just the facts – Embellish but don’t fabricate!

Write it Right

The rest of your success with your personal statement is tied up in avoiding poor English, spelling errors and choosing engaging, clear, “college language” to express yourself. Read the instructions carefully regarding length. If you are asked to answer your question or questions in 1,000 words, do it! Do not grossly under-write i.e. 300 words and whatever you do, do not grossly over-write, i.e. 1,800 words. Pull out your grammar book, dictionary and thesaurus and USE THEM to sound intelligent, truthful and sincere. Do not “dive off the deep end” with over modification, multi-syllabic words where simpler words do best and watch out for the long, cumbersome sentence structure that makes a tired reader stop and go back to get the point. Remember you do not know where your statement falls in the “reading order”. Last but not least, make it look good!

In Summary

There are no “perfect personal statements”. There are successful statements and successful statements take time and more time, ruthless editing and re-writing and they have a “hook” or interesting point of departure and follow-through to captivate your “hostage” audience. Successful statements “answer the questions asked”, follow the instructions given, are selective about content, following the guidelines herein, use effective order (deductive, inductive, topical or order of importance) and conclude effectively. Remember bad statements can sabotage your chances for success (Steltzer 1), but good statements can ensure your success! Get help from professionals, interested family, favorite college professors and good friends, read appropriate books and visit web sites to help discover the right balance of personal and academic characteristics and specifics for your statement.

Self Help

Graduate Admissions Essays: What Works, What Doesn’t, and Why by Donald Asher Berkeley California: Ten Speed Press, 1991

How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School by Richard J. Steltzer New Jersey; Peterson (Paperback –Aug 1997)

Perfect Personal Statements: Law, Business, Medical, Graduate School (Peterson’s Perfect Personal Statements: Law, Business, Medical, Graduate School) by Mark Alan Stewart (Paperback Feb 2002)

Ivy League Admission: 160 Successful Law School Personal Statements by Nancy L. Nolan – Mar. 2006)

Mastering the Personal Statement by John Richardson (Paperback – Jan 2000)

Resumes and Personal Statements for Health Professionals by James W. Tysinger (Paperback – Jan 1999)

Writing about me: A step by step method to creating a powerful personal statement for schools of medicine, dentistry, chiropractic, pharmacy, physician...optometry, podiatry, veterinary medicine by Barbara Huntington (2003)

www.ivyedge.com (specializing in admission essay editing for candidates applying to Ivy League universities)

www.admissionssays.com (works with your personal biography to produce customized model essays)

www.editavenue.com (direct access to over 250 highly qualified editing experts)

