

Writing the Personal Statement

The **personal statement** provides an excellent opportunity to make you really stand out to an admissions committee. As you are writing your personal statement, remember that admissions committees look at dozens, even hundreds, of applications—for medical school, that number can reach the thousands. Your application has a much better chance of standing out from the crowd if you have a strong personal statement.

There are two general types of personal statements:

1. The *general, comprehensive* personal statement:

The prompt for this type of personal statement often says something like, “Write an essay that explains why you want to be a doctor.” By asking very broad, general questions, these personal statements enable you to take a wide range of approaches in your essay. Many graduate, medical, and law school applications take this approach.

2. The *response to very specific questions*:

Sometimes applications for business and graduate schools will ask you to answer several specific questions instead of one broad one. For this type of statement, it is important to make sure that your essays answer the questions specifically, using concrete examples to support the claims that you make.

BEFORE YOU START WRITING, consider the following questions:

- What makes you unique? How can you play up your experiences and/or character traits to set you apart from your peers?
- What skills or personal characteristics do you possess that will enable you to be successful in the field? How can you use specific examples to demonstrate these skills and characteristics?
- Why are you drawn to this field? What makes you well suited to it? What types of experiences led to your interest (classes? personal experience? work? a particularly compelling professor?), and how has your desire to follow this career path changed and grown over time?
- Why are you drawn to each particular school? What do you know about the program to which you’re applying—the opportunities that the school provides and the faculty with whom you will be working if you are admitted?
- What are your long-term career goals?



- Have you participated in activities during college that demonstrate qualities that will be important to this line of work? What other related skills have you developed during undergrad (for instance, by working full- or part-time)?
- Do you need to explain any inconsistencies in your academic record—i.e., great LSAT/MCAT/GRE scores but a mediocre GPA (or vice versa), or low grades early in college and better grades once you started taking classes in your major?
- What have you achieved, academically, personally, and professionally, that demonstrates that you will be a good candidate for the program to which you're applying? Have you overcome any particular obstacles (physical, social, economic, or familial) to get where you are today?
- *Overall, how can you persuade the admissions committee to choose **you**? What makes you a stronger applicant than the others?*

WHEN YOU BEGIN WRITING...

1. **If you apply separately to each school, tailor your personal statement for each one—or, at the very least, for your top choices.** It's more work, but the more you demonstrate how you are a good fit for each school and its specific programs, the more likely the admissions committees are to agree with you.

Answer the questions that are asked.

- You may find that questions from different schools may sound similar. However, it is important to figure out what is different about each question so that you can respond to what each school is asking.
- This is definitely *not* a case where you should take the easy way out. If the questions are slightly different, make sure that you have answers that reflect those differences. If that means writing separate statements for each school, then that is what you should do, even though it means more work.

Research the schools.

- Browse the university website. Look for information about the program to which you are applying, as well as other opportunities and fellowships that the school offers. Familiarize yourself with the faculty and their work. How do your areas of interest fit in with and enhance each school's?

2. **Find a unique angle from which to approach your story.**

Many people struggle with this aspect of the personal statement. Since most of us really lead pretty boring lives, it can be a challenge to figure out what your angle is. Still, remember that although many people may have had the same experiences that you have, no one responds to those experiences in exactly the same way. How did *you* handle that adverse situation, adjust to your first year of college, or adapt to studying abroad? Tap into your own individuality to freshen up your description of those experiences. *Remember, however, that this is a formal academic document, and the language you choose should still reflect that formality.*

Be specific.

- Use concrete experiences to back up the claims you make about yourself. Livening up your statement with compelling examples will do two important things for you: first, it will give the committee *specific reasons* why you will be a good doctor, lawyer, or graduate student; and second, it will help to *keep the committee interested*. A personal statement that demonstrates a logical connection between your experiences and your desired career path will be more persuasive, and an interested committee is far more likely to remember you when it comes time to decide who's in.

3. Choose carefully what to include and where to put it.

Focus on the introduction.

- The opening of your essay can make all the difference in the committee's willingness to spend time on your personal statement. If you are able to grab your reader's attention from the very beginning, you are more likely to make yourself memorable. This first paragraph sets up the rest of the essay in terms of tone and topic.

Highlight your knowledge and experience, but know what to include...

- The body of your personal statement will describe your background in the field: knowledge and experiences, classes you've taken, work and research experience, the contacts that you've developed with others in the field, and any other sources that have enabled you to know why you want to pursue this career. Many people have very little knowledge of the field, so you will want to demonstrate that you do know what will be required of you. It will be important for you to choose carefully what to include; your choices give the committee crucial clues about your judgment.

... and what to exclude.

- As a general rule of thumb, there are two major things that you should avoid in your personal statement: (1) controversial issues, such as religion or politics, and (2) references to activities, awards, or experiences in high school or earlier. Keep your personal statement as current as you possibly can, and remember to stay away from topics that might offend your readers!

4. Pay close attention to the mechanics of writing: spelling, grammar, and style.

Follow the instructions.

- Stick to the word limit. Read the directions carefully, and follow them. An application that does not follow the basic rules will certainly not impress the committee.

Avoid clichés.

- Virtually everyone who applies to medical school wants to help people and is good at science. Virtually everyone who applies to graduate school loves literature or history or whatever field they want to study. Stay away from commonplace statements like this, and instead focus on the qualities and characteristics that make you a unique applicant.

Proofread, proofread, proofread.

- Have other people proofread your personal statement as well. You want to maintain every advantage possible as you are applying, and a meticulously constructed personal statement may be crucial to your success. Demonstrating that you have strong language skills will always be an advantage. A carelessly edited personal statement, on the other hand, could suggest to the committee that you would be equally careless as a student.