



Writing Effective Personal Statements

Many graduate and professional schools consider excellent writing skills a must for their prospective students. Therefore, your personal statement could be the most important part of your application. Even outstanding grades or standardized test scores will not redeem a poorly written essay. Consider the following items when composing your personal statement. Most personal statements are of two types:

GENERAL COMPREHENSIVE STATEMENT—This statement is usually required by law, medicine, and most graduate programs, and the applicant is left to his or her discretion to determine its contents. A large portion of this handout focuses on the general comprehensive statement.

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS STATEMENT—This statement is frequently required by graduate business programs and sometimes by law schools. When answering these questions, you should pay careful attention to ethical and social issues. You might also include detailed areas of research that are of interest to you.

Items to include:

- Make sure you have analyzed your motivations for continuing your education and that you can honestly articulate them. Graduate committees quickly see through greed or other motives.
- Read the application carefully before responding.
- If possible, make your personal statement a story. Do not make the mistake of boring the committee. Does your life contain interesting and challenging events? Have you overcome any great obstacles to achieve your goals? If so, talk about them.
- Find an angle that represents you uniquely. Remember that the personal statement is your chance to display not only what you have done, but, more importantly, who you are, and what your character contains.
- Concentrate on your opening paragraph. It should grab your reader's attention. Also, make your prose lively and terse; write in the active voice.
- What are the special, unique, distinctive, or impressive details of your life? Be personal and honest. Project confidence.
- When did you originally become interested in the field, and what have you done since to learn more about it? Has what you learned confirmed your desire to work in this field? Explain.
- How did you learn about the field—classes seminars, work, conversations with professionals?
- What are your career goals, and how will a degree from this school help you accomplish these?
- Explain any strange gaps between: grades and standardized test scores, grades between semesters, or long absences from school.
- What personal characteristics—compassion, integrity, leadership skills—do you possess, and how can you demonstrate them in writing?

Items to omit:

- Avoid any accomplishments or events from high school or earlier, unless they are part of your story.
- Avoid any controversial topics, i.e., religion and politics.
- Avoid being too detailed. Remember, you have only about 250-350 words.
- Avoid restating information—awards, scholarships—noted elsewhere in your application.
- Do not make the mistake of trying to guess the admission committee's minds. It will be very clear if you are only trying to say what they want to hear.