

Writing a Personal Statement for Graduate School

First and foremost, follow the prompt! Each school will have their own writing prompt(s) or set of questions so you'll want to avoid writing a generic statement. It may seem easier if you are applying to a number of schools, but it's also a great way to have your application set aside. Some schools will ask about your academic and/or personal background, work experiences, activities. Others will ask about your experiences with diversity. Some will want to know how your interest in their program developed, but not others.

The personal statement is not just a way to help the admissions committee find out about you as a person, but an important view into your thinking and writing ability—valuable skills in a future graduate student.

But with so many applicants for so few spots, your statement can be one of the most important ways you can set yourself apart from other applicants. Take it seriously and give yourself plenty of time to write it. The best statements are not laundry lists of accomplishments and activities but essays that speak about a unique episode from your own experience, expressing your motivation for pursuing an advanced degree and offers the admissions committee a glimpse of the kind of person you are.

What should you write about?

- Tell a story about an experience or event from your life and use it to talk about how you changed or shifted your perspective—or to display a personality trait that tells the committee who you are. Use it to craft a narrative that explains who you are.
- Write about any activity or experience that shows off your best qualities. Review your personal life for material, including your experiences as a student (internships, study abroad, student organizations). Make connections between the experience and your application.
- Let your story do the talking and *illustrate* your good qualities. Show the selection committee who you are through the details of your story. It's much more effective—and memorable—than just telling them. Anyone can say they are enthusiastic; instead, show them what it looks like.
- If you are going to mention a research interest, you need to back up your interest by including details about experiences that led you to it.

As you write:

- Follow all statement instructions. Answer all questions. Check twice!
- Keep the focus on YOU, not a sick relative, a remarkable mentor, or the inner workings of an organization where you interned.
- Write several drafts and ask for feedback—the earlier in the process, the better.
- Give yourself plenty of time!
- Revise. Edit. Proofread. Several times. Then one *more* time!

A few important don'ts:

- Don't open with a quote (I know it's perfect, but *just don't!*). If you want to express something you read in a quote, say it in your own words. The committee wants to hear what you think—not someone else. Resist!
- Don't use citations. If you must cite someone, paraphrase! Give them credit by using their name, but don't include full citation information. (And no footnotes, either!)
- Don't write about your philosophy on the law or explain how cancer grows. That is not the purpose of this statement. Please don't attempt to teach the teacher! The admissions committee is made up of experts on whatever subject you hope to study; you are the expert on YOU. Tell them about something only you know!
- Don't work on your statement alone. Writing a personal statement is like one half of a conversation. You are hoping the admissions committee sees something special in your statement (and in you), so finding a reader (who is also a good writer) to give you honest feedback is the best gift you can give your application—and yourself. Come visit us in the TLC!

And one more piece of advice—but this is just my opinion: *please don't* tell the committee how “passionate” you are about... *whatever* you are interested in! “Passion” in any form has to be one of the most overused clichés in the history of college applications. Go ahead and *be* passionate, just find a way to *show* them your passion without saying it!