

WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT

Writing about yourself can be a difficult part of applying for opportunities in college and beyond. Knowing what reviewers are looking for and how to refine your writing can make the process easier.

Before Writing

Read the prompt/instructions carefully: Reviewers are asking for the exact information they need to assess you; understanding and answering the prompt comprehensively gives you the best opportunity to share that.

Know your audience: Your audience will determine what information is specific and relevant to your statement. Consider whether anything you include may cause confusion. If you don't know the specific audience, write to a general, college-educated audience from across different disciplines.

Know Thyself: Impersonal statements that attempt to cater to what the reviewers want to hear rarely work. Take time to freewrite or talk through why you, specifically, want this experience and why you are a good candidate for it. Below are some questions to get you started:

- What qualities or skills do I possess that set me apart from others?
- What are the most compelling reasons for the admissions committee to be interested in me?
- What events or experiences in my background led me to this opportunity?

Drafting

Avoid summary and repetition: You have limited space in an application; avoid summarizing, even in your conclusion. Most applications have multiple components, and the information you are writing about may already be covered in your resume or transcript. Don't be afraid to expand upon important experiences and ideas, but make sure the information you are adding is new.

Avoid listing: You can't include every detail, so choose the most important experiences and ideas to expand upon. Lists tell reviewers little about what you can do, what you learned, and how those are relevant to your candidacy.

Use specific, relevant examples and experiences: Avoid generalizations like "all my life," "I have always," and "What I learned in X will help me...". These lack the specifics to help reviewers assess your candidacy and fail to show your individuality. Instead, highlight the specific experiences you have had, skills you have learned, and perspective changes you have undergone that led you to applying.

Make it positive and confident: Writers can feel pressured to share difficult or traumatic experiences in order to make an impression or demonstrate resilience. You can use these stories if comfortable and when relevant, but prioritize your future goals, personal growth, and confidence in your abilities.

Revision

Read it aloud: Reading aloud gives you a new perspective. Listen for your voice and identity, repetition, ambiguity, missing transitions, impersonal and vague phrasing, and grammar.

Re-read the prompt and instructions: In the writing process, complex instructions and multi-part prompts can be easy to lose track of. Review all components of the directions and make sure they are included in your essay.

Get feedback from others: Another perspective can ensure that your message, tone, and ideas are understood, and that things like organization, conciseness, clarity, and relevancy are present in your writing. Have a writing tutor, advisor, professor, or friend read your statement and give feedback.

Make every sentence relevant: With such limited space to describe yourself, your goals, and your experiences, you must be concise. Review each sentence for its relevance to the prompt, repetition, and relation to the sentences before and after it.

Parts of this handout were adapted from "How To Write A Winning Personal Statement" by Richard Stelzer and from a previous iteration of this handout by Jeffrey Spahn '95
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