



Personal Statements for College Applications and Scholarships

Handout created by Angela Gulick based on information compiled by Writing Lab Faculty

Introduction

There is no one way to write a personal statement, and different readers have different expectations. The suggestions presented in this handout come from several Writing Lab faculty members who have assisted students for years with writing personal statements. However, your personal statement is the one document in an application package that allows **you** to speak for yourself. You need to be the final judge of what you want that statement to say.

Understanding Your Task

- 1. Read all application materials carefully and thoroughly.** Pay close attention to verbs such as describe, compare, contrast, illustrate, and evaluate. If you are not sure what the application requires of you, come to the Writing Lab so that faculty may assist you with comprehension.
- 2. Determine how many questions are being asked, one or several.** Unless otherwise indicated by the application, you should answer each question specifically. Think about how you want to deliver your answers. Do you want to weave them throughout the statement or answer them in the order they were asked?
- 3. Ask your prospective school questions if you don't understand what is being asked of you.** It is perfectly acceptable to call the school's Admissions Office if you have questions about deadlines, maximum word or character counts, paper versus electronic document, other materials that need to accompany your personal statement, and so on. For example, know for sure whether the maximum word or character count includes spaces. Some schools are *very* particular about how long they want these statements to be, and you need to respect whatever specifications are presented to you.

Learning More about Your Audience

- 1. Think carefully about who reads these personal statements.** An admissions officer reads hundreds of such statements every semester. Be sure that your statement fulfills its purpose of quickly showing you as a real person.
- 2. Find out about the school you wish to attend.** Look at the school's website as well as the website of the specific department you wish to join. Are there programs or student groups you would want to join? Specific courses that interest you? Are there any faculty with whom you want to work?
- 3. Find out about the school's mission and values:** It is helpful to know something about the school's history and what the school values. Most institutions have mission statements or other documents that showcase what the schools stand for. Knowing what the school values can help you shape your own statement.
- 4. Talk to People:** Do you know any faculty at Parkland who may have assisted past students in getting into this school? Speak to those faculty. Do you have any friends, neighbors, or family members who have attended this school? Talk to them too. Just be aware you may get lots of *different* advice.

Writing the First Draft of Your Statement

- 1. Be sure to answer the question(s) asked.** If it is a multi-part question, answer all of the parts unless otherwise indicated. Some faculty suggest answering these questions in the order they appear. Be sure to actually answer the questions. It is amazing how many times we see students who wrote nice little statements that never answered the questions posed.
- 2. Be specific and selective.** You can't say everything in a short personal statement--and you shouldn't try. One of the biggest mistakes we see is students who squeeze too much into their personal statements and thus never go into any depth or specificity. Also, avoid long rambling stories or analogies (extended comparisons) that don't offer a focused view of your topic.
- 3. Remember that this personal statement is your voice.** Transcripts tell about your grades. Applications tell facts and figures about you. Letters of recommendation tell what other people think of you. The personal statement is your chance to **focus on the slice of your life that makes these grades, facts, opinions come alive.**
- 4. Think how you want to organize your personal statement.** One possible strategy is the "past, present, and future" strategy.
 - Past:* What events from your past (school, family, community, work) have shaped your interest in your major and future career? Showing you have had a long-term interest in your subject looks promising to schools looking for students with focus and motivation.
 - Present:* What are you doing *right now* to prepare for your next step? Are you taking any relevant courses? Do you have any significant projects that show an investment in your topic? Are you a member of any student or community organizations related to your major? Have you participated in internships, job shadowing, or other work-related events?
 - Future:* Where do you see yourself heading next, and *how will this school help you achieve your goals?* This is where your research of the school can come in handy. The more specific you can be, the better. Instead of saying, "I love science and want to learn more about chemistry," get specific. For example, talk about your desire to become a chemical engineer studying environmentally friendly fertilizers and soil additives.
- 5. Get rid of needless filler.** Because you don't have a lot of space to write, get to your point quickly and engage your reader, particularly in the introduction. Try not to write anything that could be written by anyone else; perhaps start with an anecdote from your own personal experience. However...
- 6. Be careful using very emotional personal experiences.** If you are asked to write about your family experiences and how they made you determined to go to college, be aware that emotional appeals may not be the best strategy to use. You can write about sexual abuse, single parenthood, substance abuse, but be mindful of your audience.
- 7. Think about what you can add to the school.** Rather than thinking about what the school can do for you (please admit me so I can get a degree and become successful), think about **what you can do for the school**. How would admitting you help the admissions professionals form a good overall combination of students? Tell them what you'll bring (skills? abilities? experiences? background? perspectives?) that might distinguish you from the mass of students who apply.

Revising Your Personal Statement

1. **Look carefully at the tone of your document.** Try to be positive and enthusiastic in a way that feels natural but not forced to you. Too much over-the-top enthusiasm can be read as insincere. Watch out, however, for negativity as well. A reader might focus more on your negative comments than on your strengths, abilities, and goals.
2. **Look carefully at the wording of your document. Here are a few common missteps:**
 - a. *Sounding artificial and forced.* Try to sound like yourself, your best self. It's tempting to enlist others to polish your essay until it sounds like Shakespeare wrote it, but unless you're an Elizabethan bard yourself, this won't seem believable to your audience. You don't need to force yourself to be overly formal. Aim for a **clear, direct, and specific delivery of information**. Readers slogging through hundreds of applications will appreciate it
 - b. *Using quotations that don't logically link up with writers' own statements.* A quotation from a "great thinker" may seem like a good idea, but it only works if it's something truly important to you so that you've actually applied it to your life. Too many students look up great thoughts on random websites or follow attention-getter templates, and the result can sound awkward. A saying from a song or a movie that you know well or a book you've actually read can be **a more genuine glimpse into the real you**.
 - c. *Sticking with generalities.* Push yourself to add specific and **personally unique** details. Specifics, often indicated by proper nouns, interest the reader more than generalities. So, rather than "I grew up in a rural area," say "I grew up cruising my 1968 Chevy Impala around the square in Paxton, IL."
3. **Look carefully at the editing of your document.** In a personal statement, everything matters – what you say, how you organize your thoughts, *and* how much attention you pay to spelling, grammar, and mechanics. No matter how strong a writer you are, have others read your statement for you. Bring your work to the Writing Lab, ask your teachers for help, ask other trusted friends and family members.

Conclusion

The following good advice was provided to one of our faculty by someone who used to read application essays at UIUC. The ideal essay would be one that, if the committee read it right before going to lunch, they would still be thinking about it when they got back to work. Good luck!

Thank you to Linda Girard, Angela Gulick, Sue Kuykendall, Marva Nelson, Brian Nudelman, Jennifer Reichart, Steve Rutledge, and Lori Williams for their contributions to this handout.