Writing a Personal Statement

The **personal statement** (also sometimes called the **statement of purpose**) is a common feature of graduate and professional school applications. Below, you will find responses to some commonly asked questions about the writing process. Remember, though, that no set of guidelines or recommendations is a replacement for hands-on help. Consider the information below and look at some sample essays online, but also bring your personal statement to the Writing Center and – most importantly – **ask a professor in your field review it**. This is a difficult genre to master, and you should use all of the resources at your disposal.

**What is a Personal Statement?**

A personal statement is usually a brief 2–3 page essay describing your reasons for applying to a graduate or professional school program. Requirements and expectations for the statement can vary widely between programs, institutions, and disciplines, but in most cases, the purpose of the statement is to distill your application down to a short essay explaining why you want to enter the program, why it should admit you, and what you intend to do there.

**What should it include?**

The content of your personal statement will depend on the prompt you are responding to. Most prompts will ask you to discuss your qualifications, plans, goals, and relevant experiences, but it is important be attentive to the special requirements of each school.

The most important rule of personal statement writing is simply to **respond to the prompt**. Prompts can be structured many ways: one might consist of a few short sentences, another might be a list of several questions, and yet another might ask you to write two or three distinct essays. If a prompt includes multiple questions or topics, make sure you address all of them. The admissions committee reading your essay might be sifting through dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of these documents. To be competitive in this context, your statement needs to provide the information the program asks for.

Make sure that you personalize your statement for the school you’re sending it to. Do some research on the school and its faculty, and list a professor who you might want to work with. Explain why you are a good fit for the program, and why the program is a good fit for you. Pay attention to detail, and if you’re juggling multiple distinct statements, each tailored to a different program, make sure to keep them carefully organized (this seems like common sense, but it’s not uncommon for admissions committees to receive personal statements written for other programs).

There is some room for creativity in the personal statement, but you need to be cautious about using creative elements. This is a tension in the writing process – if you want your statement to stand out among the many that your readers are evaluating, it needs to be unique and memorable. But, as noted above, it also must respond to the prompt and provide the information that the admissions committee asks for. If it is within the scope of the prompt, feel free to relate a
personal story that provides insight into your motivations, but make sure that it’s relevant, concise, and framed by practical information.

What about style and tone?

Here, too, the key is to balance creativity and professionalism. Identifying a style that feels both formal and personal can be difficult. Keep in mind, though, that it can better to use language that feels natural to you than it is to force a professional or sophisticated tone into your writing. Varied word choice is important, but it should never come at the expense of accuracy and coherence – the personal statement shouldn’t be a dump for GRE vocabulary words. If you attempt to mimic an elevated and complex academic discourse with which you have limited experience, you risk producing writing that feels awkward and forced, but if you stray too far in the opposite direction, towards an informal, colloquial, or overly personal tone, you risk coming across as unprofessional. Try to find an appropriate middle ground between these extremes, and seek out the opinions of writers who have experience with this genre.

How long should it be?

Length requirements will vary somewhat depending on the prompt, and you should be sure to make note of the requirements and strictly adhere to them. Again, the people reading your personal statement could be reading hundreds of these documents, and they will not appreciate essays that are longer than they’re supposed to be. A concise, carefully-written essay can say more than a long, wordy one, and it can simultaneously demonstrate that you are confident and experienced enough to privilege quality over quantity.

Resources/Model Statements:
You can find a wide variety of model/sample personal statements online through a Google search. Models found on college/university websites are generally more reliable.

Purdue OWL:
https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/969/01/

University of California at Berkley:
https://career.berkeley.edu/grad/gradstatement.stm

University of Chicago:
http://www.law.uchicago.edu/alumni/magazine/spring11/intheirownwords

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill:
https://www.utexas.edu/cola/depts/psychology/_files/PDF/diversitypdfs/Personal-Statements%20Workshop.pdf