

Marymount Manhattan College
Office of Career Services

Writing a Personal Statement

Adapted from Purdue OWL and University of Washington Psychology Writing Center

The personal statement is your opportunity to introduce yourself to the university admissions committee. The aim of writing is to clearly and effectively communicate that you possess the interests, abilities and competencies required to excel in your selected course of study.

Personal statements generally fall into two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive statement:

This allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write. This is typical of law and medical school statements.

2. The response to specific questions:

For business school and most academic/pre-professional graduate programs, you will be asked to respond to specific questions. The best responses serve the dual purpose of directly answering the question and selling your strengths to the admissions committee.

Questions to Ask Before you Write:

- What elements of your personal and intellectual history make you unique?
- What details of your life might help the committee better understand you or help set your application apart from others?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- How did you learn about this field? What steps did you take to further your learning?
- What have you learned from your academic, extracurricular and pre-professional experiences that specifically relate to this course of study?
- What are your career goals? How would this degree further these goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain?
- What transferable skills do you possess? What skills may you have that do not translate easily to your resume?
- Why are you a strong candidate for graduate study in this area?

Advice on Writing:

Be clear: Use straightforward words and direct phrasing. Avoid unnecessary verbiage. Do not use jargon and/or long words in an effort to sound sophisticated.

Avoid clichés, overly common phrases, and nonspecific information: For example, instead of calling yourself someone who thinks “outside the box” give examples from your personal, academic and professional experiences that showcase how your creativity makes you a superior candidate for your program and field of study.

Answer the questions that are asked: For personal statements requiring answers to specific questions, be sure to answer the question being asked in a direct and succinct manner. Often, you will be able to adapt answers from other applications to the current one you are working on. Note, however, that adapting answers is not the same as copying and pasting them.

Tell a story: Think in terms of showing and demonstrating your experiences through concrete examples. Admissions committees read a lot of applications – the challenge is to make sure yours is the one they read from start to finish, not gloss over on their way through the pile. If your statement is fresh, original and lively, you will hold the reader’s attention. Furthermore, if you distinguish yourself through strong stories, you will make yourself memorable.

Be specific: Your desire to become a PhD candidate, lawyer, veterinarian, etc. should be logical, the result of specific experiences and interests that are described in your statement. **Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story in a way that is specific to both the graduate program and to you.**

Concentrate on your opening paragraph: The opening paragraph is your chance to grab the attention of the reader and frame the statement on your terms.

Tell what you know: You’re not an expert (that’s why you’re applying for more school!) – but you should know more about your field than the average individual and be able to communicate this knowledge clearly. Refer to experiences (work, research, extracurricular, etc.) classes, theories, conversations with people in your field, books/journal articles you have read, workshops you have attended, or any other source of specific information about the why this is the educational and/or pre-professional experience for you.

Focus on recent experiences and big commitments: Your 8th grade spelling bee victory? Unless it sparked a life-long interest in etymology, skip it and focus on things you have done more recently and to which you have had sustained commitments.

Research: Ask: Why is this program for you? What (or in some cases, who) does it have that others do not? How will it uniquely further your personal and professional goals?

Organize: Be sure the statement is clearly organized from beginning to end. It may help to make an outline and/or write the topic sentence to each paragraph before or even during the writing process. Using meaningful transition words such as “first,” “in addition,” and “finally” to help keep your reader engaged.

Check spelling and grammar: Personal statements should also serve as a reflection of your strong writing and editing abilities. Use a spell check, but also have others read the document. Avoid contractions when possible.

Be concise: If a prompt asks for 250 words, it's because they want you to write no more than 250 words. To accomplish this task, be clear and concise. Avoid repetition. Balance short and long sentences. When reading something particularly long, ask: Can I say this more concisely?

Before you hand it in, double check that:

- You have responded to the prompt precisely as detailed on the application.
- You have had at least two other people read your statement for both content and grammar
- You have been specific about your previous experiences
- You have been specific about why this school/program is unique in meeting your needs
- You have the correct school's name **EVERYWHERE** on the application
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In Closing...

It can be difficult to write about yourself. Hopefully, the above tips have provided some guidance on how to begin this process. If you have carefully considered your personal and professional reasons for applying, you will be in the best position to write an honest and thoughtful personal statement. This said, be sure to leave yourself plenty of time to organize and revise the document.