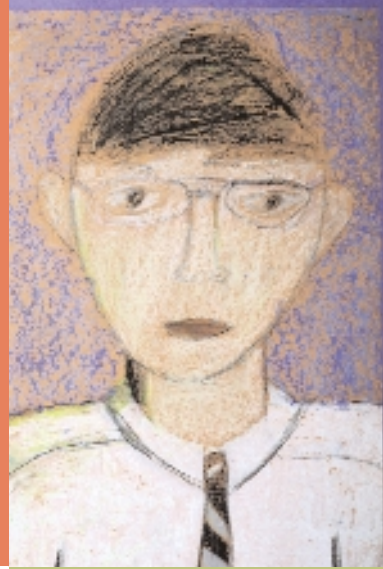


## WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT

Students and professionals confront many challenges when considering an advanced degree; selecting a school, obtaining financial aid and securing recommendations from professors are just the beginning. For some applicants, the greatest challenge comes when faced with the task of writing the personal essay. Such essays are required by almost all graduate and professional schools to help them learn more about you and why you are interested in their program. Yet the process of writing a description of yourself that demonstrates your worthiness of being accepted into grad school can be the most difficult, time-consuming and frustrating part of the whole application process.



## GENERATING IDEAS FOR A PERSONAL STATEMENT

Once you've resigned yourself to describing your life goals in 500 words or less, how do you begin? One way to generate ideas for your personal statement is through the following pre-writing exercise.

Set aside some time to answer the six questions listed below.

How did my work/experience as a (specify job):

1. Heighten my interest in my chosen course of study?
2. Confirm my decision to pursue my future career?
3. Help me learn what *commitment to a job well done* involves?
4. Prove my ability to work under pressure?
5. Teach me how to work without supervision and/or work as a team member?
6. Help me discover what it's like working with the public?

As you answer each question, consider past jobs or experiences (internships, volunteer work, etc.) that have particular meaning for you. It may be helpful to specify more than one job or experience for each question. Maybe your job as a pharmacy technician helped you understand what it's like to work under pressure, for example, whereas your job as an administrative assistant heightened your interest in health care management. Next, ask yourself what you learned through the experience. Perhaps you discovered your ability to thrive under stressful conditions, or you realized how much you enjoy working with the public.

## I REMEMBER A TIME . . .

After you have finished the exercise, look over your answers and select one job/experience that illustrates your strengths/skills/qualifications. Now it is time to turn your attention to your opening paragraph. It is important that this paragraph grabs the reader's attention. One useful technique is to begin with a brief narrative about a meaningful event or an on-the-job incident. Keeping the job or experience that you selected in mind, write a brief narrative about an incident that occurred during the course of that job that highlights your reason for pursuing this degree. Remember, the narrative should reveal something special about you—something memorable to the admissions



committee member who has spent days reading an endless stack of essays written by *other* candidates.

One student of mine, for example, began her essay by explaining what led to her interest in a career as a physician assistant: working at a local homeless shelter.

“One day while working at the shelter, I was introduced to a physician assistant who was in the process of establishing a free clinic for the homeless,” she explained. “After speaking with her, I saw how one person could indeed make a difference in the lives of others. I was so inspired by her actions that I began my own exploration into a career as a physician assistant.”

### THE MIDDLE PARAGRAPHS

It's a good idea to use the body of the essay to explain why you believe grad school is a good choice for you and how you confirmed your decision. Perhaps a professor served as an inspiring role model or your undergraduate classes helped to confirm a decision to pursue research. The following questions may help:

1. How did you become interested in the field and the particular school to which you are applying?
2. Why do you believe grad school is a good choice for you? How have your work experiences helped to confirm your decision?
3. What are your career goals? Is a graduate degree necessary to obtain your dream job?

Use these answers (along with the answers in the pre-writing exercise) to describe what led you to pursue your chosen field. Keep in mind that it is often the information gleaned from the essay and the interview that are the most helpful in allowing your reviewer to make a strong case on your behalf to the entire admissions committee.

One common question asked by many grad school applicants is: Should I use the essay to justify my weaknesses? If I didn't do well on the required tests, for example, should I try to account for my modest scores? Should I explain why I missed a semester of school?

The answers vary. Some feel that an excuse of any kind only emphasizes the negative. Others believe that briefly addressing a weakness is a good idea. As you decide the best option for your particular situation, remember that anything you include in the personal essay is open to questions during the interview.

### IN CONCLUSION

Be sure that your final paragraph is as attention-grabbing and powerful as the first. Restate your strongest points to remind the reader that you are a qualified candidate who is committed to your chosen field and who will be a credit to the school and to the profession. Let your enthusiasm and confidence shine through; this is no time to be modest about your abilities and achievements.

Once you have finished your essay, take a break (ideally at least a day or two, if time permits) from your writing and come back to it later. This way, you'll be able to look at your essay with fresh eyes. Read it aloud, listening to what you have written and making sure that your ideas are clearly expressed. And ask a trusted friend or professor to read through your essay—they can often catch that occasional misspelled word or grammatical error as well as provide invaluable advice and suggestions for improvement. \*

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