

# Writing Personal Statements

## WHAT SHOULD A PERSONAL STATEMENT DO?

A personal statement is a short essay most graduate or professional schools require with your application that explains why you want to be admitted into that program, how your experience makes you a qualified candidate, and how you hope the program would contribute to your life professionally and academically.

Your personal statement is your chance to convince the school you are applying to that you will be an asset to its program. Your transcripts, resume/CV, letters of recommendation, and test scores will also speak to your qualifications, but your personal statement will give the committee reading your materials a sense of you as someone who is motivated, experienced, unique, and excited to achieve goals and to keep learning. In other words, it gives you the chance to elaborate on and describe how you stand out above the other applicants. **What do you have to offer that they don't have?**

Some programs you apply to might simply ask you to "write a personal statement," or something a bit more detailed, like "write a personal statement about your experience, why you would be an asset to the program, and how the program will help you achieve your professional goals." Others might be more detailed still, asking you to respond to several questions in the form of several different essays. Whatever the prompt is, make sure you read it thoroughly several times so you know what you need to do.

## HOW CAN YOU GET STARTED ON YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT?

- Look over your resume or CV. What experiences stick out to you as ones worth explaining to the committee further? Which ones are unique to you that would make you stand out as a candidate? Do some free writing about these to get your ideas going.
- Take a close look at the website for the program you are applying to. Do they give any extra clues as to what they would be looking for in their graduate students? What are their current graduate students studying? What about their faculty?
- Do some free writing about what your career or academic goals are.
- Don't worry about starting at what you think would be the beginning of your essay. Write what comes to you first!

## WHAT ARE SOME COMMON FEATURES OF A PERSONAL STATEMENT?

Here are some common moves writers make in personal statements:

- Try starting your statement with a brief anecdote from your experience (something that inspired you to pursue your field, a significant event that occurred during your experience working or studying in your field, an obstacle you have overcome to get you to this field, etc.).

*Courtesy of the Odegaard Writing & Research Center*

*Adapted from <https://louisville.edu/writingcenter/for-students-1/handouts-and-resources/handouts-1/personal-statements> and <https://ingeniusprep.com/blog/personal-statement-structure/>*

- If you are applying to a lot of programs, try to keep your discussion of the specific program to which you are applying to one paragraph so you can easily change it for each program.
- Some writers choose to order their paragraphs chronologically, but you don't have to do this. You can also try organizing your paragraphs, for example, by theme.

## **STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION**

This is one common way of organizing a personal statement, but there are others. Your own intuition might lead you to diverge from this structure somewhere, and that's okay! Your personal statement is meant to be a reflection of you, and that's as true for the structure as for the content itself.

### **Introduction**

An important step in your personal statement structure is your **introduction**. Obviously, this is the first thing that admissions officers will read, so you have to make a memorable impression with your opening statement and paragraph. Remember that these officers read hundreds of applications — and essays — each day, so it's crucial that you start your story off in a unique way so that you grab and keep their attention.

**Hook:** The hook of your essay is a catchy phrase or sentence that should capture the reader's attention immediately as they start your essay. Your hook can include a quote (for a personal statement, quotes are better suited if they're a dialogue from real life rather than from a famous person), a fact that might startle your audience, or a vivid description of something unique and makes the admissions reader say, "That's interesting!" and want to keep going.

***Example of a hook:** It hit me when I was twelve years old: I had a problem. I hated taking showers.*

**Problems:** Once you've got your hook, you can build on it by outlining the problem or issue that you faced. Because many essays often tell stories of growth in an individual or how the writer worked on something they're passionate about, there's often a conflict that stands in the way. As you work on your personal statement structure, consider whether you faced any obstacle that could go hand-in-hand with your hook.

***Example problem:** No, it had nothing to do with the warm water, fragrant hair products, or the time spent alone, but rather with how I spent my time afterward. For a little over a year, I blow-dried and straightened my hair after every shower, turning what should have been a fifteen minute affair into an hour-long ordeal. Why did I do this? It was a symptom of what I call 'The Curly Hair Teenage Angst Syndrome.'*

**Solution or Thesis:** You've probably heard the word "thesis" when it comes to your English class essay. This is the main point, the purpose of your essay. What do you want to convey to the reader in the next few paragraphs? As you introduce your essay, you want the reader to know that this is a story of personal development or hard work and determination. So, take

advantage of the introduction to provide a picture of exactly what you'll be covering in your response — how did you get to the solution? This gives the admissions officer an idea of what to expect as they continue reading.

**Example thesis:** *My hair was perfectly straight, but I hated it. I hated succumbing to my vanity, continuing to do something that the reasonable part of my brain knew was silly. Deep down I could acknowledge that I was blow-drying my hair only for external approval and that ultimately, my curly hair was just fine by me.*

## Evidence

Once you've introduced the topic or theme of your essay, it's time to get into the more nitty gritty details. Next up in the personal statement structure: the **evidence**. If your story is about your amateur wrestling career or how you founded your own company, it's time to let the admissions officer know about the **specifics**. Because this essay is one of the most effective ways to let the colleges of your choice get a picture of who you are, making careful choices here is very important. You want your personality to shine through by using captivating dialogue, vivid descriptions, and subtle tone techniques. The reader should come out of this experience knowing what makes you unique and different from other candidates.

You don't have to use overly flowery language. The point is clarity and vividness. The more **concrete** your depiction of events, the better the admissions officers can picture it and understand why this topic is important to you. And of course — as cliché as it sounds — **remember to show, not tell.**

**Example evidence:** *As a lifelong artist and self-proclaimed craft aficionado, I decided to bring my cache of crafting supplies to the hospital the next day: **colored-paper, yarn, fabric, beads, and more.** My grandma and I spent hours **weaving bracelets and debating color combinations.** By the time it got dark, my grandma, satisfied from an **unexpectedly eventful day, fell asleep quickly, unbothered by her back pain.** I went home, eager to brainstorm new crafting ideas. I scrolled **through blogs, scoured YouTube compilation videos, and scribbled down crafting plans in my sketchbook.***

## Ending

Once you've fleshed out your plot and descriptions, you've arrived at the final part of understanding the personal statement structure. Just as it's crucial to start your essay in a catchy manner, it's essential that your **ending** is memorable as well. There are a few ways you can end your personal statement. Your conclusion can refer back to your opening paragraph — especially if you started with an anecdote — and talk about it in light of the things you mentioned as part of the evidence. You could choose the expansion route and reflect on a personal or universal truth, and how you'll focus on events or similar situations moving forward. Or you could take it back to your thesis — talk about your growth, and how you've changed or how your life may have shifted.

**Example ending:** *In addition to establishing a meaningful friendship, this experience seeded a mentality that will continue guiding my actions, attitudes, and interactions. It showed me the value of being empathetic and considering others' perspectives. I learned to view my setbacks and predispositions as mere short-term obstacles that can be overcome with a growth mindset — truly believing that anybody can do anything.*

## Coherence (“Flow”)

Once you’ve got your ideas on the page in a more or less structured arrangement, you can start thinking about how those ideas fit together, that is, how they **flow**. When trying to achieve “flow” in your writing — i.e., an overall sense of unity and continuity — it’s important to keep two concepts in mind: **coherence** and **cohesion**.

**Coherence** is the logical organization and clarity of ideas in a piece of writing. A text is considered coherent if it is easy to follow and understand, and if the ideas presented in it are logically connected and related. **Cohesion** refers to the words, phrases, and sentences that a writer uses to show how their ideas are connected. So, cohesion promotes coherence, and the presence of both coherence and cohesion leads to **flow**.

**To make sure your personal statement flows, you should first focus on the big ideas so you can achieve coherence:**

- Start with a clear thesis that summarizes the main points you will be discussing in your personal statement.
- Organize your ideas in a logical manner, with a clear introduction, evidence section, and ending.
- Make sure each sentence and paragraph supports and relates to your thesis, if you have one.
- Use specific examples and anecdotes to illustrate your points and make them more relatable.
- Make sure that your personal statement is focused, clear, and concise so that the reader can easily understand your goals and aspirations.

**Once that’s done, you can focus on the more fine-grained details of cohesion:**

- Use transitional words and phrases to connect your ideas and show how they relate to each other.
- Avoid using overly complex language and jargon that might be difficult for the reader to understand.
- Edit and proofread your statement to ensure it flows smoothly and is free of errors.

## Length and Formatting

The program you are applying to should specify length, formatting, and other technical requirements for your personal statement and other application materials.

## **FINAL TIPS**

- Ask professors, colleagues, friends, family members, or anyone else you feel would be helpful to read your statement and give you feedback. Our tutors at the OWRC are great at that!
- Read your statement out loud after you have written a draft of it so you can catch grammatical errors, or try reading it backwards.
- Make sure your opening paragraph is interesting enough to grab the reader's attention. Many committees are overwhelmed with submissions, so the more you can do to make them want to keep reading, the better!
- Try to stay away from clichés. Reading, for example, that a candidate wants to go to a Master's in Education program because he or she is a "good teacher" does not mean much to a committee, as any candidate could claim this. Try to be more specific and explain what being a good teacher would mean to you.

Personal statements are a challenging genre of writing, but the rewards for writing yours well are certain to be worth it. Don't undersell yourself, don't be afraid to stand out, and don't worry about sounding "too braggy." Your unique combination of knowledge, skills, experiences, and personality mean that you have something to offer that no one else does. Your only job now is to show it!