

Personal Statements for Graduate School

Writing a personal statement can be one of the most important, and challenging, papers you've ever written. It can be awkward and unusual for you to talk about yourself in a way that persuades someone to offer you a spot in graduate school. But this is also a chance for you to separate yourself from every other applicant and talk about why you are one of the best candidates. Take advantage of it and spend some time thinking about what you want to say and how to say it. Remember, a personal statement will usually only be read once by the committee who makes the decisions, so make it count.

Be sure to also note if the application is a general and comprehensive personal statement, which gives you freedom in what you write, or if it asks specific questions. If it does ask for specific responses, be sure to respond directly to these questions in your writing.

Brainstorming:

To begin your essay, brainstorm using the following questions:

- What might help the evaluating committee better understand you? What sets you apart from the other applicants? Who will be applying for the same program?
- Why are you interested in this field? What things have stimulated and reinforced your interest?
- How did you learn about this field (classes, seminars, work-experience)?
- What are your career aspirations?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that need to be explained?
- What skills or personal characteristics do you possess that would enhance your chances for success in this field?
- Why should an admissions committee be interested in you?

Developing a Structure:

One idea about how to begin answering these questions in a structured response, is to think about your personal statement like the following equation:



You want to communicate that your desire to get into that particular school, together with the skills that you've acquired during your undergraduate education, will help you achieve your goals. Now, you may have two different goals: a short-term and a long-term goal. The short-term goal may be to get into that graduate school. The long-term goal is how you will use graduate school to accomplish your career goals. That's what you want to stress in the personal statement. Another way to look at it is that achieving your career goal is dependent upon you getting into that particular school, and your experiences to date make you the perfect candidate to get accepted into that school.

It also can be helpful to look at this as if you were scaling a ladder. Your experiences, skills, and abilities throughout your undergraduate years have led you to the next step – graduate school. Graduate school will further refine these abilities and give you greater skills to prepare you for the next step – a career. At this point, you can see how you want to get to the career step, and so you must communicate to admissions counselors how their particular school, not just graduate school in general, will help you reach that career step. It is very important to show that you have done enough research to know that this school specifically, is the right fit for your aspirations.

A Draft Outline:

Introductory Paragraph:

This is the most important paragraph because you are making your first impression. Try communicating the equation above: how your **desires** to get into that specific graduate school + the **skills** that you've acquired during your undergraduate education and in work, will allow you to achieve your long-term career goals. Sum up your thoughts in the first paragraph. The body of the paper will contain the specific skills and experiences you've accumulated.

You can also try work in an anecdote or example that's unique to you. Some admissions counselors are wary of these, as they may seem cheesy or contrived, but it is essential for you to differentiate yourself from others. Use an example that communicates sincerity such as, "Looking back, one of the reasons why I enjoyed playing with baseball cards so much (and why I ended up with the best players) was that I loved the challenge of bartering with my schoolmates. It's this passion for the challenges of commerce and business communication that propels me towards a career in venture capital."

Body:

This is where you can explain your experiences and qualifications. Admissions counselors will look at this closely to see if you can back up your statements in the first paragraph. Start with the most important and relevant skills. For instance, if applying to medical school, talk about your most recent experience volunteering in a hospital and describe the skills you've acquired there, such as analyzing problems and assisting patients. Wrap it up by restating how this experience reinforces your desire to help people and make their lives better.

Next, move on to class work or a job experience and describe other skills that you've acquired

there. What you're doing is segregating your skills to highlight them in different experiences. For the purpose of a personal statement, you want to make it clear that you have improved specific skills in specific situations. This tells admissions counselors that you'll be able to do the same once you get to graduate school.

Throughout, incorporate how that **particular** graduate school will help you achieve your goals. What is it about that program that you like? If it's a medical school, does it emphasize patient care or emergency room medicine? If it's a business school, is there a particular faculty member who has a career and approach you admire? Displaying this knowledge is critical in assuring admissions counselors that you've done your research and know exactly what you want and how to try to achieve it.

Conclusion:

This last paragraph will leave them with the last impression of you, so be clear and summarize your paper. Reiterate that your **desire + skills = goals** and that the particular graduate school to which you are applying will help you realize those goals. End it with a statement that closes your paper and gives it finality. Doing this will ensure that the admissions counselors will judge you on the merits and the quality of your paper.

Evaluating Your Paper:

After you have written a first, second or third draft of the paper, ask yourself some of these evaluative questions:

- Does the opening paragraph grab your attention?
- Is it a positive portrayal? Is it upbeat and confident?
- Is it an honest portrayal?
- If they have asked specific questions, have you answered them thoroughly?
- Has anything relevant been omitted? Work or academic experience?
- Does the statement provide insight into your character?
- Is it well written? Is the grammar, tone, and verb agreement perfect?
- Are there any typos?

A Final Few Dos:

- Strive for depth rather than breadth. Keep your focus narrowed to one or two key themes, ideas or experiences
- Try to tell the reader something that no other applicant will be able to say. Get creative in your opening remarks.
- Be honest, be yourself, and give insight into what drives you. Worry less about being the “ideal” candidate.
- Address the school’s unique features that interest you.
- Focus on the positives, and try to make the blemishes or deficiencies into positive experiences in their own right.
- Evaluate your experiences, rather than simply describe them. What made these experiences valuable or important to you?
- Proofread carefully for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage and style. Ask a friend to read it and see if anything seems strange or confusing.
- Use readable fonts, typeface, and conventional spacing and margins.

... and Don’ts:

- Avoid repeating information found elsewhere on the application.
- Do not complain about the “system” or your circumstances in life.
- Do not preach to the reader. You can express opinions, but don’t come across fanatical or extreme.
- Do not talk about money as your prime motivation.
- Do not discuss your disadvantaged background or minority status unless you have a compelling reason to do so.
- Do not remind the school how highly ranked they are.
- Do not use boring clichés for your introduction and conclusion.
 - “Allow me to introduce myself, my name is...”
 - “I would like to thank the admissions committee for considering my application.”
 - “This question asks me to discuss...”
 - “It is my sincere hope that you will grant me the opportunity to attend this fine school.”
- Do not use unconventional and gimmicky formats and packaging.
- Do not submit supplemental materials unless they are requested.
- Do not get the name of the school wrong!