



WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT

A personal statement is an important part of your graduate school application—this is where you capture in clear, concise and compelling terms why you should be chosen for the program to which you’re applying.



What is a personal statement?

Graduate schools often require a written statement—often called a “statement of purpose,” “personal statement” or “letter of intent”—as a part of the application. Some require fairly specific information. Others are unstructured, leaving the applicant free to address a wide range of topics. Usually the purpose is to persuade the admissions committee that you are a distinctive applicant who should be selected.

Make sure everything you include supports the overall purpose of the statement, and remember the audience as you draft it. Your readers are professionals in their field, and they are assessing you for fit, distinctions, self-awareness and quality in order to make their decision.

Some do's

- ✓ Read the instructions carefully. In applications with detailed instructions for the personal statement, not following them can hurt your chances of acceptance.
- ✓ Spend some time reflecting. Think. Jot down some notes. What are your strengths? What makes you special?
- ✓ Be real. Readers can pick up if you're not being authentic. Stay focused on who you are and what you bring to the table.

And don'ts

- ✗ Don't use the “life story” approach. Stay focused on the program and why you're an excellent candidate for it.
- ✗ Don't use a catalog of achievements. Approaching your personal statement as an exhaustive list of what you have done tells little about you as a person.
- ✗ Don't lecture the reader. The committee knows a lot about the discipline so don't make unnecessary claims about the field.

What to write in your personal statement

Some programs provide questions or guidance to help you structure your statement. Analyze them. Answer the prompts fully and thoughtfully.

Usually graduate and professional schools are interested in the following topics, although the form of the question(s) and answers may vary.

Your professional and academic purpose in graduate study

This topic should include the big issues and questions you are especially interested in tackling. It also should include how you intend to apply your graduate study in terms of your future career or other professional goals. The purpose portion of your statement is an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge about the program by referring to faculty, curriculum or other program details.

Your area of specialization

Why are you drawn to this area and how does this program align with your interests and goals? This is an opportunity to demonstrate deep contemporary knowledge of the area of study. Learn about your area of interest in detail so that you are able to state your preferences using area-specific language, and be sure it aligns with the program's faculty and curriculum.

How you're uniquely prepared and qualified

Correlate your academic credentials and your extracurricular experience with program criteria to show how they combine to make you a special candidate. Present yourself as a distinct candidate based on your background, interests, goals or passions. Many programs value diversity, so this is also a great place to highlight your background or diverse perspectives.

Why this program? Why now?

Research the school and describe its special appeal to you. Refer to the school's curriculum, philosophy/approach or faculty. Demonstrate that you know what is involved academically, and that your goals align with the details of the program. Also, make it clear why now is the right time for you to begin this study. Your statement should convince the committee that this is your top choice of any program.

Tell them who you are as a person

Remember, your readers know nothing about you. Give them a strong sense of who you are as a person beyond credentials. In many programs, faculty are selecting candidates with whom they will be working closely for three to six years, making this element of your personal statement especially important. Relate your application to personal experience or passion. One detail: This is an opportunity to demonstrate that you will be an active and generous member of the learning community.