

FRAMING YOUR FUTURE 2003
PUTTING YOUR SELF ON PAPER:
A SHORT GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL PERSONAL STATEMENTS
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First Principles:

- Personal Statements (a.k.a “statements of purpose”) provide you with an opportunity *to persuade* the admissions committee to admit you to their institution.
- For programs that do not require a writing sample, your personal statement demonstrates to the committee how well you write.
 - Any student seeking an advanced degree *must write well!*
 - Your ability to write well has a direct bearing on your successful completion of any graduate program coursework and terminal project (for example, a master’s thesis or dissertation) *no matter what discipline or field you study.*
- Over sixty percent of all admissions committees rank the personal statement among the top three pieces of the admissions picture (against recommendations, resume, test scores, and GPA).

Practical Suggestions for Writing the Essay:

- Give yourself *plenty of time* to work on the essay. Allow time for each part of the process: researching your program, brainstorming, drafting the statement, seeking feedback, revising, seeking proofreading help, and finishing up the statement to mail out.
- Customize your essay for *each school* Students who compose just one personal statement for a number of graduate schools do themselves a great disservice.
- Make sure the essay is detailed, specific, and clearly written.
- Demonstrate your sense of *fit* with both the school and your future profession.

Never Do the Following:

- Write an essay longer than the prescribed length. Most personal statements are 500-1000 words.
- Disregard formatting instructions. Nothing says “I don’t care” more than ignoring simple, clearly articulated rules. If they say, one page single-spaced, make it one page single-spaced.
- Bash a scholar who works at the school or who has been a mentor for faculty at the institution you wish to attend.
- Rely on clichés or typical narratives. If you want to be study in an English graduate program, for example, don’t write your personal statement about how much you like to read. Yawn! They’ve heard it already.
- Lie, exaggerate, or *plagiarize*. Graduate programs check essays randomly against paper-mills. If you apply to law school using a plagiarized essay, you’ll get black-listed.

Start by Brainstorming! See the worksheet on the following side:

BRAINSTORMING FOR THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

Use this set of questions to help you compose your personal statement.

What makes the school to which I am applying so special? What does it offer me that no one else does?

As you answer this question, think about resources the institution has (libraries, laboratories, legal journals, and [most critically] faculty) and why you need them.

How would I fit into that particular academic environment? What do I bring to the table?

Only you can tell the admissions committee what contribution you'll make to the institution. All of your life experiences, your education, your particular background and set of skills, will make you a special part of an academic community.

Do I have any interesting or unusual skills that I can contribute to the profession?

If you want to go to graduate school in the humanities, but you've worked forever in computers, or had an undergraduate minor in computer science, it might be nice for the admissions committee to know that.

Why do I want to go to graduate, professional, or law school?

Admissions committees need to know why you want to go to their school. If you're going to a graduate program, do you have a research project that you want to work on with one of *their* faculty? If you're going to professional school, do you want to work in a particular field of business?

What will convince others that I am a good candidate? Do I have any characteristics that would help to make me a good professional?

Make sure that you demonstrate that you are conversant with the methods, intellectual domains, and major figures relevant to your study. But don't name drop just for the sake of it. Make sure you have a good reason to mention a particular figure or theory.

What formative experiences in my life have led me to this path? Can I tell a story that would grab the committee's attention and make them remember me?

Remember, if you choose to tell a personal narrative, make sure it is honest, relevant, and (above all) *not cheesy!*

Is there anything in my record I need to explain?

If you have a semester or a course with a lower GPA than you would have liked, you can use the personal statement to explain that discrepancy. Maybe you changed majors. Maybe you took risks that others wouldn't have done. Maybe your program is more difficult than other undergraduate programs in the same field at other institutions.

Is there anything else about me that I want the committee to know? Is there anything unique, impressive, or distinctive about me that they would like to know?

Electronic Resources

The University of Texas at Austin, University Writing Center

[http://uwc.fac.utexas.edu/media/Handouts/Personal%20Statements%20\(resour.pdf](http://uwc.fac.utexas.edu/media/Handouts/Personal%20Statements%20(resour.pdf)

The Write Place (drop-in tutoring schedule)

<http://www.tcnj.edu/~assistn/ldrop.htm>