

Graduate School: Crafting Your Personal Statement

Before reading this document, make sure to check out the [Career Center's Guide to Choosing a Graduate School Program!](#)

When you're competing against thousands of other applicants with similar GPA's, work experiences, test scores, and recommendations, how do you stand out? One way to polish and differentiate your application is through a stellar personal statement. Your personal statement* is an opportunity to engage the admissions committee and tell them why a graduate program would be a good fit for your skills, personality, and future career goals. Start by writing a draft, then revise, revise, and revise until you have a statement that conveys your desired message well.

*Note personal statements are sometimes called a letter of intent, a statement of purpose, or a statement of interest. These terms are synonymous.

Start Early

- Give yourself plenty of time by thinking about your essays early. The quality of your essay is a very important factor in the admissions process – make sure you have the time to put in your best effort on each graduate school statement.
- Start at least two months before the deadline to give plenty of time for revisions and alternative drafts.
- Research your school's website and, if possible, read sample essays of admitted students to grasp the expectations for your personal statement.

Analyze the Prompt

- Carefully read through the prompt and make sure you understand what is being asked of you.
 - What are the specific things that the admissions committee wants to know about you? What experiences, thoughts, and goals can you convey that fit into the prompt?
 - Be prepared to answer: why this degree? What can you contribute to their program? Why do you want to go to this particular school/program?
- If there are multiple questions in the prompt, be sure to answer all of them thoroughly.
- Discuss your background and experiences that set you apart. Keep it about *you*, not a historical event or social issue.

Organize Your Thoughts and Create a Draft

- Brainstorm about your personality traits and reasons for going to graduate school. From there, you can extract anecdotes and compelling reasons why you are a strong candidate.
- Create an outline of your statement and decide where you want examples to appear. Don't worry about making it perfect at this stage. Mistakes can be fixed in later drafts.
- Develop a flow to your essay by inserting transitions into the beginning and end of paragraphs.

Be Specific

- Flesh out your outline and provide specific examples. The admissions committee should be able to clearly understand your interest in the field and graduate program through the example(s) you use.
- It is often easier to trim words than to add paragraphs, so feel free to write beyond the word limit. Revising can come later to pare down your thoughts.

- Draw from experiences such as, but not limited to, internships, school leadership positions, volunteer work, and other personal anecdotes, to demonstrate your interest in the field
- Show, don't tell! Make sure to back up any assertions about your character with supporting evidence (e.g. I am a strong problem-solver and can confidently lead a team. For example, at work I was assigned to...).

Find a Creative Angle

- Write in your personal style! However, make sure to stay genuine and professional in your writing. A common mistake students make is to get *too creative* and stray from answering the prompt.
 - Starting with an anecdote or weaving a theme throughout the essay, is a good way to add flow and creativity to your personal statement.
 - The opening paragraph can be creative or catchy to draw the reader in, but it doesn't have to be.
 - You don't have to pick a topic that is completely unique, as long as your essay is still infused with reflection, insight, critical thought, and strong writing. For example, many students might choose to write about a formative experience such as studying abroad. If you find a unique angle, pick a specific moment or experience, and dig a bit below the surface, this could be a great topic. However, if you write something more general about how the experience was life changing because it brought you outside of your comfort zone, you might come off as cliché. Your essay topic matters, but the execution of the topic matters equally.

Multiple Revisions

- Always revise your essays and have multiple people read them. Your personal statement must not contain any errors. We suggest having at least three people read your essay:
 1. Advisor/professor: A trusted advisor or professor can make sure your paper is acceptable from an academic viewpoint. Additionally, most professors have gone through graduate school and can provide insight about the process beyond the personal statement.
 2. Friend: A friend can check that the paper is in your personal voice and aligns with your desire to go to graduate school.
 3. Third party/someone you don't know: Use resources such as the Connors Family Learning Center, Online Writing Lab (OWL), and the Career Center advisors! Having a third party read your application is a great way to get another perspective on your essay. Have him/her tell you their first impression to see if it aligns with your intended message.
- Read your essay out loud. Doing this will help you find awkward wording in your essay and ensure that the document is in your own voice. Check to make sure you vary the beginning of your sentence structure, and don't start too many sentences with "I." Utilize transition words or phrases to vary your "I" statements.
- Make sure your personal statement demonstrates strong critical thinking, reflection, and writing skills.
- Keep your writing concise and simple. Using large words for the sake of sounding intelligent often comes across as pretentious rather than experienced.
- For law school personal statements, stay away from legal terms and jargon. If you get the technicalities wrong, it may reflect poorly on your application.
- After revising, leave the paper alone for a couple days and focus on other work. Come back with a fresh pair of eyes and see if the paper truly conveys why you want to attend the specific graduate program.

Tailor Your Personal Statement to be School-Specific

- Do NOT re-use the same personal statement for every school you are applying to. While you do not have to write an entirely new statement for each school, make sure you read each prompt carefully and tailor your goals and examples to the specific program to which you are applying.
- In most personal statements, you'll want to mention why you are specifically interested in the program or school. Do your research to be able to talk about particular classes, professor, initiatives, research opportunities, practicum placements, etc. Law schools typically ask this as a separate question on the application, so be sure to read each essay prompt carefully.