

How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate School

Dr. Jacqueline King
Assistant Director, MARC U*STAR

Ivanna Abreu
Coordinator, Meyerhoff Scholars Program



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What is a Personal Statement?

- First non-numerical introduction to you, the way you think, and to the way you express yourself
- A sample of your writing skills
- A reflection of your personality and your intellect
- Sell yourself, as you would in a job interview
- Preparation and forethought are essential

Tell A Story

- Be exciting, not boring
- Remember that Admissions Officers read hundreds of applications

The Ten Commandments of Personal Statements
- Adapted to specific standards
- Read and re-read to the prompt

Write Yourself

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The Two Types of Personal Statements

- General/comprehensive
- Responses to specific questions
- Read and respond to the prompt

Know Yourself

- Do some self-reflection before writing
- Talk to people who know you well about what they find interesting or exciting about your life story
- Make a list
- Set yourself apart

Questions to Ask Yourself Prior to Writing: The W's

- What is special, unique, distinctive or impressive about your life story? Where did you come from? Where are you going?
- When did you originally become interested in this field and what have you since learned about it? (An article, and inspirational professor, a personal experience or observation...)
- How have you learned about this field- readings, classes, work experiences, people in the field, in your life?
- Who inspired you?
- Where were you inspired?
- Why was this moment important?
- What related work and/or research experiences have contributed to your personal growth?
- What are your career goals?

Pre-writing Questions: Don't Put Your Resume in Prose

- Don't recite information that can be found elsewhere in your application (GPA, GRE scores, etc.)
- Are there any gaps in your academic record that you should explain? Stay positive. Don't dwell on negative.
- Have you overcome any obstacles or hardships?
- What personal characteristics do you possess that are relevant to your profession (integrity, compassion, persistence...)?
- What skills do you possess? (computer, lab techniques, languages, instruments, minors and certificates, extra-curricular leadership roles)
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school than other applicants?
- Why is this school a good match for your research/career interests?

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Write a Gripping Opening Paragraph

- Grab and hold the reader's interest
- Demonstrate your abilities as a writer
- Tell who you are up front

Not to Include

• accomplishments during high school (unless relevant)
• overly controversial subjects
• overly negative information
• bragging about your accomplishments
• creative or silly
• formal writing
• clichés
• typos

Write a Conclusive Final Paragraph

- Your conclusion should be conclusive
- You should circle back, tie up any loose ends, and not introduce any new ideas

What Not to Include

- References to accomplishments during high school or earlier (unless relevant)
- Don't mention potentially controversial subjects
- Don't include irrelevant information
- Don't over-exaggerate your accomplishments
- Avoid being overly-creative or silly
- Remember, this is formal writing
 - no contractions
 - write-out acronyms

What to Include

- Be selective
 - Maintain a positive tone
 - Be specific
 - Express yourself clearly
 - Adhere to stated word limits and follow directions
 - TYPE and PROOFREAD your essay carefully
 - Be honest- you will be asked about this information in person
 - Provide more than a recitation of information available elsewhere in the application
 - Avoid obvious cliches. Ex: A medical school applicant who writes that he is good at science and wants to help other people is not expressing an original perspective.
- *** Tailor the writing to the specific program; mention the faculty with whom you'd like to work and why, and cite their recent work.

**This is where you may want to
add info about research
experience**

- Research experience
- Your contribution to the project
- Skills developed
- Bigger picture- relevance of research
- Mention name of lab/organization and project manager
- Challenges faced
- Where work is now

Preparatory Questionnaire

(to give to individuals who know you and whose judgment you value, e.g., advisor/faculty member)

What do you think is most important for the admissions committee to know about me?

What do you regard as most unusual, distinctive, unique, and or impressive about me?

Are you aware of any events or experiences in my background that might be of particular interest to those considering my application to graduate school?

Are there any special qualities or skills that I possess that tend to make you think I would be successful in graduate school and/or the profession to which I aspire?

“1 Conversation is Worth 2 Drafts”

Evaluative Questionnaire (to give to reader along with your draft):

1. Did my opening paragraph capture your attention?
2. Did you find the statement as a whole to be interesting?
3. Did you find it to be well written?
4. Did it seem positive, upbeat?
5. Did it sound like me?
6. Do you regard it as an honest and forthright presentation of who I am?
7. Did it seem to answer the question(s)?
8. Can you think of anything relevant that I might have omitted?
9. Is there material within the statement that seems inappropriate?
10. Did you gain any insight about me from reading this?
11. Did you notice any typos or other errors?
12. Do you think the statement has in any way distinguished me from other applicants?
13. Do you think my application is logical?

The Inside Perspective

Some quotes from Graduate School Directors of Admission:

“We want to know what students do with their free time, what makes them tick outside of work hours, and whether they’ve demonstrated the ability to work with and help others.”

“The best essays that I’ve read are from people who’ve said they’ve learned a lot about themselves through this application process.”

“You want to come alive off the page and write the story that only you can write.”

“It doesn’t help me to know the applicant has won 3,000 awards (that can be indicated elsewhere in the application); I want to see something about how the applicant thinks.”

In Conclusion...

- First impression of you and your goals...make it count!
- Reflect and remember you are telling an strategic story
- Expect 4-8 drafts...dedicate time
- Choose readers wisely & selectively

Questions?

Thank you!

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