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Writing Your Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School

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Introduction

What is a Personal Statement?

- Tells a story about who you are personally, professionally, and academically
- Gives the school a look into the way you think and express yourself

Types of Personal Statements / Graduate Admission Essays

General / Comprehensive: Allows you to write openly with few specific requirements for the subject matter

Specific Essays: Given specific questions to answer. *Goal*: respond persuasively to hold reader's interest

Keys to Writing Your Essay

- Understand yourself
- Tell a story
- Importance of the opening paragraph
- Who are you?
- Background check
- What not to include

Understand Yourself

Take an analytical look at yourself – reflection and self-examination

- What sets you apart from others?

Tell a Story and Find an Angle

- Stick to the facts
- Make yourself memorable, but in a positive way
- Be interesting, insightful, and appropriately revealing
- Write a drama – describe your challenges and difficulties – without dwelling on the negative
- Find a “hook” to your story that makes you unique

Importance of the Opening Paragraph

- Usually most important to the essay
- Need to grab reader's attention
- Framework – introduce the “drama,” the “hook” or elements most relevant to your story

Examples of Good Opening Paragraphs

Do not use these paragraphs as a comparison to your own. Use them as examples of unusual circumstances. You do not need to jump out of an airplane or swordfighter to be a successful candidate for graduate school.

“At first glance, the most remarkable thing about me might seem to be the fact that I have the temerity to apply to law school in the first place.”

“ I am a 26-year-old woman who has spent much of the past eight years engaged in such unusual activities as jumping out of airplanes, being a test parachutist, earning a pilot’s license, and learning how to survive behind enemy lines.”

“Two days before taking my exam in October, I received devastating news that turned my world upside down: my mother, who was living a continent away from me in New York, was diagnosed with cancer.”

“Not every applicant has supported himself for five-and-a-half years jousting and sword fighting in a Las Vegas show.”

Who are you?

- Discuss your background and experiences
- How are you different from other applicants?
- Follow up with interests and exposure to the field (suggesting that you have a realistic perception of the field)
- Refer to classes, seminars, research, books, and discussions with those in the field

Background Check

Review your experiences, events, and achievements. Begin by utilizing the following exercise to help you remember and think about your history:

Exercise: List 10 things of which you are proud

- Use the Insight Questionnaire (page 5) to gain insight from others – professors, co-workers, friends, and family
- Don’t miss relevant details (talk to others)

What NOT to Include

No high school information – unless extraordinary achievements or traumatic events which impacted your career plans

No controversial subjects – religion, politics, etc

Be selective with your information – don’t write about all achievements – highlight those that are most relevant

TIPS

- What you say and how you say it – most important
- Be sure to answer any specific questions asked
- When appropriate, find an angle and tell a story about yourself
- Often useful to include material that is “personal” in nature
- Adhere to word and page limits
- Avoid obvious clichés – “I’m good in science and want to help people” – not original
- Do not write what you think the school wants to hear – write honestly
- NO spelling or grammatical errors and NO sexist language
- Why are you applying to this particular school? Research and prepare to answer

Think About This...

If you had 5 minutes to answer the question, “what’s most important for us to know about you?” - What would you say to an admissions committee?

- This question will help you begin to prepare an effective personal statement
- Refer to the Personal Statement Questions (page 4)
- When you have a “final” draft – ask others to read it and give you feedback (use the Feedback Request Form – page 7)

Personal Statement Questions

1. What is special or unique about you or your life story?
 - Think about 10 things that are most unusual about you as a person
2. What are your personal characteristics, skills, or unusual obstacles that you had to overcome?
3. When did you become interested in your field and what were you doing when you decided? (Try to paint a picture in words if you can)
4. How have you learned about this field? (Write about classes, articles, seminars, work, or other experiences)
5. Who are your favorite writers, professors, researchers, etc.? What is the most important book, play, article, or film and how has it influenced you? What is the single most important concept you learned in college?
6. What are your short and long term career goals? How will a graduate education facilitate those plans?
7. What are your biggest accomplishments to date?
 - Start by making a list of the things of which you are proud
8. Research: Was your research published? What role did you play in the research? Describe the hypothesis, findings. What was the purpose of the research? What did you really learn (about yourself, working with others)?
9. Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain?
10. Why might you be a stronger candidate in your program of study than other applicants?

INSIGHT QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questions are to assist me in writing my personal statement. I want to be sure to include all relevant data about myself, so I am soliciting information from individuals who know me and whose judgment I value. Thank you for your help.

I am interested in studying:

I am applying to the following graduate school(s):

1. What do you think is important for the admissions committee to know about me?
2. What do you regard as unusual, distinctive, unique, or impressive about me (based on our association)?
3. 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?
4. 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?

FEEDBACK REQUEST FORM

I have composed the attached personal statement(s) for submission to graduate school. If you could take some time to read what I have written and answer the following questions, I would greatly appreciate your perspective.

1. Did my opening paragraph and the statement as a whole capture your attention and seem interesting?
2. Did you find it to be well written?
3. Did it seem to be positive as well as an honest presentation of who I am?
4. Did it seem to answer the question(s), if applicable?
5. Is there anything relevant that I may have omitted?
6. Is there material within the statement that seems inappropriate?
7. Did you gain any insight about me from reading this?
8. Do you think the statement distinguishes me from other applicants?
9. What is your overall impression?