

WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT

Many graduate school programs, scholarship and internship applications request candidates to write a personal essay. Specific questions may be provided for you to answer, or in some cases you will have the freedom to write about the topic of your choice. The personal essay serves as a writing sample and a chance to present yourself as an individual. It should be something that only you could have written.

How to Focus Your Essay

Use the *Questions to Ask Yourself Before Writing Your Personal Statement* section of this guide to help you determine how to best approach the story you have to tell.

You can focus your essay to:

- Relate a personal anecdote
- Connect your past, present and future
- Present a distinct point of view
- Relate your goals
- Describe unique life experiences
- Explain why you chose this particular school or opportunity
- Illustrate your commitment to a cause

Questions to Ask Yourself Before Writing a Personal Statement

Questions about your individuality:

- Does any attribute, quality, or skill distinguish me from everyone else? How did I develop this attribute?
- What is my strongest, most unwavering personality trait?
- What are my favorite books, movies, and artwork? Have these influenced my life in a meaningful way?
- What was the most difficult time in my life, and why? How did my perspective on life change as a result?
- Have I ever struggled for something and succeeded? What made me successful?
- Have I ever struggled for something and failed? How did I respond?
- Have I experienced an epiphany, as if my eyes became open to something I was previously blind to?
- How would my friends describe me? What would they write about if they were writing my essay for me?
- How have I changed/grown over the years? What caused these changes? How have they affected me?
- Are there obstacles that I had to overcome and how have I dealt with these difficulties from my past?
- Who has influenced me over the years (e.g. parent, sibling, teacher, or friend) and in what way have they influenced me?
- What are my career goals? Why did I choose this career path?
- Why might I be a stronger candidate than others? What sets me apart from other candidates? Given a stack of similar applications, why should a committee choose me?
- What are my dreams for the future? When I look back on my life in thirty years, what would it take for me to consider my life successful? What people, things, and accomplishments do I need? How does this particular program/position fit into my plans for the future?

Questions about your field of study:

- When did I become interested in my field of study? Why am I interested in my field of study?
- What experiences confirmed that this is what I really want to study?
- What have I learned about my subject of interest?
- How has my discipline shaped me? What has my field of study taught me about myself?
- What am I most passionate about relative to my field? What special interests do I have within my chosen field?

Questions about your academic record:

- Are there gaps or inconsistencies on my records (transcript and/or exam scores) that I can explain?
- Are there any awards, recognitions, or honors that I have received that are worth mentioning?

Questions about your non-academic experiences:

- What internships and/or jobs have I had in the past? How are these experiences related to my field of interest? What have I learned from these experiences? What skills have I acquired?
- What extracurricular activities have I participated in and how do they relate to my professional goals?
- What have I done outside of the classroom that demonstrates qualities sought after by universities or employers? Of these, which means the most to me?
- What are my most important campus and community activities? Why did I join these? What did I contribute?

Questions about the application readers and institution:

- What are the most compelling reasons for a committee to be interested in me?
- Why am I applying to this program? This institution?
- How will attending this graduate school/maintaining this internship/scholarship help me grow as an individual and prepare me for my career?
- What specific features attract me to the program? How do the qualities I bring make for a good match?

Other Resources to Help You Discover What to Write About:

- Ask for Help from Parents, Friends, Colleagues, etc. If you struggle to describe yourself and your personality traits do not automatically leap to mind, ask your friends, relatives or colleagues to write a list of your five most salient personality traits. Ask why they chose the ones they did. If an image of your personality begins to emerge, consider life experiences that could illustrate these particular traits.
- Consider your Childhood. While admissions officers are not interested in reading about your childhood and are more interested in the last 2-4 years of your life, you might consider events of your childhood that inspired the interests you have today. Interests that began in childhood may be the most defining parts of your life. For instance, if you were interested in math since an early age and now want to study medicine, you might incorporate this into your medical school admissions essay. Analyze the reasons for your interests and how they were shaped from your upbringing.
- Consider your Role Models. Is there someone who has been a role model to you? You may want to incorporate a discussion of that person and their admirable traits into the essay. Many people get off track when using this theme and write about the role model and forget about themselves. Remember to keep the focus of the essay on how this person impacted you, how you have been influenced by them.
- Goal Determination. Life is short. Why do you want to spend 2-6 years of your life at a particular college, graduate school, or professional school? How is the degree necessary to the fulfillment of your goals? When considering goals, think broadly; few people would be satisfied with just a career. How else will your education fit your needs and lead you to a fulfilling life?

Because your personal statement can have an impact on your acceptance or rejection, it is important that you leave a valuable impression on the admissions committee. Your job is to let the reader know why you should be the one that is accepted. After answering the questions described above, your next step is to use this information and create an organized and structured essay. Remember that the only way to write a unique essay is to have experiences that support whatever topic you come up with.

Tips on Writing Your Personal Statement

It is important to start early and plan to spend time developing and rewriting your essay multiple times.

- If you are to respond to specific questions on a form provided by the program, make a photocopy to use as a draft. Re-type on the original for a clean and error-free submission.
- Before you begin to write, make a list of points you would like to cover in your essay. Considering your educational and career goals, select items from your list that reflect experience, skills and interests that relate.
- Outline the main points you want to make and in what order. Have a beginning, middle and end to your essay. If you have any questions or problems with structuring your writing, BU's [Writing Center](#), located in LN 1209 is a great resource. They will not proof your essay, but will help you to create a well-written document and will teach you how to identify and correct your own errors.
- Focus on one significant experience, or a maximum of 2 or 3 issues. An effective personal statement is one that shows you have analyzed and carefully considered a few of your major life experiences and how they relate to your preparation for study in the field.
- Unite your essay and give it direction by having a theme or thesis. The thesis is the main point you want to communicate. Have a consistent story line.
- Use concrete examples from your life experience to support your thesis and distinguish yourself from other applicants.
- Write about what interests you. You are more likely to create a successful essay if you are excited about your topic.
- Start your essay with an attention grabbing lead – anecdote, question, or engaging description of a scene.
- Vary your sentences and use transitions. The best essays contain a variety of sentence lengths and a good transition flows from the natural thought progression of your argument.
- Be positive and upbeat.
- Be honest about your ambitions, accomplishments, and plans.
- Write simply, clearly and succinctly. Rely on nouns and action verbs, not adjectives and adverbs, to carry your story.
- Make it easy to read and interesting for the readers, both with writing style and appearance.
- End your essay with a conclusion that refers back to your lead without restating your thesis verbatim.
- Utilize anybody who is willing to review your statement and offer feedback, especially people who are in your specific field.
- Edit, edit, edit. Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite.
- Make sure your final product has perfect spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Your first draft will not be your final copy; you will edit and rewrite several times. Strive for an honest, thoughtful essay that will give the reader a sense of who you are and why you want to pursue this particular program at this particular institution or organization. Remember, the reader does not know you.

Do's

- Address the questions/assignment given.
- Develop paragraphs purposefully, be specific and make every word count.
- Use action verbs and numbers to indicate the scope of your responsibility.
- Back up claims with facts/evidence.
- If discussing a problem or deficit, do not apologize or sound defensive. State the facts but do not whine then move on to positive statements about what you learned and how you grew from that experience.
- Use simple sentences; do not try to sound “fancy.”
- Let your personality come through your writing.
- Demonstrate your commitment to the field.
- Let them know why you picked them.

Don'ts

- Try to impress the readers by using words that are not a part of your normal vocabulary or writing.
- Overstate accomplishments.
- Be cute, flippant, profane, or glib.
- Use jargon, slang, unusual abbreviations, flowery language, or cluttered imagery.
- Include information that does not support your thesis.
- Start your essay with, “I was born in...,” or, “My parents came from...”
- Write an autobiography, itinerary, or résumé in prose.
- Be afraid to start over if the essay just isn't working or doesn't answer the question.
- Rely exclusively on your computer to check your spelling.
- Give excuses for your low GPA or test scores.
- Be negative.
- Make things up.
- Overuse “I.”
- Over-elaborate, or be too brief or superficial.

Additional Resources in the Fleishman Center for Career and Professional Development

For further assistance with writing your personal statement, feel free to come to Fleishman Center and check out one of the following books:

Peterson's How to Write the Perfect Personal Statement

Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice

Be sure to bring your Binghamton University ID when checking out books. The Fleishman Center has an overnight checkout policy for our library books in order to benefit the optimal amount of students.