



Writing a Personal Statement

Much like a cover letter for a job interview, a personal statement is an essay by the applicant for a selection committee to showcase their worthiness for the program they are applying for. Written like a comprehensive-narrative essay, a personal statement outlines the significant aspects of a student's academic and personal history in a style that the committee would find unique and impressive, while carrying conviction.

However, drafting an essay that contains all of the above aspects can be tricky. The admissions' committees for graduate schools, in specific, are looking to not only know what about the program interests you, but what you will bring to the table in terms of research, seminar discussions, conferences, and other collaborative opportunities. For this reason, having a concrete plan and strong motivation is pivotal in the drafting of a personal statement.

Before Writing

- It is important to understand that personal statements are a process, because of which, starting early and giving yourself ample time to brainstorm effectively and take a good stock of your skills and abilities can be a life saver.
- Take active interest in researching about the program and school you're applying to as much as you can before you begin the essay. In doing so, you might be required to contact the program advisors and professors you're interested in working with. Make sure you have read all details listed by the school's website and are asking questions that haven't been answered on the program's website or the school's guidelines.
- Let the personal statement question guide your brainstorming process. Most schools demand either of the two kinds of personal statements given below.
 1. Known as the general personal statement question, the prompt for such personal statement essays is the generic "write a personal statement describing your experiences and goals".
 2. Then there is the specific prompt, asking several questions such as, "Explain why you should be considered for the program," or "Discuss the accomplishments, events, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and helped shape your motivation to apply for this program. Also discuss in detail your academic preparation for the program so far."



Once you've understood what kind of personal statement to write, start the brainstorming process by dividing it into sections such as personal accomplishments (distinct life incidents that helped shape or motivate your desire to pursue the subject of your choice; talents, interests, attributes that make you special); academic accomplishments/experiences (soft and hard skills, achievements, projects, course descriptions, etc.); community experience (extra-curricular involvement, volunteer work, etc.), and professional experience (work experience – how it is relevant to or has influenced your career goals; soft and hard skills gained). In addition, think of something (an incident, decision, hardship or epiphany, etc.) that helps explain the motivation and inspiration for your choice of study/career, and is, in a way, the “central theme” running through your essay.

To make the most of the brainstorming process, you might want to devote several hours to days, to each section as you reflect upon, recall, and record the accumulated experiences in each area. Another way to expedite the brainstorming process is by discussing your experiences in these areas with someone who can provide constructive feedback.

While Writing

As you begin writing the first draft of your essay, go the extra mile by doing another warm-up exercise and consider the answers to the following questions:

- What is that unique or impressive angle (could be an obstacle you overcame or a hardship that taught life-changing lessons) to your life experiences that lend intrigue to your overall essay?
- How does this angle/incident/theme connect to your field of interest? Are there any gaps in your academic record that you would want to explain? (If there's no connection between your chosen program and previous academic record or you switched fields, be honest, and discuss what motivated you to head in that particular direction).
- What are the most compelling reasons for the committee to consider you and offer you admission? What are some of the most important things they should know about you?
- How would you sum up your short and long-term goals in concrete language? How do they relate to the program you're applying for?
- Why have you chosen this program? What are some of the features of this program that align with your own personal and professional goals or targets?
- When writing the first paragraph, use the anecdote/theme you've selected from the brainstorming process in your essay.



Be careful not to merely list your admirable traits/skills for the committee, walk them through your experiences that demonstrate how you acquired these qualities, and let your experiences speak for themselves.

Example:

“In the next few weeks, I worked to bring this incident to the administration’s attention, reaching out to professors, and the head of the society in question. This culminated in the organization of an event that included me and other students talking about transgender women who had been murdered in the recent past, and why media depictions of transgender people needed to be responsible, to not perpetuate harmful stereotypes.”

In the above excerpt, an example of a particular incident is used in order to highlight the student’s inclination towards activism. This is important here as the example illustrates **how** the student manifests ideals of activism in their life as opposed to merely stating that they are an activist.

Similarly, when talking about a course that you took in college, don’t merely mention the course and what you had to do in it but what about it might have inspired you, resonated with you and which you perhaps integrated with further projects.

Example:

Gayatri Spivak and David Harvey were seminal in my understanding of the urban city, Karachi in the course, ‘Introduction to Urban Studies’. During the course, I conducted extensive research which helped me hone my academic writing and research skills.

Corrected version:

I was made privy to two specific ideas through my urban studies course, Introduction to Urban Studies: “who has the right to the city?” (David Harvey) and “what does it mean to live in alterity, or as ‘the other’?” (Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler). It is these ideas that propelled my senior year thesis which was grounded in these ideas, albeit with a different lens. I spent several days with riders employed by Careem and Bykea, and was made aware of the myriad of problems they face. These problems were rooted in factors like the climate of the city, corporate violence, and even the sheer size of Karachi.”

In this corrected version, the academic ideas which inspired the writer are mentioned and how they culminated into a thesis project. Additionally, an explanation of what kind of research was undertaken which further demonstrate how her understanding of the course morphed into a thesis project are given, as well as demonstrate a deeper understanding and ability to apply her learnings from the course.



Once you're done with the introduction and body paragraphs, you have to seam it all, and essentially come full circle by tying your skills with your aspirations for graduate school, in the conclusion

Example:

[Introductory paragraph]

Karachi experiences many spatial and social “frictions” (Tim Cresswell). But in a city that has a population of 15 million, every single person experiences different frictions, and experiences them differently. Whether it’s due to their socioeconomic class, gender, sexuality, or ethnicity, or the area of the city they live in, people’s lived experiences are wildly divergent.

[Concluding paragraph]

Both my personal life and my academic life have converged over the last four years, teaching me that my future is inextricably tied to Karachi, its urban space, and marginal experiences in the city. I have also realized that community building, grassroots organization, social activism, and academia are central to making our cities and our homes more livable. Not just for some people, but for everyone. This is the work that I hope to continue if I receive the Fulbright Scholarship in Anthropology.

In the above example, the first paragraph highlights that each individual residing in a metropolis such as Karachi has unique experiences with respect to their location in the world. This particular theme comes full circle in the last paragraph where the student ties this in with both, her motivations for graduate school and future aspirations.

After Writing

Read your draft several times to ensure there’s logical progression and cohesion amongst all the points your essay is making.

Proofreading and Revision

As stressed before, personal statements are works in progress and for this reason, there’s always room for changes and improvement. Therefore, make sure to get another person to review it. it’s always advisable to get a fresh pair of eyes to highlight areas of improvement.

Provided below are some proofreading and revision tips for an effective personal statement.

- 1- Avoid spelling, punctuation, grammatical and formatting errors as well as redundancy. Make sure to use a standard font and adequate spacing, and proofread your essay after a day or two so you’re looking at it with a fresh pair of eyes, and repair any mistakes that might have missed your attention the first time.



- 2- Use the active voice as much as you can.
- 3- Introduce variety to your sentences by using both short and long sentences. Keep short sentences to announce important points or thoughts that need stressing.
- 4- Avoid the overuse of jargon and replacing common words with uncommon ones from a thesaurus. Focus on using a sincere and upbeat tone, and adopt a straightforward style.
- 5- Do not fill your essay with too many things competing for the readers' attention. Thoughtfully select a handful of traits and experiences that coincide with your career goals naturally.
- 6- Avoid making up details and stories that lack conviction. Be yourself!