

Tips for Writing Personal Statements

(See page 3 for an expert's tips!)

A student's statement must express who they are. The person who is reading the statement has already seen the applicant's grades and resume, meaning that they approach the statement with an idea in their head of whether the student is a strong candidate for their program. Consequently, a student's statement must serve a number of purposes:

1. The statement is a *picture* of who the student is. The reader expects to see who the applicant is, rather than be told who they are. They have already read the resume, so the student should avoid lists of accomplishments. Rather than saying "I am a strong leader" the student should describe a time or an event that illustrates his/her leadership abilities. The statement should read like a story by keeping the reader's attention and illustrating a theme.
2. The statement is an indication of the applicant's priorities. Prior to writing, the student should explore what's important to them and why. What personal characteristics (i.e. integrity, compassion, persistence) do they possess that would improve their prospects for success in the program they are applying for? Again, grades, the resume, and letters of recommendation will show whether the student is capable of getting the job done. The purpose of the statement, then, is to show why the applicant is a good, ethical, hard-working, etc. person and thus a better candidate than the next guy.
3. This is the applicant's invitation to the reader to get to know him/her. In many cases, the personal statement serves as an interview. Thus the student should strive to be the person they themselves would want to hire- capable, confident, and intelligent. However, experienced readers are well aware when the applicant writes what they *think* committees want to hear and see right through this. Instead, the student should write truthfully with the idea in mind that this is their only interview- the goal is to be the very best version of themselves that they can be authentically.

Many students need help with not only the content but also the format of the personal statement.

Structure

1. The key element to a strong personal statement is a strong focus or theme. This is generally an abstract quality (i.e. a desire to help others). While the idea is probably not unique, the student needs to articulate it in a unique way. This they generally do through an anecdote depicted in the introductory paragraph that describes a turning point in their life. This moment they then relate to other aspects of their life, explaining how they learned from this experience and how it makes them a strong candidate for whatever they are applying for. The student should pick an event or quality that they will be able to describe and analyze within the confines of the paper.
2. Use a frame. This means that the student has an introduction where they describe the event, or in the case of fellowships describe why the program they have selected is the best for them. Applicant's should then use body paragraphs to support the lesson they

learned/quality they embodied/why this program is the best, in relationship to other aspects of their life. Students should be aware of the prompt provided by the program they're applying to and address these issues in the body paragraphs accordingly. Then in the conclusion the student needs to bring everything together, tying in the introduction.

3. Check for transitions. Make sure that the student has a clear train of thought. Ensure that the last sentence of every paragraph logically leads to the topic sentence of your next paragraph. Remind students that the theme of their essay should clearly relate to each new paragraph and be incorporated therein.

4. Check to see that the student uses a logical order to ensure coherence and comprehension. Many students follow a chronological order, but they can also order ideas from most to least important, or block paragraphs thematically (i.e. extracurricular activities, related coursework, etc.). Explain to students why the order of their paragraphs works or doesn't so that they can understand how to fix the problem.

Style

1. The student needs to have perfect punctuation and grammar. No typos! Urge students to seek multiple editors to review drafts of their statement.

2. Make sure the student is explicit and doesn't make assumptions about their audience. Tell the student to ask themselves "so what, why does this idea matter?" for every sentence they write. Does the sentence they just wrote further their focus and relate to their theme? At the same time, they should avoid wordiness. Remind the student that simplicity is elegant. The statement should be clear but concise!

Finally, remind the student to start early and leave themselves plenty of time for multiple drafts! This is not the time to be lazy!

Suggest to students that they visit the resources below, they offer many excellent tips for writing personal statements!

For Graduate and Professional Schools

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_perstate.html

http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/personal_statement.shtml

<http://www.cmu.edu/hpp/achieve/pstips.html>

<http://www.xula.edu/premed/PMInfo/a.AppSeries/App07EssayGuide.htm>

For Fellowships

<http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/FS/personal.pdf>

An Expert's Tips to Personal Statements

Definition of a Personal Statement

Mary Hale Tolar¹

Deputy Executive Secretary, Truman Scholarship Foundation

A personal statement is:

- **A picture.** Your personal essay should produce a picture of you as a person, a student, a potential scholarship winner, and (looking into the future) a former scholarship recipient.
- **An invitation.** The reader must be invited to get to know you, personally. Bridge the assumed distance of strangers. Make your reader welcome.
- **An indication of your priorities and judgement.** What you choose to say in your statement tells the committee what your priorities are. What you say, and how you say it, is crucial.
- **A story, or more precisely, your story.** Everyone has a story to tell, but we are not all natural storytellers. If you are like most people, your life lacks inherent drama. This is when serious self-reflection, conversation with friends, family, and mentors, and permission to be creative come in handy.

A personal statement is not:

- **An academic paper with you as the subject.** The papers you write for class are typically designed to interpret data, reflect research, analyze events or reading—all at some distance. We are taught to eliminate the “I” from our academic writing. In a personal statement your goal is to close the distance between you and the reader. You must engage on a different, more personal level that you have been trained to in college.
- **A resume in narrative form.** An essay that reads like a resume of accomplishments and goals tells the reader nothing that they could not glean from the rest of the application. It reveals little about the candidate, and is a wasted opportunity.
- **A journal entry.** While you may draw on experiences or observations captured in your personal journal, your essay should not read like a diary. Share what is relevant, using these experiences to give a helpful context for your story. And include only what you are comfortable sharing—be prepared to discuss at an interview what you include.
- **A plea of justification for the scholarship.** This is not an invitation to “make your case.” Defending an assertion that you are more deserving of the scholarship than other candidates is a wasted effort—you’ve likely just accomplished the opposite.

¹

<http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/FS/personal.pdf>