

Personal Statement Guide

What is a personal statement?

The personal statement, also referred to as the statement of purpose, is a written statement briefly describing your personal and academic background and your interest in pursuing a graduate degree. The goal of the personal statement is to allow the admissions committee a chance to better understand your personal background, academic, work and internship experience, academic and research interests, and your overall fit with their program. The statement is one of the most important documents in your graduate school application and it's the one you have the most control over. Requirements will vary for each graduate program you apply to, so be sure to carefully read directions for each application.

What is the purpose of a personal statement?

The personal statement allows the admissions committee a chance to learn more about you in order to make an admissions decision. Admissions committees carefully consider a number of materials to decide which candidates are right for their programs. Academic departments need to better understand each applicant beyond their application, transcripts, standardized test scores, letters of recommendation and writing samples. They are interested in better understanding your interests in pursuing a graduate degree and how you fit into their graduate program. The personal statement is your chance to “talk” directly to the admissions committee, to exhibit your desire to obtain a graduate degree at their institution, and to demonstrate your knowledge of that particular program. This is your chance to distinguish yourself from the other top candidates. The goal of the personal statement is to highlight your experience and your ability to clearly express your thoughts and interests. Remember your P's: your statement should be Personal, Persuasive, Positive, and Proofread.

How long should my personal statement be?

The length of your personal statement will vary based on each program's requirements. Directions for the personal statement or essay will be specified along with the other requirements for admission. Be sure to thoroughly read the instructions and follow the content and page requirements. In cases where the length is not specified 2 pages or 1200 words is a general rule of thumb. Remember you will also be submitting your resume or CV so if you do not have enough space to talk about all of your experiences allow your CV to fill-in.

What is included in the personal statement?

Specific requirements will vary for each graduate program. Be sure to read the instructions for each application before writing your personal statement. In general the personal statement should do two things: tell the admissions committee why you are right for the program and why the program is right for you. The statement should be a personal narrative describing your academic interests and background, the ways you have prepared yourself for graduate school, your personal background, professional goals, and reasons why you want to attend a particular program. Your essay should be concise, clearly organized, and written in a personal yet professional manner.

10 Helpful Tips

Plan and produce your personal statement as carefully as you would a final paper. The following tips will help you produce an effective personal statement.

1. Before you begin writing your statement it is important to do some research. Read as much as possible about each program. Gather information on the academic focus, degrees available, courses available, faculty (and their research interests), potential concentrations, teaching and research opportunities, etc.
2. Begin compiling your information by filling out our **Personal Statement Worksheet**.
3. Prepare an outline of the topics you want to cover (e.g., personal background, academic research focus, and career objectives) and list supporting material under each main topic.
4. Write a rough draft based on the information you created in your outline.
5. Proofread! Check your grammar, punctuation, and spelling carefully.
6. Have a Career Counselor and Professor read your first rough draft to make suggestions. Integrate these suggestions into your next draft.
7. Take your revised statement to the Writing Center at Pepperdine to have it reviewed.
8. Your final statement should be as brief as possible--two double-spaced pages are usually sufficient unless otherwise stated by the program. Stick to the points requested by each program.
9. Be sure to make each statement relevant to each program. Although you may be able to incorporate many of the same ideas into each statement, the specifics about each program must be clearly addressed in each personal statement you submit.
10. You can write a strong personal statement without a lot of relevant work or field experience. Highlight the experience, coursework, research projects, and extracurricular activities you have participated in. Be honest, sincere, and persuasive.



Keep in Mind: The point of the personal statement is to be **personal** and **persuasive**. Convince the reader that you are right for the program and that the program is the best fit for you. In the end, there is not a right or wrong way to structure or write your essay. Just be sure to follow the specific directions posted by the program and use our Personal Statement Guide to help you with the rest.

Getting Started

Review application requirements

- Carefully read the personal statement prompt or question(s) for every program.
- Print out personal statement directions or copy and paste to the top of your essay paper to be sure you fully answer the program's prompt.
- Be sure you know when the application is due and how you will submit your application. If you are to mail in a hard-copy of your statement be sure you send it out at least three days before the application deadline.

Sample Personal Statement Prompts

University of Washington – St. Louis: Masters in International Affairs

- “A completed application form, including an essay of 300-400 words describing their interest in and qualifications for the program.”

Harvard University: Masters in Education

- “In your statement, please discuss:
 - Your background: how your experiences (education, work, volunteer, and/or personal) have prepared you for graduate study;
 - Your objectives for graduate study: your career goals, possible faculty mentors, and (for doctoral students) initial research interests;
 - Your decision to apply to HGSE: why you think there is a good fit between your objectives and our program;
- Your statement should be written by you alone and represent your original work. The statement should be no more than 1,500 words.”

Research the programs you are applying to

- Use website and printed materials to learn more about each program. You should be able to answer the following questions:
 - What makes this program distinct from other graduate programs?
 - What is the focus of the graduate program?
 - What degrees are available? Which one are you applying to?
 - Are there concentrations or specific tracks available within the program?
 - What type of research is being conducted? How does this fit into your academic interests?
 - Which professors are you most interested in working with?
 - Are Research or Teaching Assistance-ships available?
 - Are there internship or fieldwork experiences available to students?

Review sample statements

- Reading sample statements can help give you an understanding of what's expected and how other students have written their personal statements. Contact the Career Center to review sample personal statements.

Preparing

The following sections pose questions you should answer in preparing for your personal statement. This exercise is intended to brainstorm ideas for your personal statement. You may end up incorporating some or all of the ideas posed below. Keep in mind that it often takes several drafts to create a final essay.

Personal

- Has a particular experience, situation, or person influenced your decision to pursue your career goals?
- Have you overcome special circumstances or obstacles, whether physical, familial, or economic? If so, what are they, and how has your experience affected you relevant to pursuing graduate studies? (Don't assume that the committee is uninterested in your personal "problems." They want to know something about your character, and describing how you have overcome obstacles tells them something useful about your resolve and commitment.)
- Is there a "bump" in your academic road (such as an uncharacteristically poor semester or weak GRE score) that you feel you should account for? (Consult your Career Counselor or advisor before including this material in a final draft as there may be a more appropriate way to address this information such as a supplemental essay or letter.)
- What do you consider your most significant accomplishment thus far? Why? (This may be a personal, professional, or academic accomplishment.) These are not the only questions you can ask yourself, and they may well lead to other questions particular to your experience.

Education

- How and when did you become interested in the field?
- Why are you interested?
- What have you learned? How? (Through classes? independent study? practical experience?)
- Which classes, individuals, books, or ideas have been most significant, and why? (be specific)
- Has there been a single "turning point" experience that has led you to pursue graduate study? If so, what was it, when did it occur, and how did it change your career goals?
- How have you prepared for graduate school?
- How will your education thus far benefit you in graduate school?
- What are your overall career goals?

Work

- Have you been employed in any capacity in your chosen field? If so, what specifically have you learned from that experience?
- Have there been other particularly meaningful work experiences? How so?
- Have you gone out of your way to secure these experiences? What have you gained from this?

Structuring

While you can structure your essay in anyway you choose, the following format will help you to clearly organize your thoughts to write a cohesive and concise statement. Remember, no matter what order you use, it is important that your essay clearly demonstrate your fit for each specific program, your academic and research interests, highlights of each particular program, and your overall career goals.

Introduction:

As with other essays, your introduction is the most important part of the essay; the first sentence frames the content and format of your essay.

Successful first sentences are unique and persuasive; stimulating or attention-grabbing statements can help to get the reader interested in what you have to say.

The first paragraph may explain your interest in the subject and program or your motivation to apply to this program. This should be stated in a clear and creative way.

The sentences following your first sentence should briefly support the claim stated in the first sentence.

The Body:

1. Personal History/Background

- Clearly demonstrate who you are as an individual and what experiences or events have lead you to your decision to apply to graduate or professional school.
- Narratives or stories can be useful to illustrate your points as long as they are relevant.
- Keep this section personal and brief.

2. Academic Background/Work Experience

- Discuss how your major and coursework at Pepperdine has prepared you for graduate work.
- Specify 1-3 classes which have prepared you for graduate studies. Discuss specific class projects which are relevant to the graduate program.
- Discuss any research experience including research methods, publications, presentations, etc.
- Discuss any teaching (TA) or tutoring experience you may have.
- Describe how volunteer, leadership, internship or work experience has prepared you.

3. Graduate Program Characteristics/Research

- State your interest in the specific graduate program. **Do your research**; know what each program offers and how they differ from other graduate schools. There is a reason you are applying to this program—let the admissions committee know this!
- Thoroughly discuss your academic and initial research interests and how they related to faculty at that program. Identify 1-2 professors with whom you would like to work. If you haven't already, specify how you are prepared for research or coursework at the graduate level.
- If the program offers different concentrations or tracks within the program, identify your concentration of interest.

4. Professional/Career Goals

- Explain what you hope to do with your graduate degree and how a graduate degree from that institution will get you there. You do not need to know the specific organization you will work for, but a general idea about the type of work or industry is useful to the committee.
- If you have a few career goals in mind, discuss those options and note how this program will prepare you for a wide-range of careers and give you the information necessary to make a decision.
- If you are planning to continue on with your education after this degree you should note that.

Personal Statement

Things to Do and Things to Avoid

Do:

- Plan ahead. Give yourself time to prepare, draft and revise your statement.
- Prepare an outline and create a rough draft.
- Stay Focused. Answer all the questions being asked.
- Discuss why you're interested in the school and/or program.
- Use examples to demonstrate your abilities. Show, don't tell.
- Provide evidence to support your claims.
- Write with confidence and stress what makes you unique.
- Write about yourself and use examples from your own life experiences.
- Speak in the first person.
- Make sure your essay has an overall theme or a thesis.
- Use active words to describe your qualifications and experiences.
- Write a unique and personal introduction.
- Use standard fonts like Times Roman, Verdana or Arial.
- Be honest, confident, and be yourself.
- Use paragraph or idea transitions and vary your sentences.
- Make sure your essay is organized, coherent, and concise.
- Discuss your future goals.
- Mention any hobbies, past jobs, community service, or research experience.
- Address your weaknesses without making excuses or dwelling on them.
- Stay positive and engage your reader.
- Proofread and revise your statement at least 3 times.
- Have others proofread your essay.
- Seek assistance. Meet with a Career Counselor or your Professor.

Avoid:

- Grammar or spelling errors. (Proofread!)
- Jargon (don't try to impress the readers by using big words).
- Writing one statement for all schools. Be specific and target each essay to a program and school.
- Digressions or repeating yourself.
- Boring the reader.
- Generalizations, clichés or gimmicks.
- Jokes (a little humor may be okay but do consider that it could be misinterpreted by the reader).
- Defensiveness, negativity, or arrogance.
- Complaining or excuses.
- Focusing too much on other individuals. Remember this statement is about YOU.
- Writing an academic term paper or an autobiography.
- Including information already cited on the application or summarizing your resume or CV. Remember space may be limited so tell the committee what they will not know from other application documents.
- Forgetting to proofread.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Should I address poor grades or standardized test scores in my personal statement?

A: If there are extenuating circumstances which negatively affected your academic or test performance you can consider discussing them in your statement. However, you must use caution and consider how your explanation will be perceived by the admissions committee. For instance, if your grades were particularly low during one semester because of a death in the family or serious personal illness you it may be helpful to briefly address this in your statement. This will be useful for explaining why one semester was lower than the rest of your academic record. Additionally, if your standardized test scores do not reflect your academic ability you may choose to note this. However, if you are a poor test taker the personal statement is not the place to mention this. After all, many graduate programs will involve tests and exams. Remember to focus on the positive aspects of your application. If you do choose to address this issue responses should be kept brief, no longer than two sentences. When in doubt, seek assistance from the Career Center.

Q: My program requests a personal statement but doesn't give specific directions. What should I include?

A: Although some programs will be very specific about what they want, others may just leave that decision up to you. In general the personal statement should do two things: tell the admissions committee why you are right for the program and also why the program is right for you. The statement should be a personal narrative describing your personal and academic background, how you are prepared for graduate school, your academic or research interests, professional goals, and reasons why you want to attend a particular program. Your essay should be both personal and persuasive. If the program does not give information about page restrictions you should plan on writing no more than 2 double-spaced pages. The statement should be concise, clearly organized, and written in a personal yet professional manner.

Q: I'm not even sure where to start with my personal statement. Can anyone help me?

A: Yes! Career Counselors are available to meet with you on an individual basis to help you with your personal statement. Whether you are in the beginning phases of writing your essay, revising your statement or unsure of where to even start, the Career Center can help. Make an appointment with a Career Counselor by calling 310-506-4184 or stop by the Career Center in TCC 210 (above the Caf).