

Preparing Personal Statements For Graduate School & Professional Programs



COLLEGE OF
GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL STUDIES



This packet is intended to serve as a starting point for students and alumni developing personal statements for graduate schools and professional programs. It includes descriptions of what a personal statement is and why it is important, several approaches used to create personal statements, as well as best practices, tips, and additional resources for developing a successful personal statement.

General Personal Statement Writing Exercise: Questions To Ask Yourself *Before* You Begin Writing

Past experiences

What (or who) have been the most important influences in my life?
What is my greatest accomplishment to date? Biggest mistake or failure to date?
What is the best decision I've ever made? The worst decision?
What is the most important lesson I've learned in life?
What is the most unusual thing I've ever done?

Present Motivations

Why do I want to go to *this* school?
What do I hope to gain from pursuing a higher level of education?
How do I plan to use this degree?

Future Goals

Is there a particular type of work I would like to do?
Is there a particular population with whom I'd like to work?
What are my future goals (personal and professional)?
Where do I see myself in 5 years? 10 years? 20 years?

Enduring Qualities

What motivates me?
What is the most unique thing about me?
If my best friend had to describe me in three words, what would he/she say?
What personal qualities am I most proud to possess?
If I only had 10 minutes with the admissions committee, what 3 things would I want them to know about me?


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What is a Personal Statement?

Personal statements are ways for graduate admissions committees (usually made up of program faculty) to learn more about you as an applicant. Much like a cover letter for a job application, the personal statement is a way to sell your abilities. You may have had to submit a personal statement as part of your undergraduate application. In graduate or professional school, the admissions committee wants to know not only what interests you about the program, but also what you will contribute to their program in terms of research, seminar discussions, conferences and other collaborative opportunities.

Ask yourself, what interests and qualifications make you the ideal applicant for this program? Why are you pursuing a career in this field?

Also, keep in mind some programs may require multiple essays for admission, so be sure to read each application carefully. Likewise, professional programs such as medicine and law often require one personal statement be uploaded to a centralized application and read by several professional programs. Finally, note that programs may request supplemental materials or personal interviews at other stages in the admissions process.

Generally, there are two types of personal statements:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement.

May or may not have a word or character count, usually a generic prompt such as "Write a personal statement describing your experiences and goals."

2. The response to a very specific prompt.

May or may not have a word or character count. Often, the prompt includes several questions such as, "Explain why this program is the best fit for you" or "Tell us about an accomplishment that is important to you."

Samples of Personal Statement Prompts:

Below are some sample prompts for personal statements from common fields of graduate study. These prompts were adapted from actual prompts by programs in these fields. Notice how some are purposefully vague while others are very specific. Do you notice any overarching themes or commonalities in these prompts?

- **Medical School:**

Use this section of the application to compose a personal essay explaining why you want to study the field of medicine.

- **Law School:**

Please provide a separate essay not to exceed two double-spaced typed pages using 12 point font. In this essay you may discuss any attributes, experiences, or interests that would enable you to make a distinctive contribution to the law school and/or the legal profession.

- **Business School:**

Essay #1: In 600 words or less, briefly assess your career progress to date. Elaborate on your future career plans and your motivation for pursuing an MBA.

Essay #2: Complete the following statement, 'people may be surprised to learn that I...'

Essay #3: Tell us about an accomplishment you are proud of and how it relates to the person you are.

- **PhD in Humanities:**

Applicants should describe their research interests and professional objectives and how this program is a good match for their interests. While there is no prescribed length, statements are generally 1-2 pages single spaced.

The Do's of Personal Statements:

- DO take time to think about who you are and the experiences that have shaped your life.
- DO look at an open-ended essay as an opportunity to tell admissions committees about you, but go beyond the facts that are conveyed by other parts in the application.
- DO allow yourself plenty of time to brainstorm and rewrite your essays.
- DO tailor and adapt an essay for each specific program you are applying to, unless it is to be submitted to multiple schools via a centralized application service.
- DO mention possible career paths, interests, professional goals, and explain why you are ready for an advanced degree in this field. Prove you have the work ethic, commitment, and resilience necessary to succeed.
- DO recognize potential changes in your plans for graduate study, be realistic and flexible; and convey that in your statement.
- DO be specific; be sure to back up all statements with examples and concrete evidence. Remember: show, don't tell.
- DO research your programs and schools. Ask yourself if there are certain values expressed in the program or aspects, such as a thesis, that intrigue you.
- DO have someone proofread your essay for you, if they have questions or something is unclear, the admissions committee will probably experience the same confusion.
- DO answer all parts of the prompt.
- DO stay within the word or character count.
- DO frequently save your document in multiple locations.

The Don'ts of Personal Statements:

- DON'T forget to have a thesis or theme that is woven throughout your essay.
- DON'T be cliché or use generalizations; i.e. "I want to be a doctor to help people."
- DON'T submit a personal statement with spelling and punctuation errors.
- DON'T mention political or religious affiliations unless necessary or relevant.
- DON'T make up stories, exaggerate, or lie on your personal statements.
- DON'T make lists of accomplishments. Instead elaborate on them with examples and stories highlighting your skills and experience.
- DON'T write in the third person. First person is always best.
- DON'T sound defensive or arrogant. Tone is key.
- DON'T mention names of professors you hope to work with, mention areas of interest instead.
- DON'T have your essay focus too much on others. This is about you.

Getting Started: Pre-Writing Prompts

Your personal statement is your opportunity to highlight yourself— your experiences, goals, and ambitions. Graduate and professional programs want to hear not only about your success in the classroom, but also about your experiences outside of academia that led you to pursue a graduate degree in a specific field.

Below are several reflective exercises, or pre-writing prompts, to help you brainstorm and develop material to use in your personal statements. Depending on how you learn best, one exercise may prove more useful to you than others. Exercise 1 and 2 focus on specific skills and attributes you may have and help you expand on them. Exercise 3 and 4 begin very broadly and then become more specific in making connections. All of these exercises can be done with the assistance of a Peer Career Advisor or on your own.

Exercise #1: Accomplishments & Experience Table

Personal Accomplishments: (Talents, interests, attributes that make you special.)	
Community Experiences: (Extracurricular involvement, volunteering, civic or religious organizations, etc.)	
Academic Accomplishments: (Honors, achievements, awards received.)	
Professional Experience: (Work experience and professional affiliations.)	

Exercise #2: Storytelling

Reflect on an experience that illustrates your personality, passions, and dreams. Think about why you chose this experience, how does it relate to the field you want to study? Then answer the following questions.

- How does the story explain your personality?
- Where in the story does the reader get a sense of your passions? Your dreams?
- Does the story explain why you have chosen to study this particular field?
- In what ways does the story describe potential research interests?
- Does this story address why you are a good candidate for the institution, considering its values and approach to education?
- How well does the story convey that you are prepared to begin studying this field?
- Does the story explore your long-term professional goals or career path?
- Share the story or important themes in your personal statement. Explain the significance of the story or how the themes relate to the career field you are pursuing.

Exercise #3: (Part 1) List of Skills and Traits

Highlight the skills and traits in each category of skills that you feel you possess. Then, on Part 2 answer the questions for each skill you selected.

COMMUNICATION:		HUMAN RELATIONS:		RESEARCH:	
Editing	Mediating	Advising	Guiding	Assessing	Examining
Explaining	Discussing	Assisting	Understanding	Calculating	Extrapolating
Influencing	Speaking	Counseling	Motivating	Collecting	Interviewing
Interpreting	Translating	Empathizing	Representing	Diagnosing	Investigating
Listening	Writing	Facilitating	Serving	Evaluating	Synthesizing
CREATIVE:		TECHNICAL:		TRAINING:	
Creating	Imagining	Adjusting	Installing	Adapting	Evaluating
Designing	Improvising	Aligning	Observing	Communicating	Clarifying
Developing	Inventing	Assembling	Operating	Demonstrating	Instructing
Establishing	Performing	Drafting	Programming	Enabling	Planning
Illustrating	Visualizing	Engineering	Repairing	Encouraging	Stimulating
LEADERSHIP:		PUBLIC RELATIONS:		MANAGEMENT:	
Motivating	Educating	Conducting	Presenting	Communicating	Appraising
Negotiating	Self-motivating	Informing	Promoting	Consulting	Leading
Planning	Mediating problems	Researching	Representing	Coordinating	Negotiating
Assigning	Empowering others			Delegating	Persuading
Directing					
PROBLEM SOLVING:		FINANCIAL:		CLERICAL:	
Analyzing	Planning	Accounting	Calculating	Classifying	Compiling
Diagnosing	Proving	Administering	Forecasting	Observing	
Executing	Reasoning	Allocating	Investing		
Recognizing		Auditing	Projecting		
		Balancing			

Exercise #3: (Part 2) List of Skills and Traits Follow-up Questions

1. In what ways have you demonstrated this skill/trait?
2. When did you begin to develop this skill/trait? (College? High school? Childhood?) Be as specific as possible.
3. How will you use this skill/trait in your graduate school or professional program?
4. How do you plan on using this skill/trait after completing graduate school or the professional program?
5. What skill(s)/trait(s) do you not currently possess that you hope to gain in your graduate or professional program?

Exercise #4: Attribute Map

Step 1: Identify a skill or attribute you have that applies to the field or program you are applying to.

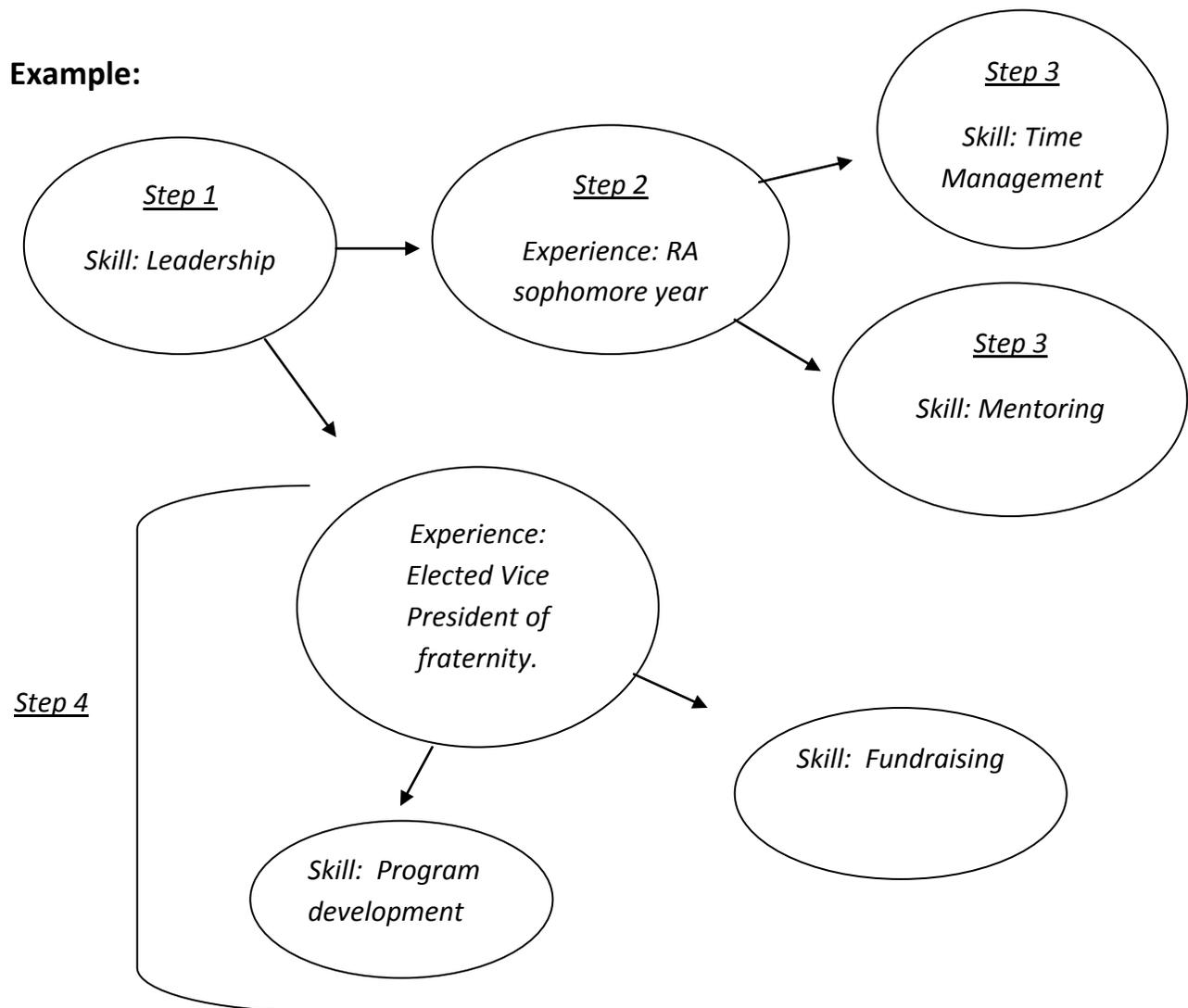
Step 2: Connect that skill to a significant experience or situation.

Step 3: Brainstorm additional skills or attributes gained from the specific experience.

Step 4: Repeat the process and make connections between experiences with shared skills.

Step 5: Decide on experiences and skills you can confidently discuss in your personal statement.

Example:



Personal Critique Form

Assess your personal statement draft for the following items; 1 is the lowest score and 3 the highest. Use the Comment section to indicate whether or not you addressed the point/how you might elaborate on it.

Item	Score	Comments
<u>Introduction:</u> Statement and opening paragraph makes you want to read further.	1 2 3	
<u>Evidence of Desirable Attributes:</u> Describes specific qualities the writer possesses.	1 2 3	
<u>Experience:</u> Demonstrates experience in research, volunteerism, career exploration, overcoming challenges, etc.	1 2 3	
<u>Engaging & Unique:</u> Interesting from start to finish and applicant will stand out from others.	1 2 3	
<u>Connection to Profession/field:</u> Effectively explains why applicant is a good fit for the program and addresses the question, "Why this field and not a related field?"	1 2 3	
<u>Appropriate Format:</u> Correct word count/length, addresses points clearly, fully developed ideas. Error free.	1 2 3	

Additional Resources

Purdue OWL: Writing the Personal Statement:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/>

University of Indiana Bloomington Writing Tutorial Services, Personal Statements and Application Letters: http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/personal_statements.shtml

Dartmouth College Career Services:

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~csrc/students/gradschool/artsci/statement.html>

Edmonds Community College: Learning Support Center: Writing Center:

http://www.edcc.edu/lsc/handouts/documents/Personal_Statement--How_to_Write_It.pdf