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Personal Statement Guide

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Development

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The Personal Statement

Writing your personal statement can be a frustrating experience, especially if you don't know what you're doing. However, with the right tools and information, you can make it an exciting opportunity to give you and the reader a greater insight as to who you are, and why you've chosen this specific career path. This guide is meant to show you a general way to write your own personal statement and some helpful advice along the way, but it is by no means the only way. The personal statement is **personal** and is different for every person! With that said, let's get started!

*****Before reading any further:**

A statement of purpose is NOT the same as a personal statement!

While writing a personal statement should focus on you, a statement of purpose should focus on your ideas of a particular topic and/or what you hope to achieve by participating in the program to which you are applying. A statement of purpose should not address personal characteristics or reasons why you want to participate in a program. Some programs will not always make this distinction, or may use these terms interchangeably, which is why you need to read the instructions carefully.

What is a Personal Statement?

A personal statement is your chance to give the reader a feel for who you are as a person, as well as a student. This essay is an introduction of who you are both intellectually and creatively, so that the reader may better understand you and make them want to get to know you better. The main question the personal statement should address is, "Who are you and why do you want to go into this specialty?" It also provides an opportunity to:

- Highlight your strong points and abilities
- Show that you know something about and are a good match for the specialty you have chosen
- Tell about your values and how they were formed and expressed
- Describe your career goals and how this program will be a good match for you

Read the Instructions!

It may sound silly, but one of the biggest mistakes applicants make is failing to address the topic or questions presented. Many institutions will ask different questions that may sound similar. Do not make the mistake of using the same personal statement to address two different institutions with seemingly similar questions. It is also imperative that you follow the application's guidelines on length, margins, font size, etc. If no length is given, the general accepted length is **5-7 paragraphs, and is no longer than two pages.**

Questions to get you Started

When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?

What personal characteristics (for example: integrity, compassion, persistence) and skills (leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?

What do you hope to gain from this program specifically? What are your future career goals (make sure your answer is reflective of what is offered through the program)?

Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example: economic, familial, or physical) in your life?

Some other questions to think about:

- Are there any discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate than others for this program?
- If you have work experience, what knowledge/skills have you gained?
- Is your essay going to be a reflection of you?

Basic Format

Introduction: Reel them in!

Your introduction is your first (and only) chance to pull the reader in and set the tone of your essay. Most importantly, the introductory paragraph should capture the main idea or theme of your statement. There are a number of ways you can do this, such as quotes or anecdotes, but make sure that they are relevant and not cliché.

Body Paragraphs: Get Personal!

The body of your essay might detail your interest and experience in your particular field, as well as some of your knowledge in the field. Too many people graduate with little or no knowledge of the nuts and bolts of the profession or field they hope to enter. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field and use the language professionals in the field use in conveying this information. Refer to experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other source of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it. Since you will have to be selective in what you include in your statement, the choices you make are often an indication of your judgment.

Conclusion: Tie it all together!

The conclusion will illustrate your ability to combine all the smaller components of your essay to create a big picture. It should rephrase your main ideas, point towards the future, and hopefully discover something new for you and your audience. The focus here is not to narrow your essay, but widen the lens for your reader to demonstrate your experiences in a broader context.

General Advice

- ANSWER THE QUESTION(S) THAT IS/ARE BEING ASKED!!!
 - This is THE most common mistake among applicants. Really read the question and answer it accordingly, and follow ALL additional instructions.
- Tell a story
 - Think of a concrete story that will help demonstrate your experience, interest, and readiness. This will not only inform the reader of your qualifications, but it will also keep the reader interested!
- Be specific
 - Don't just say that you're very organized; be specific and give examples of how you are organized.
- Concentrate on the opening paragraph
 - The lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you either grab the reader's attention or lose it. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of your personal statement.
- Don't include certain topics
 - Try to stay away from high school experiences or controversial subjects (religious/political issues), unless completely necessary.
- Do some research, if needed
 - The reader doesn't want a page of statistics about why their school is great, but there is a reason why you are applying there over other institutions. If there is a certain factor influencing your decision (faculty specialties, campus culture), let them know. While geography may also factor into your decision, only mention this if there is an academic reason (i.e. near the Library of Congress) and not for personal reasons (i.e. the beach).
- Avoid Clichés
 - A medical school applicant who writes that he is good at science and wants to help other people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from often-repeated or tired statements.
- Above all else: PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD
 - There is no surer way of receiving a rejection letter than by having errors in your statement. It should be perfectly void of errors. Have friends, family, professors, and the CCPD re-read your statement.
- Transform blemishes into positives
 - Everybody has flaws, and that's okay. Don't whine or complain about the negatives, but show your perseverance because of them.

Top 10 Do's and Don'ts

Do's:

1. Strive for depth rather than breadth. Narrow your focus to one or two key themes, ideas or experiences
2. Try to tell the reader something that no other applicant will be able to say
3. Provide the reader with insight into what drives you
4. Be yourself, not the 'ideal' applicant
5. Get creative and imaginative in the opening remarks, but make sure it's something that no one else could write
6. Keep your language clear, concise, and simple
7. Focus on the positive in the personal statement; consider an addendum to explain deficiencies or blemishes
8. Evaluate experiences, rather than describe them
9. Proofread carefully for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage, and style
10. Use readable fonts, typeface, and conventional spacing and margins

Don'ts:

1. Do not submit an extended resume; avoid repeating information found elsewhere on the application
2. Do not complain or whine about the "system" or circumstances in your life
3. Do not preach to your reader. You can express opinions, but do not come across as fanatical or extreme
4. Do not talk about money as a motivator
5. Do not discuss your minority status or disadvantaged background unless you have a compelling and unique story that relates to it
6. Do not remind the school of its rankings or tell them how good they are
7. Do not seem undecided or too general. Be specific
8. Do not use unconventional and gimmicky formats and packages
9. Do not submit supplemental materials unless they are requested
10. Do not get the name of the school wrong

*Purdue's OWL Materials: Writing the personal statement:
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/#resourcenav>

Advice from Admissions Counselors

Dr. Daniel R. Alonso
Associate Dean for Admissions
Cornell University Medical College

“We look for some originality because nine out of ten essays leave you with a big yawn. “I like science, I like to help people and that's why I want to be a doctor.” The common, uninteresting, and unoriginal statement is one that recounts the applicant's academic pursuits and basically repeats what is elsewhere in the application. You look for something different, something that will pique your interest and provide some very unique insight that will make you pay some notice to this person who is among so many other qualified applicants. If you're screening 5,500 applications over a four- or six-month period, you want to see something that's really interesting.”

Steven DeKrey
Director of Admissions and Financial Aid
J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management (Northwestern University)

“We're looking for a well-written, detailed essay that responds directly to the question. The questions are about extracurricular activities, motivation, challenges, commitment to the school that kind of thing. We see a variety and that's fine. Our approach is very individualized. The way the applicant devises the answer, determines the length, develops the response, is all part of the answer. The level of effort applicants put into essays varies considerably, which sends messages to the admissions committee as well. Over-involved, elaborate essays send one message, while very brief and superficial essays send another message.”

Michael D. Rappaport
Assistant Dean of Admissions
UCLA School of Law

“Most law schools operate fairly similarly. There's a certain group of applicants whose grades and LSAT scores are so high that the presumption is that the applicants are going to be admitted unless they do something terribly stupid to keep themselves out. I have seen applicants whose personal statement has done that, but it's extremely rare. At the other extreme is another group of applicants who, no matter what they write, are not going to get in.

The applicant has to realize, first of all, where he or she stands. If you have a straight-A grade point average and a perfect LSAT score, you don't have to spend a lot of time worrying about your personal statement. On the other hand, if you know you're in the borderline area, that's where the personal statement becomes very, very important.”

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

Sample Personal Statements

Sample Personal Statement #1 - Senior Design

Senior Design—the year-long capstone course and college-wide competition that engineering students learn about on their first day and do not stop thinking about until their last. It forces them to draw from all they have learned. It is a test of perseverance, creativity, and technical knowledge. It was also, rather unexpectedly, the catalyst in my decision to study law.

The philosophy of the Senior Design course was to foster a spirit of entrepreneurship. To that extent, we had to conceptualize, design, build, and test our project considering real-world constraints such as time, cost, and technical feasibility. Finally, we had to “sell” it to a panel of industry judges during a poster presentation.

My team agreed to implement an idea I had for years but didn’t have the know-how or resources to build. We designed a point-of-sale (POS) system for restaurants where customers could place their own orders and pay directly from their tables. It consisted of a graphical touch-screen display unit at the table, pager units for wait staff, and a kitchen unit where all orders would be displayed and managed. All communication was wireless, using state-of-the-art Bluetooth technology. We dubbed it TruePOS.

The professor feared our project was too ambitious. Even now, it is difficult to say if this was true. My team meshed together well, but like any fabric, there were bound to be rips. We were almost torn to shreds the last few weeks: sleepless nights, arguments piling up, parts not working, and families tested to the limits of their patience. But our sacrifice paid off. Among 21 teams from civil, mechanical, and electrical engineering, as a whole considered to be the best group in the history of the competition, we won the grand prize. At the awards banquet, almost every professor, student, and industry invitee told us that we should get a patent as soon as possible.

As we stood on the stage accepting our award, I could tell we were feeling many of the same emotions: elation, relief, and gratitude. As I looked at my teammates, with their earnest, eye-scrunching smiles, I came to a realization. I was not the same person I was a year ago. It was as if Senior Design was a glowing, red-hot crucible, and I was placed inside, melted down, and tempered in a new mold. My basic substance was the same, but I had taken a different shape. I had grown complacent, but I now felt a renewed fervor. Although I hadn’t given it much consideration earlier, I knew the next step in my life: we would get that patent.

My teammates and I met with the Director of the Office of Technology Transfer, Ken Sherman, at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Ken explained the basic patent process including the concept of prior art and asked us to do a patent search on the United States Patent and Trademark Office website. As I conducted this search, I realized that, to my own shock, I enjoyed it. I found myself wondering what it would be like to sit down with the engineers and scientists behind many patents, hashing out the technical details and helping them draft the document that would secure their intellectual property. Most inventors lack the necessary skills to protect themselves. I would be good at helping them, I thought.

My interest in patent law, and now the law in general, has only continued to grow. I have been devouring information on law school, and I cannot wait for the challenge. I believe that Columbia Law

School presents the best opportunity for my legal education and is undoubtedly my first choice. I have contacted several students and alumni who attest to the challenging, yet rewarding experience Columbia provides. Many of my friends and most of my family live in New York, many just minutes away via train. I have always relied on a strong support network, and Columbia would allow me to not only continue this habit, but also strengthen it. My plan is to practice law in New York; Columbia's placement history would help me realize this goal.

My decision to study law came from an unlikely source. My strong academic record and background as an electrical engineer provide a pragmatic foundation for my success in law school. I feel prepared to study law at Columbia University, and I feel that I can offer Columbia something in return. I look forward to beginning my legal career at Columbia.

*Sample Law Essays: <http://www.top-law-schools.com/personal-statement-examples.html>

Sample Personal Statement #2 – AIDS Hospice

The AIDS hospice reeked from disease and neglect. On my first day there, after an hour of "training," I met Paul, a tall, emaciated, forty-year-old AIDS victim who was recovering from a stroke that had severely affected his speech. I took him to General Hospital for a long-overdue appointment. It had been weeks since he had been outside. After waiting for two and a half hours, he was called in and then needed to wait another two hours for his prescription. Hungry, I suggested we go and get some lunch. At first Paul resisted; he didn't want to accept the lunch offer. Estranged from his family and seemingly ignored by his friends, he wasn't used to anyone being kind to him — even though I was only talking about a Big Mac. When it arrived, Paul took his first bite. Suddenly, his face lit up with the biggest, most radiant smile. He was on top of the world because somebody bought him a hamburger. Amazing. So little bought so much. While elated that I had literally made Paul's day, the neglect and emotional isolation from which he suffered disgusted me. This was a harsh side of medicine I had not seen before. Right then and there, I wondered, "Do I really want to go into medicine?"

What had so upset me about my day with Paul? Before then nothing in my personal, academic, or volunteer experiences had shaken my single-minded commitment to medicine. Why was I so unprepared for what I saw? Was it the proximity of death, knowing Paul was terminal? No it couldn't have been. As a young boy in gutted Beirut I had experienced death time and time again. Was it the financial hardship of the hospice residents, the living from day to day? No, I dealt with that myself as a new immigrant and had even worked full-time during my first two years of college. Financial difficulty was no stranger to me. Neither financial distress nor the sight of death had deterred me. Before the day in the hospice, I only wanted to be a doctor.

My interest in medicine had started out with an enjoyment of science. From general biology to advanced cellular/behavioral neuroscience, the study of the biological systems, especially the most complex of them all, the human body, has been a delightful journey with new discoveries in each new class. Research with Dr. Smith on neurodegenerative diseases further stimulated my curiosity. Equally satisfying is my investigation with Dr. Jones of the relevance of endogenous opiates to drug therapies for schizophrenia, Alzheimer's dementia, Parkinson's disease, Huntington's chorea, and drug abuse. I love research. Looking at the results of an experiment for the first time and knowing that my data, this newly

found piece of information, is furthering our knowledge in a small area of science is an indescribable experience. I have so enjoyed it that I am currently enrolled in two Departmental Honors programs, both requiring an Honors Thesis. I will graduate next year with two majors — Neuroscience and Biological Sciences. While I want to incorporate research into my career, after meeting Paul I realized that the lab's distant analytical approach wouldn't help me show compassion to my patients. Even worse, it could contribute to the emotional neglect I found so repulsive.

Dr. Nelson, the general practitioner for whom I volunteered for two and a half years, had always told me that the desire to become a doctor must come from deep within. In his office, I took patients' vital signs and helped them feel more comfortable. I also spent a significant amount of time with Dr. Nelson learning about the physician's role. He became my mentor. I learned of the physician's many responsibilities — personal integrity, an endless love of learning, and the awareness that throughout his or her career every physician is a student and a teacher. I also realized that in medicine many decisions are based on clinical approximation, as opposed to the precision of the lab. Still after two and a half years in his Park Avenue office, I was unprepared for the AIDS hospice in a blue-collar neighborhood, and my experience with Paul.

Even my work at the Family Clinic, which serves a large poor and homeless population, failed to prepare me for Paul. In the clinic, I worked a lot with children and interacted with their families. I recall an episode when the parents of a twelve-year-old girl brought her to the clinic. They were nervous and frightened. Their daughter had a hard time breathing because of a sore throat and had not been able to sleep the previous night. I took her vital signs, inquired about her chief complaint, and put her chart in the priority box. After she was seen by the physician, I assured her parents that her illness was not serious — she had the flu, and the sore throat was merely a symptom. The relief in the parents' faces and the realization that I had made them feel a little bit more comfortable was most fulfilling. During my stay at the clinic, I thoroughly enjoyed the interaction with patients and dealing with a different socio-economic group than I found in Dr. Nelson's office. But while I was aware of their poverty, I was not aware if they suffered from emotional isolation and neglect.

The abandonment that caused Paul's loneliness nauseated me. But after I thought about it, I understood that meeting Paul and working in the hospice gave me an opportunity, however painful, for accomplishment and personal growth. And medicine offers a lifetime of such opportunities. I didn't turn my back on Paul or medicine. I'm glad I met Paul. He and I were friends until he died, about eight months after I first started working at the AIDS hospice. I visited him and others in the hospice at least once a week and frequently more often. My experience with Paul and other AIDS patients led me to re-commit to a career as a physician — the only career I want to pursue — but a physician who will always have a minute to comfort. Yes, my research is exciting and important. Yes, medicine involves problem solving and analysis of symptoms as I learned at the Family Clinic. And yes, medicine frequently involves clinical approximation as Dr. Nelson taught me. But more than any of the above, as I learned at the AIDS hospice, medicine requires compassion and caring — and sometimes a Big Mac.

*Sample Medical School Statements: <http://www.accepted.com/medical/sampleEssays.aspx>

**And remember your most important resources: The Career Advisors! They are more than willing to listen to your ideas, critique your personal statement, or advise you on any other aspect of your careers!*