

How Do I Write a Personal Statement?

Here's a subject you know something about: You! This will make writing a short essay on the topic a cinch, right? Don't count on it. Many people, including good writers, think this essay may be among the hardest they will ever be asked to write. The reasons for their difficulties are various:

- ✓ **Narrowing the topic:**
 - Precisely because you're such an expert on this subject, you have too much information to sift for what you ought to include. Suddenly it all seems relevant—how do you choose?
- ✓ **Sounding Natural:**
 - You want to present yourself in a manner that sounds like you—but how do you write about yourself, your talents and accomplishments without sounding full of yourself?
- ✓ **Packaging Yourself:**
 - Picture Dr. _____, a stranger sitting in an office somewhere on a graduate school campus you hope to attend soon. He or she has a pile of papers on the desk—let's say it's a stack of 200. Each page is a prospective student's personal statement. What makes you think he or she will have any interest in what you have to say?

Keep in mind these five important ideas as you write your personal statement:

Prioritize

- ✓ When brainstorming what to include in a 1-2 page personal statement, consider which are the key experiences, anecdotes, and honors from your life that will best suggest your preparation for graduate study in your chosen discipline at this institution.

- ✓ This may mean leaving out something of which you are very proud, but which isn't directly relevant. (For example, you may have won a regional award for your freelance photographs, but your applying for admission to a graduate program in social work. While your volunteer work with EXCEL didn't win any awards, it's a lot more relevant to the graduate admissions committee at the social work school of your choice). Remember, you will have a resume' where you can include these other important but less directly relevant items.
- ✓ The personal statement is your two minutes alone with this hypothetical reader to try and convince him or her that you're worth moving to the "keep" pile rather than the "slush" pile. Be relevant or be dismissed.

Summarize

- ✓ It is very likely that the reader will have as many as 200 personal statements to view, and thus will make judgments based on a less than thorough reading of every word. To prepare for this, include in your introduction a miniature version of the full-length version, demonstrating (if possible) that you have the adequate practical and academic experience (along with the desire and ambition to learn more) in order to hit the ground running at the graduate school of your choice.
- ✓ If you are unlucky enough to be toward the bottom of the stack, focus may become a factor for your reader; this initial summary will catch even the skimming eye.
- ✓ Writing clearly, concisely, and with a clear sense of organization will rule out automatic disqualification on the grounds of a foggy or indirect opening paragraph.

Humanize

- ✓ You have an application form, a resume', standardized test scores, and transcripts to quantify who you are. The personal statement is *personal*.
- ✓ I imagine that a majority of the 200 essays on the reader's desk are either almost identical or are inept and unfocused. In order to avoid

falling into these categories, you will need to write something that snags in the memory.

- ✓ This is a place to let a school know who you really are. Through anecdotal experience (that internship where your suggestion resulted in an office's streamlined operating procedure; those Saturday afternoons when you volunteered at the at-risk children's center and befriended a certain lonely child; etc.), you can help the reader see you shaking hands with a supervisor or sitting next to a child in need.
- ✓ What a reader sees, he or she is more likely to remember.

Customize

Say you are dating three people (this is not a recommendation). Do you send each one the exact same affectionate letter? Let's hope not: you wouldn't get away with it. The same goes for your personal statement:

- ✓ Not only do you need to be personal about your own experience and qualifications, but you also need to get personal about the school to which you are applying.
- ✓ Visit the school, or at the very least, talk to a person who teaches there; you will then be equipped to discuss briefly but pointedly in your personal statement how you and this school make a good match.
- ✓ Mention your contact(s) by name; drop what they've told you and why it makes sense to come to _____ University and what has prepared you to succeed in their program. You might follow the following template:
 - Opening paragraph. As described in the "Summarize" section, create a controlling "thesis" paragraph that accomplishes, in nutshell form, the statement you wish to make.
 - Practical experience. If you have internship, volunteer, or other employment experience directly related to your area of interest, discuss them here, ideally with an anecdote or at least a pause for reflection on your personal satisfaction in doing this work. This can be crucial, because studying a discipline and actually practicing a discipline can be such disparate experiences. Be creative about your experience: work as an R.A. or EXCEL project coordinator can be connected to so many disciplines. (Remember that there will be plenty of applications that talk almost exclusively about academics, because their writers think this is all an

academic would want to hear. Not so—"real world" experience tells a reader that you have a wider perspective to share with the other students in the program.)

- o Academic grounding...and potential. If, in your estimation, your success as a student of the discipline far exceeds the opportunities you've been given to practice the discipline, go with this paragraph before discussing your practical experience. Include honors and research opportunities; based on what you learned when you talked to your contact at the school, connect your undergraduate research to the potential for graduate research.
- o Wild cards. Is there something not directly relevant about your background that nonetheless is too good to pass up? Is your spiritual life so central to who you are that it deserves mention? Do you have a personal philosophy that would help shed light on who you are (while making your case more memorable, not more cliché)? Mention it here. Otherwise, move on. Don't forget, however, the undergraduate school you've attended. Wheeling Jesuit University's mission is to educate men and women to serve others. Does this have relevance to your future goals? Shouldn't it?
- o Finish strong. You have been shaping an argument in your personal statement: that you and the school considering your application will make a good fit. Draw that conclusion in your last paragraph. Don't linger, repeating yourself. If you've made the case, a light hand at the end will be more convincing than sudden imploring.

A Suggestion:

This may sound like a contradiction, but do not try to write a personal statement without help. You need at least another opinion, if not several. What may sound hopelessly vain to you may sound too modest to someone else, especially someone who knows you. Ask a professor or supervisor whom you trust to read your statement and give you advice. Run a draft by the Career Services office. And at any stage in your writing process, schedule an appointment with me in the Academic Resource Center. Good Luck!

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