Developing Personal Statements

Prep-Work: Know Your Audience
What does the prompt ask me to focus on or cover?
What do I know about the program I’m applying to? What values do they seem to have based on their website?
What do I know about the field or research area I’m going into? What things (experiences, research, interests, qualities) do I think this discipline values?
Imagining the work I would do in the career I’m hoping to get into, what does that work involve? What things would I need to do on a day-to-day basis?

Brainstorming Stories to Tell
Brainstorm as many stories as you can to start with, because this will give you more options and ideally keep you from feeling stuck or over-committed to the first thing you write! Stories that you might tell include, but are not limited to, the following areas:

- Heritage Stories: moments of interest that help explain your family, where you’re from, your cultural heritage, or some other important aspect of your identity;
- Academic Stories: moments in which you were intrigued or inspired to keep studying a particular thing; these could be about a paper you wrote, a group project you participated in, a specific book that inspired you, or any academic project or small moment in which you asked questions and pursued ideas;
- Mentorship Stories: similar to academic stories, mentorship stories highlight key people who’ve inspired you in some way. They may have seen your talent or they may have simply been encouraging even when you didn’t have any talent! But these stories should be about moments of inspiration that likewise encouraged you to pursue a topic, work, a project, etc.
- Stories of Struggle: are moments during which you struggled with something. This is an interesting category if done well, but they can be very tricky... you want to avoid the cliched “overcoming” narrative (i.e., I struggled but overcame X.). When done well, stories of struggle can highlight grappling with ideas, experiences, and values and ideally offer complex solutions—not easy answers!

Story Writing Tips

- “Show” don’t “Tell”: that is, describe what happened, what was said, etc., rather than telling readers things like “I learned a lot..”
- Be specific! Use details, adjectives, descriptions, and find ways to pack meaning in!
- Focus on moments—tiny, small interactions, as opposed to “my time in my undergraduate” or “that year of my life”
A Good Personal Statement Will....

Explain why a particular school is a good fit for a student, in more than just a “fit” paragraph. “Fit” means establishing—by showing—that you’ll fit into the research, culture, and interests of the department and campus community. “Fit” should, ideally, be articulated throughout the statement, and involves more than merely naming professors students would like to work with. Think about the resources available at a particular school—do any of these resources make the school an especially good fit? Think about the values a department or field seems to have—how do your experiences and work already enact those values?

- Other, non-professor ways to articulate fit: Unique archival/library holdings; Research Centers/Societies; Interdisciplinary Programs; Study-abroad opportunities; Labs doing interesting work in your field; Public-service components for work; Reading groups in your area; Interest in local community-based projects; interest in other projects the department is already involved in.

Draw on specific elements of a student’s undergraduate career to explain why he/she is ready to pursue the life of a scholar. Students need to describe how their specific experiences have prepared them for graduate school and reaffirmed their decision to enter the type of career that graduate school will prepare them for.

- Examples of relevant experience: Working on an Honor’s Thesis or Capstone Project; Tutoring; Teaching Assistantships; Lab Research; Summer Research Internships; Community Outreach; work relevant to your field
- Template: “My experiences ____________, ____________, and ____________ have already allowed me to see what the life of a scholar-teacher will be like; I feel ready to take that next step, as a graduate student at ______ university.)
- Goal: Articulate the values in these work. For instance, your experiences tutoring highlight your commitment to... collaborative learning, teaching, helping others improve their writing, seeing writing as essential to critical thinking, etc. Don’t just say: “Through tutoring, I learned a lot.” Be precise about what you learned.

Have a clear direction, but still indicate openness to intellectual growth and change.

- Phrases to use: developing/evolving/growing/changing/progressing
- Sample template: “Given my background in X and Y, I can envision my research developing in several directions while at_____. Perhaps I will choose to __; or, perhaps, studying with ____________, I will choose to ____________.

Indicate not simply what a school will provide a student, but also what a student will bring to a school. This is especially important when articulating why you want to work with specific professors! Try to frame statements in terms of potential contributions.

- Sample Template: “I could contribute to Professor X’s work on _______. Or, perhaps, given my interest in ____ and _____, I could help Professor B with her new work on ______.
Common Mistakes to Avoid

Language that seems naïve, tentative, or overly supplicative.
*Words to avoid: Luck, love, hope, passionate*
- “I have always loved ____.”
- “I am passionate about X”
- “Although I do not have a background in ____, I know ____ could fill in those gaps.”
- “If I were fortunate enough to have _____ decide to work with me....”
- “I hope to study ____, if I am lucky enough to be admitted to ____.”

Language that seems overly grandiose, pompous, or entitled.
- “When attending X school, I will quickly ______.”
- “My theory of V, articulated in my undergraduate honor’s thesis, has overturned Kant’s well-known theory of ____.”
- “Professor X will undoubtedly provide invaluable mentoring on my project, which I know will enable it to grow. I, in turn, look forward to helping improve her ___ project, which, though brilliant, has two major flaws:....”

Too many words:
The common word limit for personal statements is typically one thousand words, or roughly two single-spaced pages of size-twelve-font type.
*Things you can cut:*
- Information repeated elsewhere (e.g., in a supplemental essay)
- Information that rehashes what is said on a C.V.
- Personal anecdotes about how one got interested in the field. (Often, this is the first paragraph of an essay, and often, it is too long).