

Writing Strong Personal Statements

Questions to consider when writing your personal statement:

Is this for a scholarship, or graduate school?

Is this for a Master's or a Ph.D program?

What does your essay prompt ask?

Are there other, supplemental essays that go with this one?

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” 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?

- *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

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.)

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

- “I have always loved _____.”
- “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).