Personal Statements: Five General Tips

Keep in mind that there is no one magic formula for writing a personal statement. Carefully review the expectations and requirements of the school to which you are applying. These general tips will likely be a good starting place, but remember to consult your handbook for more detailed advice.

Be Sincere

It can be difficult to come across as genuine when you know there are certain things you are expected to say. However, while there are certain things that need to be covered, how you go about doing that is largely up to you. Try to focus less on what you think the college “wants to hear” and more on your sincere reasons for applying to their school and why you believe you should be admitted. If you are just reciting things you think need to be said, it will more than likely be obvious to the person who reads it.

Try to avoid obvious clichés, like “I’ve always known that I’ve wanted to study....” or “From a young age, I’ve found myself drawn to...” These sentiments might be the truth for you, but these statements are so overused that they hold little value. Instead of falling into the cliché, try thinking of a story that can pull your reader in. Was there a specific moment in your life that really solidified your interest? Anyone can say they’ve always been interested in something, but fewer people will be able to tell a compelling story to back it up.

Additionally, don’t lay it on too thick. This includes spending excessive time praising the school to which you’re applying. They know they’re a good school. What they don’t know is why you’re a good candidate for their program. You can highlight certain aspects of the school that really impress you, but do it in a way that you’re always showing how this makes you a good fit for the school. For example, maybe the university you’re applying to has advanced laboratory equipment. Instead of just dropping this neat detail, mention how excited you are to see how your research could advance with access to more sophisticated equipment.

If you’re worried that you’re coming off as insincere or ingenuine, ask someone to read your personal statement and tell you what kind of impression you create. Try swapping out clichés with more personal sentiments whenever possible.

Don’t Be Modest

If you don’t feel comfortable writing about yourself, you’re not alone. However, don’t let your discomfort keep you from acknowledging all that you’ve achieved. Lay out your accomplishments clearly, and don’t be afraid to talk yourself up. Of course, don’t exaggerate the significance of your research or present information in a way that’s misleading (for example, if you had only a minor role in a project, don’t act like you were the lead researcher).

Show how the research you’ve done has been valuable. Highlight how you’ve benefitted from your volunteer work. If you’ve achieved something that not many undergraduates can attest to, don’t be afraid to emphasize that detail. There is a distinct line between selling yourself and bragging. You (or anyone who reviews your essay) will be able to tell if you’re overselling yourself or coming across as overly self-important. However, as
long as you’re laying out your accomplishments and being sincere about what you’ve gained from your experiences, you shouldn’t have anything to worry about.

Be Concise but Detailed

Here is where you going to run into the biggest balancing act. Your personal statement likely has a pretty strict word count. There isn’t a lot of room to write, which is why you need to figure out what your most significant strengths are.

A great way to make yourself stand out is to open with a personal anecdote. However, if your anecdote is taking up too much space to get the point across, consider a different strategy. Sensory details can help a reader feel as though they’re there in the moment with you, but they also don’t need to know everything you were seeing/hearing/smelling/etc. Try setting the scene with only a few vivid details.

When you describe your qualifications and experiences, make sure you’re including detail. “I assisted with five different research projects” is a concise statement, but it tells us little about you. It’s also information that can clearly be seen on your CV, which will be looked over as well. Rather than briefly listing everything relevant that you’ve done (which your CV does anyway), try focusing on a few of your strongest areas and really painting a picture of what you did and how you grew as a scholar. It can be helpful to think of a hypothetical applicant whose qualifications are very similar to yours. What things could you say about yourself that would help you stand apart from someone similar?

Show You’ve Done Your Research

In applying to a graduate school, you’ve implicitly decided that you would be a good fit there. Now it’s time to let them know just why you feel that way. Convince the admissions department that not only do you belong at their school, but their school would also be lucky to have you.

Consider mentioning a professor whose research interests closely align with your own or a unique aspect of the program that really makes it right for you. It should be clear that you are very familiar with the program and its goals. Vague details like “it’s a really great program” or “I can definitely see myself there” do little to convince anyone that you’ve done your research and truly want to get into their school.

Embrace Revisions

Your first draft is not going to be perfect. There may be substantial revisions that you need to make. Remember that this does not mean you’re a bad writer. A personal statement is difficult to write, and it’s going to take some hard work.

Have a variety of people read over your personal statement, such as friends, writing center tutors, and faculty. Ask for help at any stage of writing. If you’re completely stuck or only have a few paragraphs done, that’s okay. Reaching out to another person can help you get out of that rut.
It’s significantly easier to go back and modify work you’ve already done than stare at a blank Word Doc and try to figure out where to start. Even if none of your original draft makes it into your final personal statement, it gets easier to keep writing and make revisions once you’ve gotten started.

When you read over drafts of your personal statement, don’t just be on the lookout for typos and grammar errors. Think critically about how ideas are flowing together. Are you missing key pieces of information or maybe spending too much time on one aspect? Are you including enough detail, but not too much?

Above all else, remember that writing is not a solitary process. Personal statements are not easy, but there are people to help you out. If you ever need more advice, stop by the McNair Office. We have several resources, writing guides, and staff who are happy to help you.