



Checklist: Writing a Personal Statement

Contributors: UWC Staff

I'm Just Starting

Things to do...

Research

Read about each program and related faculty members online. Find personal statement guidelines for each school/program you're applying to and print out any prompts for quick reference.

Outline

Using the prompts that each school/program has given you, make an outline of the question(s) that each essay needs to answer. If your personal statement is open-ended (it has no guidelines) below are some common questions that personal statements should address:

- Why have you chosen this specific program/school over others?
- What kinds of scholarly work do you intend to do?
- Are there any members of faculty that you hope to work with? Why?
- What is grad school a necessary step in your career path?
- Why are you a good "fit" for the program?
- What should an admissions committee know about you that your resume, CV, or writing sample won't tell them?

Brainstorm

Answer the questions on the Personal Statements Brainstorming Worksheet. Use your answers to begin composing a draft. Remember, your statement doesn't need to be perfect yet; a quick draft will help get the ball rolling.

Read examples

Familiarize yourself with the "look and feel" of effective personal statements by taking a look at some examples of winning essays. Remember: examples should only be used to help you brainstorm. Don't get caught up trying to make your essay sound like someone else's.

Talk to a mentor

Speak with a faculty member in your discipline that knows you well (such as a professor that will be writing you a letter of recommendation). Often, they can give you some insight on the strengths you should emphasize in your essay.



I've Started, but I Need Some Help

Things to do...

Brainstorm

Answer the questions on the Personal Statements Brainstorming Worksheet. Try to incorporate your answers into your draft.

Free write

Spend 15 minutes writing without editing yourself. Answer the questions that your program has asked quickly, honestly, and without worrying about grammar or style. If your personal statement is open-ended (it has no guidelines) below are some common questions that personal statements should address:

- Why have you chosen this specific program/school over others?
- What kinds of scholarly work do you intend to do?
- Are there any members of faculty that you hope to work with? Why?
- Why is grad school a necessary step in your career path?
- Why are you a good “fit” for the program?
- What should the admissions committee know about you that your resume, CV, or writing sample won't tell them?

Talk to a writing consultant

Just having a conversation about the program and your personal statement can sometimes reveal new ideas and directions for your writing.

Write your thesis

Write down the most important reason that your application should be selected in one sentence. Use your best sentence as your thesis. Has everything you've written for your personal statement thus far support your thesis? What other evidence do you need to make your case? A writing consultant can help you with this exercise.



I Have a Draft That I'd Like to Revise

Things to do...

Proofread

Check your draft for mechanical errors and typos that may have been missed by spell-check.

Review

Read through your essay and use the questions below to think critically about your writing:

- Have I explained why I've chosen this particular program, as opposed to others?
- Have I demonstrated knowledge of my discipline?
- Have I supported each of the claims I make about myself with examples and evidence?
- Have I described why this program is necessary to achieve my career goals?
- Do I sound confident?

Talk to a writing consultant

Consultants will not only help you with mechanics but can also provide a fresh perspective on your writing. Unlike professors or colleagues that already know you well, a consultant will likely be learning about your ambitions for the first time, just like an admissions committee.

Share your draft

Schedule a time to read over your draft with a faculty mentor in your discipline. They may have a good idea of what admissions committees in your field will be looking for.

Work on your hook

Have a few people read the first couple of sentences and ask them if, based only on what they've read, they're interested in finding out more. A writing consultant can help you find ways to make your hook more engaging.

Read examples

Check out some examples of winning personal statements to get some more ideas on interesting hooks and effective writing styles. Remember: examples should only be used to help you brainstorm. Don't get caught up trying to make your essay sound like someone else's. Be yourself, be honest, and be confident in your writing.



Personal Statement Brainstorming Worksheet

1. What is the best part about working in your field?
2. What made you realize that this career path was a perfect fit for you?
3. What was the most fascinating thing you learned about your field as an undergraduate?
4. What was the most difficult assignment or academic project you undertook as an undergraduate? How would this prepare you for grad school?
5. Have you ever worked or volunteered in your field outside of school? If so, what advantages did this experience offer that a classroom couldn't?
6. What do you see yourself doing 10 years from now? Why do you need grad school to do it?
7. What factors did you consider when you chose the schools/programs that you are applying to? Why were they important?
8. Think of a professor in your field that you've had already and that you like and respect. If this person were reading your application essay, what would most impress him or her?