Finding Your Voice in Personal Statements

Adapted from the University of Colorado Denver Writing Center

Your personal statement is an opportunity for an admissions or review committee to get to know you, the “you” that cannot be captured in CV or resume. For that reason, it is important to be confident, be honest, and be yourself. Below are four common writing mistakes that “hide” your individual voice and undermine the effectiveness of your essay.

**Academic Voice**
Excessive academic language can make a personal statement seem overwrought and artificial. **Write as though you are speaking with a colleague,** rather than publishing in a journal.

*Instead of:*
- “Based on extensive personal experience and exemplary coursework, medicine is obviously a challenge that will last a lifetime.”

*Try:*
- “I have spent a lifetime preparing to join the field of medicine, because it challenges and excites me.”

*Instead of:*
- “The profundity of the didactic and stochastic exemplifications of my academic career naturally gravitate a candidate of my paramount abilities towards fulfilling the raison d’etre of my presence in your program.”

*Try:*
- “I am very well-rounded, and my broad knowledge makes me a great candidate for your program.”

**Passive Voice**
The use of passive voice can muddle the meaning of your sentences and can downplay the importance of your accomplishments.

In **active voice,** the subject performs the action of the verb. For example: “I wrote the personal statement.” In **passive voice,** the original subject moves to the position of the direct object so that the verb is no longer connected to the true subject of the sentence. For example: “The personal statement was written by me.”

Find passive voice in your essay by looking for “to be” forms of verbs such as “am, is, was, were, are, been” or “to have” forms such as “have, has, or had”. Passive sentences also often have “by” phrases, as seen in the example given above.

*Instead of:*
- “I got two academic internships, and was a member of the Honor Society…”

*Try:*
- “I excelled in two academic internships, and was inducted into the Honor Society.”
Instead of:

- “The scholarships were awarded to me because I have earned good grades and have worked as a Teaching Assistant.”

Try:

- “I won academic scholarships for my high GPA and undergraduate work as a Teaching Assistant.”

**Hedging**

“Hedging” refers to writing that uses qualifiers and vagueness to create a tone of modesty. **Your personal statement is not a place to be modest.** Some examples of common hedging words: “Seems, tends, may, might, suggests, often, usually, probable, assume, conceivable, sometimes, believe.”

Instead of:

- “Although I may seem an unlikely candidate for law school, my passion makes it likely that I will succeed.”

Try:

- “My passion for the law drives me to achieve at the highest levels.”

Instead of:

- “I believe that veterinary medicine may be the best path for me.”

Try:

- “Veterinary medicine is the best path for me, because…”

**Addressing Negative Information**

Using your personal statement to address negative aspects of your educational background is often unnecessary unless a negative experience can showcase positive qualities about yourself. If you do choose to address low grades or bad test scores, for example, place the emphasis on what you learned or how you changed as a result of these experiences.

Instead of:

- “My grades fell because I had to work two jobs to pay for rent and food.”

Try:

- “My strong sense of self-reliance really helped me keep my life together when financial issues started to impact my school work.”

Instead of:

- “My test scores were low. but I’m sure that my recommendations will make up for it.”

Try:

- “I have created associations with the foremost biological researchers, including Dr. John Smith and Dr. Jane Jones. These mentoring relationships have convinced me that bioethical research is both personally fascinating and essential to humanity.”