

The Personal Statement

I. How to start the essay

For many students, the hardest part of applying to professional school is crafting a personal statement that is well written and thought provoking. Do not focus on grabbing the attention of the reader. Think instead of what you would like the admissions committee to know about you. Do not repeat information that is provided elsewhere in the application. Instead, explain who you are, how you think, what motivates you, and what your goals are. Your personal statement is also an opportunity to explain, embellish, and emphasize. Keep it positive. Only very rarely would it be a good idea to be bitter, angry, apologetic, sad or negative.

Students sometimes place a good deal of pressure on themselves to produce a perfect document in the first draft. The ideal personal statement is the final product of many drafts and rewrites. The first step is to put your thoughts on paper. At first, don't worry about the order of these thoughts or organizing them around a specific theme. You may wish to begin by describing your interests. This might lead naturally into a discussion of your motivation, an explanation of your desire to study law, medicine, dentistry, etc. Think of events, thoughts, ideas, situations, experiences, etc., which speak about you as a person. Explain why these events have special meaning for you. Don't worry about length limitations for the essay at the outset. Write as much as you need to, then worry later about making it shorter. Likewise, do not be concerned with awkward or rough transitions in the first draft. Smoothness and polish can be added later.

Almost any life experience, good or bad, can be relevant and positive if described properly. In the journey through life, everyone encounters adversity. Strong and resilient individuals will learn, adjust, and grow in response. Share something of your life history with the reader. Explain how your responses to these experiences influenced your personal development. How have you matured? What did you learn? How has all of this prepared you to be a better professional? What evidence can you provide that you are a mature, adaptable, and resilient person? Have you performed well under pressure? Can you juggle multiple tasks? Have you faced unusual challenges such as the need to work, family responsibilities, and so on? How have you applied classroom knowledge to life at large? Have you gained independence, self-awareness, and competence? Your personal statement is your principal opportunity to provide answers to these important questions.

Start writing early, and then put your essay away before trying to revise it. If nothing else does, the passage of time will give you a fresh outlook. Ask your friends to

read and comment on your essay, and offer to do the same for them. Faculty members, staff advisors, supervisors of volunteer and work experiences, and family members should also be approached for comments. This is no time to be shy or inordinately proud of your writing abilities. Get as much input as you can.

II. Creating a framework.

Once your thoughts are on paper, the next step is to create a coherent framework. An appropriate frame enhances even a painting by a great master. Without structure and focus, your essay, though it may be filled with wonderful ideas, will not have an impact. Creating a framework can be approached systematically. First, read through the first draft to see if any themes are apparent. As described above, this may be done more effectively if some time has elapsed since the initial writing. Next, consider whether there may be some seminal event in your life history that could be described as a turning point. See whether this event, and its antecedents and consequences, may be stretched into a thread that can run through your narrative and tie it together. As an alternative, consider whether a single topic or event can be discussed at the beginning and end of your essay. Many films begin and end with the same scene to complete the narrative and create greater understanding by the audience. In a similar way, your essay can bring the reader full circle to complete and perfect your story. These are just a few of the many literary devices you might use. When in doubt, however, don't forget the straightforward approach. Simply tell your story in a clear and convincing way. Start at the beginning and end at the end. Consider the most common advice given to those who are learning public speaking. Tell them what you are going to tell them, then tell them, and then tell them what you just told them.

III. Problem Areas

Some students have what may be called an "I" problem. This problem consists of an overuse of "I", especially at the beginning of sentences. Consider the following example.

"I have always known that I could be a first-class doctor if only I was given a chance. I am sure that I could aid the suffering in my community with my medical degree. I think the medical profession is one in which I want to excel, so I have spent all my spare time studying so that I would have all the knowledge that I need."

Excessive use of this single word makes you sound, at best, like an unimaginative writer and at worst, egotistical. Certainly your essay is about you and your achievements, but use the first person singular sparingly. In general, it is important to vary your sentence structure. Start your sentences in different ways.

Another common problem occurs when students write paragraphs that are not clear or coherent. Just as the whole document needs structure, so does each paragraph. Remembering the acronym IDEAS may be helpful. The I stands for the main idea of the paragraph. What are you trying to say? The theme of a paragraph reveals its focus and purpose. D refers to the development of the main idea. How will you explain the idea? Will you analyze, compare, contrast, or take other approaches? E stands for example. Provide examples to support the idea you are presenting. Make sure the examples are

relevant. A refers to analysis. Show your experience has prepared you to become a first-rate professional. Finally, S stands for summing up. Finish off your paragraph with a summary and a connection to the next paragraph.

Some students may also be excessively verbose. This affliction is sign undisciplined writing, an unwillingness to edit, or an inability to be concise. In speech, verbosity may be excusable as a sign of nervousness, but in writing it is another matter. Read and re-read each sentence and consider whether your points could be made better with fewer words. Write in an active voice rather than passive. Your sentences will be clearer, more direct, and shorter. Don't be afraid to add a few prepositions where they are needed. Otherwise you may be tempted to string together nouns as if they were adjectives. For example, "I served as president of the senior class reception program committee" might be better written, "I served as president of the program committee for the senior class reception."

There are, of course, many other pitfalls. Eschew complex, rare, or esoteric words. They can be annoying and may disrupt the flow of your narrative. Run-on sentences or excessive use of commas should be avoided. Purge your final draft of gross generalizations and prejudice. Alternate the structure of your sentences to create variety and avoid monotony. Be kind to your readers. The easier your statement flows together within its framework, the better the results will be.

IV. How important is the personal statement.

The personal statement can be critically important. The information you provide to admissions committees on application forms, transcripts, and via standardized tests will merely get you in the door. Typically, their initial screening will yield many more worthy applicants than can be accommodated in the first-year class. Careful reading of the personal statements is likely to play an important role in the second cut. If you were an admissions committee member faced with a surplus of well-qualified applicants, wouldn't you favor those who can write more effectively, think more critically, are strongly motivated, and are more compassionate? In a sea of bright shining faces, your personal statement gives you the chance to stand out, to shine more brightly.

Imagine that you barely made the first cut, that there is deficiency in GPA, test scores, or extracurricular activities that tarnishes your luster as a candidate. By grace or good luck you made it this far, but according to the numbers, you are unlikely to survive the second cut. In this situation, your personal statement assumes a critical significance. In a positive, mature, "glass half full" sort of way, you must explain and excuse yourself. Perhaps you had to live at home to save money and baby-sit your younger brother so you were unable to attend late afternoon meetings of premedical societies. Perhaps you never applied for an unpaid summer internship in a law firm because you had to earn money to get through the next semester. Perhaps there was a divorce, a car accident, a lingering illness, or some other personal or family problem. Such information may have a place in your personal statement as a way of explaining deficiencies. You must be very careful with this approach, however. Don't feel sorry for yourself, dwell on adversity, or try to evoke pity. You will only convince the readers that you have serious and unresolved

personal issues that could stand in the way of your professional development. Keep the tone upbeat, optimistic, and hopeful. Emphasize what you learned from the experience and how it helped build you character. Don't whine or play the victim. Make your story one of triumph over adversity. Don't say "I couldn't do better because of all these terrible things that happened to me," but rather, "Look at all I accomplished despite these setbacks." More than any other type of essay, one of this sort would benefit greatly from the opinions of others before submission.

V. How to address volunteer experiences and extracurricular activities.

Do not present your activities in a list, as if they were all equally important. Instead, focus on particular activities that tell the most about you. What you did is not as important as what you learned, both about the activity and about yourself. Be sure to address these points. Consider that the ideal service experience is mutual and reciprocal. What did you take away and what did you contribute?

VI. When you think you are finished, check it again.

When you have done all the above and you are on the umpteenth and final draft, resist the temptation to pronounce yourself finished. As time allows, find one more person to give you constructive criticism, put the essay aside, re-read it yourself, then do the truly final editing. With this approach, you can see that the importance of starting early cannot be overemphasized.

Bibliography

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