

## Personal Statements: Getting Started

A personal statement generally gives the writer freedom to decide what to include. However, you do need a theme or purpose to your writing and need to make connections for the reader so that it is clear why you have included what you have. The personal statement should usually cover your **reasons for pursuing graduate work** and what you hope to do with it (i.e. **goals**), your **reasons for choosing this school**, any **problem areas** (low test scores, a poor GPA one year) and any special **characteristics, values, experiences**, etc. that have prepared you or influenced your decision and goals.

There are often specific questions asked as well. Be sure to **answer the questions fully** and **stay focused**. Answers don't have to be long, just complete.

One way to **organize your essay** is chronologically, starting with your personal background, moving into your schooling/experiences that prepared you for graduate work, and ending with goals and program fit.

**The introduction** should introduce your theme and grab the reader's attention. Avoid generic introductions such as "I've decided to study \_\_\_\_ because..." or "I grew up in \_\_\_\_\_."

**Tell a story.** Stories are memorable and unique—exactly what you want your statement to be. Make sure your stories have points that reinforce the theme.

**Be specific.** Demonstrate your knowledge and connection with the field and school by showing things you have read, projects or work you have done, or things you have learned that make you a good match.

**Remember the audience.** You're writing this to a specific audience of professionals. You need to stand out, but not use gimmicks or try to be cute or funny (although some humor is okay). They do not know anything about you except what you tell them, so be personal, speak in your own voice and be focused. Add information that may not be in the rest of the application and make sure your interest and motivation for this field/program is clear. Do more research if you need to—"You are the #1 school in this area" is not enough of a reason.

**Proofread.** This is serious, professional and graduate level writing. While it is personal, there is no excuse for bad grammar, spelling and punctuation.

### Questions to consider:

- What first interested me about this field and what have I learned or done since that has caused me to pursue it/be better prepared for it?
- What is special or unique about me and my life experiences?
- What motivates me?
- What are my goals related to this field of study?
- What circumstances or experiences have shaped me or influenced me in a significant way?
- Have I overcome any significant challenges or obstacles in my life and what did I learn?
- What personal characteristics do I have that set me apart or make me a good candidate (integrity, dependability, compassion, persistence, etc.)?
- What skills, values, abilities and attitudes do I have that I learned or make me a strong applicant?

These questions can help you brainstorm ideas to further develop. Narrow down your ideas to the most significant or best fit to your overall point, then let them build on each other. Make sure your conclusion makes a strong finish by emphasizing the connection and relevance of what you included and reemphasizing why this program/field is a good fit.