

## Guidelines to Writing a Personal Statement

A personal statement is an essay about yourself. It should result from extensive soul-searching and deep deliberation. It is a personal invitation into your mind that reveals that you understand yourself and know where you are going. Your life has a past, present and future. The three questions that your personal statement should answer are: *Who am I?* (present), *How did I get that way?* (past), and *Where am I going?* (future). By the time the readers have finished your personal statement, they need to be able to answer those questions and then want to ask you more questions. You hope that the readers will be interested enough in you to want to meet and talk with you. You want them to have follow-up questions.

### **How should you begin?**

What is the purpose of this personal statement? Is it for a scholarship application? A premed interview? Application to the Honors Program? Read as much material about the scholarship or program and its mission. Jot down characteristics that they are looking for (i.e. “*an American ambassador of goodwill to people from other countries – Fulbright Scholarship*”)

You want to keep these concepts in mind. Jot down keywords, phrases, and ideas that come to mind.

**Reflect** Since this document will easily go through many revisions, let the first draft be a proverbially dumping of ideas (many of which may later be dropped). What have you done that demonstrates desirable characteristics (leadership, perseverance, adaptability, etc.)?

**Think** about your audience. Who are they? Being able to connect with your reader is essential. Come up with a particular person you are writing for; a name, a face, a personality. What are they expecting? Read the application very, very carefully.

**Brainstorm**. What are you passionate about? What are the three areas of your life to which you devote the most time, energy, and effort? What are the major influences in your life? What have you learned about yourself from those experiences? What are your plans after college? Where do you see yourself in five years? Ten years? What defines who you are? How do your academic studies tie into your passions?

**Be a storyteller:** People like to be told stories, to be entertained. If reviewers need to read several applications and personal statements they may not make it through one that is boring and dry. One that tells a story motivates the reader to keep reading with interest. Your goal is to make the reader want to meet you. You may need to write more than three stories in order to discover your very best stories. Think about life-changing experiences. Through those stories, the readers will see who you are. They will see you living out what is most important to you. They will learn enough about you to be able to ask you questions. Include details and anecdotes. Be as specific as possible.

**Avoid using the first person pronouns of I, my me or mine.** When you use *I*, you are communicating that you are getting ready to say something very important. Because your name is the title of the personal statement, you do not need to say *I think*. Rather than begin a sentence with *I*, begin it with a noun like volunteering, computer science, or yoga. Try to limit yourself to no more than 4 “I”s in a personal statement. **Note:** be careful not to let verbs become passive in this process.

**Sincerity – Authenticity** Your tone should be VERY HONEST, sincere, and factual. If you have overcome an obstacle, tell them. If there is something in your background that is unusual, tell them. You don’t need to tell anything that is private. The readers of this document want to know how you are *different from* other students. Do not repeat information that your audience can glean from your curriculum vitae or application. Avoid being pompous or boring.

A personal statement should **NOT** be...

- An academic paper with you as the subject
- A resume in text
- A journal entry
- A plea or justification

**Be organized.** Remember the parameters that your English composition teacher talked about: an introduction, topic sentences in paragraphs, and a conclusion. The audience should be able to read your personal statement ONCE, understand your main points, and remember you! After reading about your experiences, the readers should have a sense of what kind of a person you are. You don’t tell them your personality characteristics. They figure out what kind of a person you are by reading about your experiences. You trust the readers to figure out who you are!

**Editing is vital.** Write – Think – Rewrite – Think – Rewrite....

You reveal so much about yourself by how careful you are about proofreading. Check the spelling and punctuation. Be sure your capitalization is right. Read your personal statement aloud. Does it sound all right? If you have to stop and re-read something, you need to work on that sentence. Let a variety of people read and give suggestions about your personal statement. Encourage input from parents and friends. Ask them to circle anything that they do not understand. It is perfectly all right to get help.

Is your personal statement ... readable? , ...understandable? ...clear? ...not rambling?

**Be creative.** Use your imagination. Use a metaphor, analogy, or motif to give your paper cohesion. Look for recurring ideas and themes to emphasize. Make reference to specific people, incidents, and books that have influenced your life. Include a favorite quotation. You want to communicate the flavor of your personality. You can best accomplish this goal by including specifics from your personal experience. Describe three or four snapshots from the photograph album of your life that distinguish you and reveal new information about you that is not available in your transcript or curriculum vitae.

**Getting Personal: What Students Should or Should Not Say about Themselves on Scholarship Applications.** A. Scott Henderson, Furman University

#### **5 things to AVOID:**

1. Responses that resemble a talking family tree. Reviewers are interested in the applicant, not his or her great-great-great-grandfather who was a Justice of the Peace in the Kansas Territory. Mentioning mothers, fathers, brother and/or sisters is OK if doing so provides greater insights about the applicant. (i.e. *"Having been raised in a single-parent household..."* – This would be appropriate)
2. No-so-thinly-veiled or unapologetically trumpeted reasons why the applicant deserves, more than any other living person, to get the prize, scholarship, fellowship, admission to medical or law school, etc. (i.e. *"So as you can see, my whole life has prepared me to be a Rhodes Scholar."* – This would NOT be appropriate))
3. Boasting about particular accomplishments, especially relatively unimportant ones. (i.e. *"Ever since I won the school spelling bee in third grade, I realized the importance of hard work!"* – This would NOT be appropriate))
4. Gratuitous or otherwise inexplicable revelations about personal attributes that aren't connected with anything else the applicant has said. Such revelations are OK if they are relevant to the applicant's identity and/or long-term goals. (i.e. *"My abiding passion for civil rights stems from the fact that, as a gay male, I have been the victim of bigotry and discrimination"* – This would be appropriate if you are OK with the audience knowing this information).
5. Comparisons between the applicant and a famous person, living or dead. (i.e. *"I was happy to see that my views are the same as John Dewey's, inasmuch as we both believe that "the best education is the best education for everyone."* – This would NOT be appropriate))

#### **5 things to TARGET:**

1. Sincerity and authenticity. This is why quotations often don't work. The applicant should speak from his/her heart. Applicants should not say what they think reviewers want to hear. This includes encomia about the namesakes of the award, honor, etc. if there is one. Talking about a personal flaw or defeat (with proper finessing) is OK.
2. A consistent tone. Applicants, particularly on items that ask for personal information, should try to maintain the same tone that exists throughout the rest of the application. Otherwise, that response/section might sound flippant or ghost written.
3. Mentioning something significant or telling that has not been revealed elsewhere in the application. Such references should not be gratuitous. (see #4 above) or trivial ("Most people don't know that my favorite color is blue.")
4. Highlighting (when appropriate) the connections between the applicant's personal characteristics and the topics/issues that he/she has investigated (or wants to investigate).
5. Prompting the following reaction from the reviewer. *"I want to meet this person!"*

**A suggestion:** Listen to a variety of personal statements from the National Public Radio ***"This I Believe..."*** series. Americans from all walks of life share the personal philosophies and core values that guide their everyday lives. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4538138>

**A note about plagiarism:** Many national scholarship committees now use plagiarism detection software for personal statements and essays. Guess what? They do find some personal statements are plagiarized!