

Writing Personal Statements

Good personal statements are vital. But they are tough to write. Here are three ideas to help you keep the task in perspective:

1. Space constraints are often frustrating . . . but your competitors face them too.
2. A good personal essay comes in handy. You can rework it for many settings.
3. Many students find that writing the personal statement helps them clarify who they are and where they are going. This is inherently good.

In a Nutshell

Most good personal statements share *three core elements*. You need to:

1. Share your goals. People are looking to invest in your potential so they need to know your plan. They need to see a sense of purpose.
2. Connect your goals to the opportunity for which you are applying. Demonstrate the synergy between their goals and yours.
3. Share your story. The reader needs to know:
 - How life experience has formed and shaped your direction.
 - How you have pursued and prepared for your future goals thus far.

Good Storytelling

Good museums arrange interesting artifacts and/or exhibits into a coherent floor plan. And history unfolds as the visitor walks through. Personal statements aim for the same thing. You need to present *telling details* about your life in a logical *narrative order*.

Telling Details

You should not rehash your resume. Strive to make you and your life experience vivid in ways that complement the resume instead. Provide details that reveal important things about you:

1. When/how you arrived at your future goals.
2. What continues to motivate you regarding those goals today.
3. What personal traits you have developed.
4. What items on your resume and transcript actually mean/were actually like.
5. What has prepared you for the opportunity at hand.
6. What personal challenges you have faced.
7. What has shaped your identity and/or outlook.

Narrative Order

Organize those telling details to help you articulate the core elements sketched above. Develop a logical narrative thread that will tie the paragraphs together. Several samples to illustrate:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. I hope to do X in my career. | 1. I experienced A recently. |
| 2. A was my first encounter with X. | 2. It changed my mind about career X. |
| 3. B and C confirmed my desire to work in X. | 3. It got me thinking about career Y. |
| 4. I believe your opportunity will help me accomplish X because . . . | 4. B and C confirmed that Y was right for me. |
| 5. I feel that D and E have prepared me for this opportunity. | 5. D and E will prove valuable even though they were related to X. |
| | 6. Your opportunity is the right next step because . . . |

How to Generate Detail

Anecdotes help you share telling details. They are specific slices of personal experience that help the reader get a mental picture of you in your world. And they make the essay more memorable and more fun to read. Here are five examples to illustrate:

Bad	Bland	Better
I interned in DC.	I learned a lot about government working in DC last summer.	We stayed far into the night, drinking coffee every half hour and scouring budget amendments. I began to see how much the Senate relies on youth.
My family was a big influence on me.	I saw how hard my family worked to ensure that I did well in school.	My mom used to pass out math worksheets to keep me occupied on the long drive to see Grandma. And then grandma would grade them.
I have integrity.	I tried to discourage cheating as a tutor.	As a tutor, I saw that a student was drawing a map on his hand before a test. I confronted him . . .
I changed my mind about being PreVet.	I did not like working at the animal clinic and dropped PreVet.	After having to euthanize a healthy beagle, per the wishes of its callous owner, I decided I could never run a veterinary clinic.
I really grew from my time abroad.	I became more independent by living alone in Hungary.	I knew my time in Budapest had changed me when I found myself helping others navigate the Berlin subway during a weekend trip.

Note that the *Better* column presents scenes you could film. Good anecdotes help the reader see something in their head when they read.

Drafting

So you know what to do. How do you get the pen moving or the keyboard rattling? A few ideas:

1. Scribble down a list of things that readers might be interested in.
 - How do you spend your time? What accomplishments are you proud of?
 - When did you display your best personal traits?
 - What are your most interesting life experiences? Your most powerful memories?
2. Use the writing process as a vehicle for discovery.
 - Consider writing several different drafts. Experiment.
 - You might try outlining the points you intend to make / anecdotes you might present.
 - Try banging out whatever pops into your head for thirty minutes and then return later to see what seems promising.
3. Consider the stories behind your resume.
 - What do items on your resume mean to you? What have you learned from them? What was the highlight of each?
 - Jot down these insights and consider how they might build into anecdotes that will bring your record to life.

Cutting and Polishing

Good writing is a recursive process that requires revision and careful editing.

1. Try not to fall madly in love with your first draft. It is probably not very good.
2. Set your draft aside if time permits. Read it later with fresh eyes.
3. Get input from critical readers. “Looks good” is not actually helpful.
4. Sweat over the editing. Worry about word choice and word economy (as well as grammar and spelling) once you are happy with the content overall.
5. Remember this warning from Thornton Wilder: “If you write to impress it will always be bad, but if you write to express, it will be good.”