

What is a personal statement?

The personal statement, also called the statement of purpose, is a special type of writing sample. Personal statements are commonly requested when applying for scholarships and graduate / professional schools. They may also be requested for certain types of jobs, such as competitive teaching and research appointments in education, for positions with non-profit organizations, or for internship applications.

So what is a personal statement? It is a writing sample describing you at your best, your reasons for choosing the field you have chosen, your research interests, your objectives, and the unique ways you can contribute to the program / organization to which you are applying. **A statement of purpose is designed to communicate five things:**

1. **Writing abilities** – grammar, punctuation, organization, creativity, expression, etc.
2. **Connections** between your past education / experiences and future goals.
3. **Your philosophy** of the field and why you are pursuing an opportunity in that area.
4. **What makes you unique** and how you can add to the diversity of the program.
5. **How you can be an asset** to the organization or the school, now and in the future.

What makes a personal statement compelling?

Good personal statements tell stories that demonstrate your strengths.

1. **Knowing your strengths** – How can you be of value or how can you contribute? Begin by looking at your good experiences for evidence of your strengths and then ask those who know you best for their thoughts. Don't overlook the value of a true friend's honest assessment of your strengths. Many people find they have hidden strengths that are only obvious to their close friends and family.
2. **Knowing your audience** – Research the program(s) and organization(s) to which you are applying through online searches, reading catalog / program descriptions, and emailing for more information. Talk with professors, graduate students, advisers, and colleagues met during internships.
3. **Making a good case for the “match”** between you and the program or organization to which you are applying.
4. **Telling a story that demonstrates your strengths with examples** and that sets you apart from others and shows how you can contribute. Avoid just writing a first-person essay where each paragraph is a direct response to the points you are being asked to address. Avoid starting every sentence with “I” or “I want.”

How do I get started?

1. Set a timetable for yourself. Ideally, you should work on your essay for at least a month.
2. Identify your strengths. The Center for Career Services Career Guide includes several Dependable Strengths exercises (<http://depts.washington.edu/careers/guides/>).
3. Ask yourself some hard questions:
 - a. **Intellectual influences:** Who were your favorite professors (and why)? Identify the best paper you ever wrote, the most influential book you have read, and the single most important concept you have learned.
 - b. **Encouragement:** Recall and write out the actual words of a professor, teacher, or someone else in your life who encouraged you to go in this direction.
 - c. **Turning points:** Where were you and what were you doing when you first thought of going in this particular direction? How have your interests evolved?
 - d. **Experiences:** List volunteer, travel, family, and life experiences that have inspired you to go in this career direction.
 - e. **Academics:** How have you prepared yourself to succeed?
 - f. **Skills:** What skills have you honed through the experiential and educational choices you have made?
 - g. **Personal attributes:** What personal attributes make you particularly likely to succeed?
4. Be sure to tailor your statement to the individual scholarship / department / program to which you are applying.
5. Create an outline for each paragraph before you write it, making sure that all components of the question being asked are addressed.

What are some basic tips for writing a personal statement?

Content

1. Tell concrete, vivid stories and examples to demonstrate your strengths and “match.”
2. Don't have too many different ideas in your essay – only include information that supports your thesis or is consistent with your theme.
3. Don't exaggerate or make things up.

Expression

1. Write in the active voice.
2. Be yourself – don't use words or styles you wouldn't normally use
3. Be clear, concise, and direct. Make each word meaningful.
4. Try not to repeat an idea too many times.
5. Don't write an autobiography. You are marketing yourself, not telling your life story.
6. Don't be a clown (although some humor can be appropriate).

Organization

1. Follow directions regarding length. If no limit is given, aim for 1.5 to 2 pages of single-spaced text.
2. Don't start your essay with "I was born in" or anything similar to this statement.
3. Start your essay with an attention-grabbing lead – an anecdote, quote, question, vivid description of a scene, etc.
4. Link your paragraphs with transitions.
5. End your essay with a conclusion that refers to the introduction, relates to your theme, or summarizes your main points.

Editing

1. Revise your essay at least three times.
2. Ask someone to critique your personal statement.
3. Proofread! Don't rely exclusively on your computer for spell check and grammar check.

Where can I find out more?

Books

Graduate Admission Essays: Write Your Way Into the Graduate School of Your Choice. (by Donald Asher, 2000, Ten Speed Press)

How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School. (by Richard J. Stelzer, 1997, Petersons Guides, Inc.)

Websites

<http://www.petersons.com>

<http://www.accepted.com>

<http://www.gradschools.com>

<http://www.black-collegian.com>

University of Washington Resources

Undergraduate Scholarship Office

<http://www.washington.edu/students/ugrad/scholar/>

The Undergraduate Scholarship Office is designed to help UW students find, apply for, and win scholarships. It is located in 120 Mary Gates Hall. Office hours are Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

University of Washington Writing Centers

<http://faculty.washington.edu/jwholmes/uwwrite.html>

University of Washington Women's Center, Statement of Purpose Writing Workshop

<http://depts.washington.edu/womenctr/>

Poor Personal Statement

Having graduated with an MA in English from Purdue University, with an emphasis on the writing of poetry, I feel that I have come a long way as a writer. I think that my poetry is strong, but I also feel that I need to continue in a concentrated study of writing and poetry. This is an important stage for me, and I think that continuing in a writing program - especially one as strong as the University of Washington program - is the best way for me to accomplish my goals.

Eventually, I would like to be teaching poetry writing at the college level. After teaching creative writing at Purdue, I realize that it is something that I would like to continue doing as a career, along with writing my poetry. I have also taught composition at Purdue, and I enjoy teaching at that level as well.

If accepted into the program at UW, upon graduation I would like to teach composition, and continue to write and publish poems, in the hopes that I will eventually be able to publish enough to allow me to gain employment as a creative writing teacher.

Better Personal Statement

Every morning at 10:00 a.m. I come face to face with the power of language to free; it happens in a classroom. The students I teach at Seattle Central Community College come from night work in an industrial bakery, from a Vietnamese refugee camp, from a 9-to-5 job in a car wash, or from the day care center where they've left their children. All come to the English Skills Shop to improve their use of language and they move through the same process I have undertaken: uncovering their voices. When they get discouraged, I read aloud excerpts from their own writing. They applaud themselves. In this room, their varied experiences count. I remind them that the only reason to learn how to write well is because they have something to say. And they do.

Until this past summer, I had no training in creative writing, nor even in literature; all my knowledge was absorbed like trace minerals from mass consumption of contemporary American fiction. The writer who does most masterfully what I attempt in my own stories is Wallace Stegner. He makes the intricate webs connecting his characters visible by illuminating the tears of dew balanced on each strand. Last summer I enrolled at the University of Washington and have been working ever since to find resonance in my own stories and study the voices within others'. Through an advanced short story class and a creative writing conference, along with literature and critical theory classes, I've become a more critical reader and a better writer.

I'm looking for a graduate program which combines the two elements I've found most valuable in my recent studies: strong mentors and tight community. I seek teachers who can pull me out of the details of words and phrases to see the whole piece, its form and contradictions. I seek guidance; the self-motivation is there. To balance the hours of solitary writing, I want a graduate program which nurtures a supportive community.

Throughout this process of thawing my voice, I've taken periods of formal training and applied the techniques; I see graduate school as one of these steps. Through it I expect to move to another level in my writing and my self, the ability to honestly and compellingly explore the world through stories. The stronger and more fluid the connection between my life and my writing, the better I'll be able to teach that connection to others. I'd like to write my own stories and teach others how to write theirs. In the end, both undertakings help us all find our voices.

Good Personal Statement (with commentary)

My awakening to the wonder of human cultural diversity began with my entry into Army Basic Training. Living in an open barracks for three months with women from every corner of the United States opened my eyes and mind to the amazing variety of cultural groups just within our own country. Since then, I have lived, worked, and traveled in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. I gained invaluable cross-cultural experience as a member of a multi-national task force, which provided Emergency Medical Service in Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm. In addition to these experiences, my Army training has enabled me to develop strong skills in leadership, teambuilding, and organization. These are all qualities that will help me to be successful in my chosen field of Community Health Nursing.

[In this paragraph, she shares her turning points, skills, and attributes. She also connects her past and present.]

I have chosen the focus area of cross-cultural nursing because I know that making health programs culturally accessible is as important as making them geographically and financially accessible. This has been clearly demonstrated to me at the Washington Poison Center where we provide telephone information services to the entire state of Washington. Poison Center services are underutilized by non-English speaking population groups and those with English as a second language. This is due in part to a lack of awareness of or understanding of the services provided by the Poison Center. Cross-cultural health education is the key to informing these populations of the benefits of using Poison Center services.

[In this paragraph, she discusses why she is applying for this program and talks about some related experiences.]

As a cross-cultural nursing consultant I will work with multidisciplinary teams planning and implementing community health programs for underserved populations. I will bring to these teams the unique nursing perspective and an expertise in the effects of culture on health-seeking behaviors. Washington State has a rapidly growing Hispanic population with a large subculture of migrant farm workers. I intend to spend some time in rural eastern Washington working with Public Health officials and community leaders to increase the focus on primary prevention for this population group. I am also interested in working with Hispanic populations in other locations. With these plans in mind, I am currently studying Spanish. In addition, I plan to teach cross-cultural nursing subjects in the academic setting and in other venues such as hospital in-service training.

[In this paragraph, she talks about her future goals. She also describes why she is a unique candidate.]

Researching and Deciding on Graduate or Professional Schools:

http://www.jobweb.com/Career_Development/gguides.htm

Questions to ask when considering a PhD: <http://www.phd-survey.org/advice/advice.htm>

Law School Admissions Council: <http://www.lsac.org/>

Applying to medical school: <http://www.aamc.org/students/applying/start.htm>

Business school admissions:

<http://www.businessschooladmission.com/>

<http://education.yahoo.com/college/essentials/articles/biz/bschool-admissions.html>

Information for international students: <http://www.edupass.org/>

Other Web Resources:

www.gradschools.com

www.petersons.com/graduate

www.princetonreview.com/

Rankings:

<http://www.lsac.org/LSAC.asp?url=lsac/deans-speak-out-rankings.asp>

http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/grad/rankings/rankindex_brief.php

<http://www.phds.org/rankings/>

<http://survey.nagps.org/index.php>

Application Timeline:

<http://www.fastweb.com/fastweb/resources/articles/index/101702?id=>

<http://www.princetonreview.com/grad/apply/articles/process/schedule.asp>

http://www.indiana.edu/~career/students/grad/g_s_application_timeline.php

<http://www2.una.edu/career/JobSearch/GradSchool.htm>

<http://www.aamc.org/students/considering/timeline.htm>

Preparing For and Taking Admissions Tests:

http://www.jobweb.com/Resources/Library/Grad_School/Graduate_School_119_01.htm

<http://gradschool.about.com/cs/admissionstests/>

<http://www.gradview.com/testing/>

<http://www.iseek.org/sv/20119.jsp>

Writing Personal Statements/Statements of Purpose:

Admissions essays - http://essayinfo.com/essays/admission_essay.php
Scholarship essays - http://essayinfo.com/essays/scholarship_essay.php
<http://www.accepted.com> This site is worth a look for essay-writing and samples, but don't buy into the for-fee essay critique service.
UW Writing Centers: <http://faculty.washington.edu/jwholmes/uwwrite.html>

Letters of Recommendation:

<http://www.allaboutcollege.com/netguide/test/gre/recommendations.htm>
<http://gradschool.about.com/od/glossary/p/reclet.htm>
<http://gradschool.about.com/cs/askingforletters/a/recletter.htm>
Professors' Pet Peeves: How to receive a less than enthusiastic letter of recommendation
<http://psych.hanover.edu/handbook/peeves2.html>

Admissions Interviews:

<http://gradschool.about.com/cs/interviews/a/admint.htm>
<http://www.northwestern.edu/careers/students/grad-prof/gradinterview.htm>
<http://www.louisville.edu/a-s/biology/aed/interview.htm>
<http://www.accepted.com/mba/InterviewFeedback.aspx>
<http://www.studentdoctor.net/interview/>

Scholarships and Financial Aid:

Grants for individuals: <http://www.lib.msu.edu/harris23/grants/3gradinf.htm>

Other Web Resources:

<http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/>
<http://www.finaid.org/>
<http://www.students.gov>
<http://www.fedmoney.org/>
http://studentaid.ed.gov/students/publications/student_guide/index.html
<http://studentaid.ed.gov/PORTALSWebApp/students/english/index.jsp>
Financial Aid for International Students - <http://www.edupass.org/finaid/>
<http://www.salliemae.com>
<http://www.estudentloan.com>
<http://fastweb.monster.com/>
<http://www.petersons.com/finaid/>
<http://www.scholarstuff.com/netguide/financial-aid.htm>
http://dir.yahoo.com/Education/financial_aid/
<http://www.academicinfo.net/studentaid.html>

UW Campus Resources:

Undergraduate Scholarship Office: <http://www.washington.edu/students/ugrad/scholar/index.shtml>
UW Graduate School: <http://www.grad.washington.edu/fellow/funding.htm>
UW Libraries Grants & Funding Information Services: <http://www.lib.washington.edu/gfis/>
Early Identification Program: <http://depts.washington.edu/eip/grad.htm>
Re-envisioning the PhD: http://www.grad.washington.edu/envision/phd/obtaining_phd/applying.html
Pre-law and Pre-Med Info Lists coordinated by the Pre-Law and Pre-Med advisers at the Gateway Center, Mary Gates Hall 171.

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