



Personal Statements

The **personal statement** provides an excellent opportunity to make you really stand out to an admissions committee. As you are writing your personal statement, remember that admissions committees look at dozens, even hundreds, of applications-for medical school, that number can reach the thousands. Your application has a much better chance of standing out from the crowd if you have a strong personal statement.

There are two general types of personal statements:

1. The *general, comprehensive* personal statement:
The prompt for this type of personal statement often says something like, "Write an essay that explains why you want to be a doctor." By asking very broad, general questions, these personal statements enable you to take a wide range of approaches in your essay. Many graduate, medical, and law school applications take this approach.
2. The *response to very specific questions*:
Sometimes applications for business and graduate schools will ask you to answer several specific questions instead of one broad one. For this type of statement, it is important to make sure that your essays answer the questions specifically, using concrete examples to support the claims that you make.

Before You Start Writing, consider the following questions

- What makes you unique? How can you play up your experiences and/or character traits to set you apart from your peers?
- What skills or personal characteristics do you possess that will enable you to be successful in the field? How can you use specific examples to demonstrate these skills and characteristics?
- Why are you drawn to this field? What makes you well-suited to it? What types of experiences led to your interest (classes? personal experience? work? a particularly compelling professor?), and how has your desire to follow this career path changed and grown over time?
- Why are you drawn to each particular school? What do you know about the program to which you're applying-the opportunities that the school provides and the faculty with whom you will be working if you are admitted?
- What are your long-term career goals?
- Have you participated in activities during college that demonstrate qualities that will be important to this line of work? What other related skills have you developed during undergrad (for instance, by working full- or part-time)?
- Do you need to explain any inconsistencies in your academic record-i.e., great LSAT/MCAT/GRE scores but a mediocre GPA (or vice versa), or low grades early in college and better grades once you started taking classes in your major?
- What have you achieved, academically, personally, and professionally, that demonstrates that you will be a good candidate for the program to which you're applying? Have you overcome any particular obstacles (physical, social, economic, or familial) to get where you are today?
- *Overall, how can you persuade the admissions committee to choose **you**? What makes you a stronger applicant than the others?*

When You Begin Writing...

1. **If you apply separately to each school, tailor your personal statement for each one-or, at the very least, for your top choices.** It's more work, but the more you demonstrate how you are a good fit for each school and its specific programs, the more likely the admissions committees are to agree with you.
 - **Answer the questions that are asked.**



- You may find that questions from different schools may sound similar. However, it is important to figure out what is different about each question so that you can respond to what each school is asking.
 - This is definitely *not* a case where you should take the easy way out. If the questions are slightly different, make sure that you have answers that reflect those differences. If that means writing separate statements for each school, then that is what you should do, even though it means more work.
 - **Research the schools.**
 - Browse the university Web site. Look for information about the program to which you are applying, as well as other opportunities and fellowships that the school offers. Familiarize yourself with the faculty and their work. How do your areas of interest fit in with and enhance each school's?
2. **Find a unique angle from which to approach your story.**
- Many people struggle with this aspect of the personal statement. Since most of us really lead pretty boring lives, it can be a challenge to figure out what your angle is. Still, remember that although many people may have had the same experiences that you have, no one responds to those experiences in exactly the same way. How did *you* handle that adverse situation, adjust to your first year of college, or adapt to studying abroad? Tap into your own individuality to freshen up your description of those experiences. *Remember, however, that this is a formal academic document, and the language you choose should still reflect that formality.*
 - Be specific.
 - Use concrete experiences to back up the claims you make about yourself. Livening up your statement with compelling examples will do two important things for you: first, it will give the committee *specific reasons* why you will be a good doctor, lawyer, or graduate student; and second, it will help to *keep the committee interested*. A personal statement that demonstrates a logical connection between your experiences and your desired career path will be more persuasive, and an interested committee is far more likely to remember you when it comes time to decide who's in.
3. **Choose carefully what to include and where to put it.**
- **Focus on the introduction.**
 - The opening of your essay can make all the difference in the committee's willingness to spend time on your personal statement. If you are able to grab your reader's attention from the very beginning, you are more likely to make yourself memorable. This first paragraph sets up the rest of the essay in terms of tone and topic.
 - **Highlight your knowledge and experience, but know what to include...**
 - The body of your personal statement will describe your background in the field: knowledge and experiences, classes you've taken, work and research experience, the contacts that you've developed with others in the field, and any other sources that have enabled you to know why you want to pursue this career. Many people have very little knowledge of the field, so you will want to demonstrate that you do know what will be required of you. It will be important for you to choose carefully what to include; your choices give the committee crucial clues about your judgment.
4. **... and what to exclude.**
- As a general rule of thumb, there are two major things that you should avoid in your personal statement: (1) controversial issues, such as religion or politics, and (2) references to activities, awards, or experiences in high school or earlier. Keep your personal statement as current as you possibly can, and remember to stay away from topics that might offend your readers!
5. **Pay close attention to the mechanics of writing: spelling, grammar, and style.**
- **Follow the instructions.**
 - Stick to the word limit. Read the directions carefully, and follow them. An application that does not follow the basic rules will certainly not impress the committee.
 - **Avoid clichés. Proofread, proofread, proofread.**

- Virtually everyone who applies to medical school wants to help people and is good at science. Virtually everyone who applies to graduate school loves literature or history or whatever field they want to study. Stay away from commonplace statements like this, and instead focus on the qualities and characteristics that make you a unique applicant.
- Have other people proofread your personal statement as well. You want to maintain every advantage possible as you are applying, and a meticulously constructed personal statement may be crucial to your success. Demonstrating that you have strong language skills will always be an advantage. A carelessly edited personal statement, on the other hand, could suggest to the committee that you would be equally careless as a student.

Some Examples of Successful Statements

Statement #1

My interest in science dates back to my years in high school, where I excelled in physics, chemistry, and math. When I was a senior, I took a first-year calculus course at a local college (such an advanced-level class was not available in high school) and earned an A. It seemed only logical that I pursue a career in electrical engineering.

When I began my undergraduate career, I had the opportunity to be exposed to the full range of engineering courses, all of which tended to reinforce and solidify my intense interest in engineering. I've also had the opportunity to study a number of subjects in the humanities and they have been both enjoyable and enlightening, providing me with a new and different perspective on the world in which we live.

In the realm of engineering, I have developed a special interest in the field of laser technology and have even been taking a graduate course in quantum electronics. Among the 25 or so students in the course, I am the sole undergraduate. Another particular interest of mine is electromagnetics, and last summer, when I was a technical assistant at a world-famous local lab, I learned about its many practical applications, especially in relation to microstrip and antenna design. Management at this lab was sufficiently impressed with my work to ask that I return when I graduate. Of course, my plans following completion of my current studies are to move directly into graduate work toward my master's in science. After I earn my master's degree, I intend to start work on my Ph.D. in electrical engineering. Later I would like to work in the area of research and development for private industry. It is in R & D that I believe I can make the greatest contribution, utilizing my theoretical background and creativity as a scientist.

I am highly aware of the superb reputation of your school, and my conversations with several of your alumni have served to deepen my interest in attending. I know that, in addition to your excellent faculty, your computer facilities are among the best in the state. I hope you will give me the privilege of continuing my studies at your fine institution.

(Stelzer pp. 38-39)

Statement #2

Having majored in literary studies (world literature) as an undergraduate, I would now like to concentrate on English and American literature.

I am especially interested in nineteenth-century literature, women's literature, Anglo-Saxon poetry, and folklore and folk literature. My personal literary projects have involved some combination of these subjects. For the oral section of my comprehensive exams, I specialized in nineteenth century novels by and about women. The relationship between "high" and folk literature became the subject for my honors essay, which examined Toni Morrison's use of classical, biblical, African, and Afro-American folk tradition in her novel. I plan to work further on this essay, treating Morrison's other novels and perhaps preparing a paper suitable for publication.

In my studies toward a doctoral degree, I hope to examine more closely the relationship between high and folk literature. My junior year and private studies of Anglo-Saxon language and literature have caused me to consider the question of where the divisions between folklore, folk literature, and high literature lie. Should I attend your school, I would like to resume my studies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with special attention to its folk elements.

Writing poetry also figures prominently in my academic and professional goals. I have just begun submitting to the smaller journals with some success and am gradually building a working manuscript for a collection. The dominant theme of this collection relies on poems that draw from classical, biblical, and folk traditions, as well as everyday experience, in order to celebrate the process of giving and taking life, whether literal or figurative. My poetry draws from and influences my academic studies. Much of what I read and study finds a place in my creative work as subject. At the same time, I study the art of literature by taking part in the creative process, experimenting with the tools used by other authors in the past.

In terms of a career, I see myself teaching literature, writing criticism, and going into editing or publishing poetry. Doctoral studies would be valuable to me in several ways. First, your teaching assistantship program would provide me with the practical teaching experience I am eager to acquire. Further, earning a Ph.D. in English and American literature would advance my other two career goals by adding to my skills, both critical and creative, in working with language. Ultimately, however, I see the Ph.D. as an end in itself, as well as a professional stepping-stone; I enjoy studying literature for its own sake and would like to continue my studies on the level demanded by the Ph.D. program.

(Stelzer pp. 40-41)

Some Advice from Admissions Representatives

Lee Cunningham

Director of Admissions and Aid

The University of Chicago Graduate School of Business

The mistake people make most often is not to look at what the questions are asking. Some people prepare generic statements because they're applying to more than one school and it's a lot of work to do a personal essay for each school. On the other hand, it detracts when we realize that we're one of six schools and the applicant is saying the same thing to each and every school despite the fact that there are actually critical differences between the kinds of schools they may be applying to. They don't take the time. They underestimate the kind of attention that's paid to these essays. Take a look at what the essay asks and deal with those issues articulately and honestly.

At least two, and sometimes three people read each essay. I read them to make the final decision. Our process works so that each person who reads the application does a written evaluation of what he or she has read and the written evaluations are not seen by the other reader.

(Stelzer, p. 49)

Steven DeKrey

Director of Admissions and Financial Aid

J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management (Northwestern University)

We're looking for a well-written, detailed essay that responds directly to the question. The questions are about extra-curriculars, motivation, challenges, commitment to the school, that kind of thing. We see a variety and that's fine. Our approach is very individualized. The way the applicant devises the answer, determines the length, develops the response, is all part of the answer. The level of effort applicants put into essays varies considerably, which sends messages to the admissions committee as well. Over-involved, elaborate essays send one message, while very brief and superficial essays send another message.

Trying to second-guess what we are looking for is a common mistake--which we can sense.

We can tell when applicants use answers to other schools' questions for our essays; we're sensitive to this. Poorly written essays are a bad reflection on the applicant.

Don't over-elaborate; we're reading a lot of these. Also, don't be too brief or superficial. We like to have major ideas presented well.

(Steltzer, p. 55)

Michael D. Rappaport
Assistant Dean of Admissions
UCLA School of Law

Applicants should take the time to look at what the law school is asking them to write about. At UCLA, we say, "we know you have lots of extracurricular activities; we want to know how you differ, what makes you unique? What can you bring to the first year class that's going to make you distinctive from the other 99 people who are already there?" The fact that you were active in your fraternity or sorority is really not going to do it. What we're looking for is somebody who, in their personal statement, stands out as being so unusual, so diverse, that they're extremely attractive as a law student for the first-year class. Maybe what's going to make them distinctive is the fact they spent six months living in a log cabin in Alaska. You try to give the law school some justification for admitting you. With a lot of people, there's nothing that's going to make them distinctive. If that's the case, they've got to recognize that, indeed, the essay is not going to make that much difference here at UCLA.

We're also asking if there's any reason their LSAT or grades are not predictive. You'd be amazed at the number of people who completely ignore this; they don't take advantage of the opportunity.

Most law schools operate fairly similarly. There's a certain group of applicants whose grades and LSAT scores are so high that the presumption is that the applicants are going to be admitted unless they do something terribly stupid to keep themselves out. I have seen applicants whose personal statement has done that, but it's extremely rare. At the other extreme is another group of applicants who--no matter what they write--are not going to get in.

The applicant has to realize, first of all, where he or she stands. If you have a straight-A grade point average and a perfect LSAT score, you don't have to spend a lot of time worrying about your personal statement. On the other hand, if you know you're in the borderline area, that's where the personal statement becomes very, very important.

The applicant should take the time to read the application to see what the schools are asking for. Sometimes the school will ask for a general description of why you want to go to law school, or why they should admit you, something of that nature. In such case you can be fairly sure that the school is just interested in the essay to see how well you write. So what you say isn't as important as how you say it. On the other hand, some schools are more specific--UCLA being a very good example of that.

Make sure the essay is grammatically and technically correct and well written. Avoid sloppy essays, coffee stained essays, or ones that are handwritten so you can't read them. You'd be amazed at what we get!

(Stelzer, pp. 70-71)

Beth O'Neil
Director of Admissions and Financial Aid
University of California at Berkeley School of Law

We're trying to gauge the potential for a student's success in law school, and we determine that, principally, on the basis of what the student has done in the past. The personal statement carries the responsibility of presenting the student's life experiences.

Applicants make a mistake by doing a lot of speculation about what they're going to do in the future rather than telling us about what they've done in the past. It is our job to speculate, and we are experienced at that.

Applicants also tend to state and not evaluate. They give a recitation of their experience but no evaluation of what effect that particular experience had on them, no assessment of what certain experiences or honors meant.

They also fail to explain errors or weaknesses in their background. Even though we might wish to admit a student, sometimes we can't in view of a weakness that they haven't made any effort to explain. For example, perhaps they haven't told us that they were ill on the day that they took the LSAT or had an automobile accident on the way. Such things are legitimate reasons for poor performance. I mean, we understand that life is tough sometimes. We need to know what happened, for example, to cause a sudden drop in the GPA.

Another mistake is that everyone tries to make himself or herself the perfect law school applicant who, of course, does not exist and is not nearly as interesting as a real human being.

Between one and five people read each application.

(Stelzer, p. 72)

Dr. Daniel R. Alonso
Associate Dean for Admissions
Cornell University Medical College

We look for some originality because nine out of ten essays leave you with a big yawn. "I like science, I like to help people and that's why I want to be a doctor." The common, uninteresting, and unoriginal statement is one that recounts the applicant's academic pursuits and basically repeats what is elsewhere in the application. You look for something different, something that will pique your interest and provide some very unique insight that will make you pay some notice to this person who is among so many other qualified applicants. If you're screening 5,500 applications over a four- or six-month period, you want to see something that's really interesting.

I would simply say: Do it yourself, be careful, edit it, go through as many drafts as necessary. And more important than anything: be yourself. Really show your personality. Tell us why you are unique, why we should admit you. The premise is that nine out of ten people who apply to medical school are very qualified. Don't, under any circumstances, insert handwritten work or an unfinished piece of writing. Do a professional job. I would consider it a mistake to attempt to cram in too much information, too many words. Use the space as judiciously as possible. Don't submit additional pages or use only 1/20th of the space provided.

(Stelzer, p.81)

John Herweg
Chairman, Committee on Admissions
Washington University School of Medicine

We are looking for a clear statement that indicates that the applicant can use the English language in a meaningful and effective fashion. We frankly look at spelling as well as typing (for errors both in grammar and composition). Most applicants use the statement to indicate their motivation for medicine, the duration of that motivation, extracurricular activities, and work experience. So those are some of the general things we are looking for in the Personal Comments section.

We also want applicants to personalize the statement, to tell us something about themselves that they think is

worthy of sharing with us, something that makes them unique, different, and the type of medical student and future physician that we're all looking for. What they have done in working with individuals--whether it's serving as a checker or bagger at a grocery store or working with handicapped individuals or tutoring inner city kids-- shows they can relate to people and have they done it in an effective fashion? What the applicant should do in all respects is to depict why he or she is a unique individual and should be sought after. Of course, if they start every sentence on a whole page with "I," it gets to be a little bit too much.

(Stelzer, p. 82)