

WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT

Writing a personal statement for graduate school (sometimes called a statement of purpose or an application essay) is a challenging task. You must showcase your unique qualifications and illustrate why you are a good fit for a particular program; you must be thoughtful, specific, and focused in your response; you must make your essay stand out among hundreds of others. And, you need to achieve all of that in the space or word count provided, often just 500 words! This may seem daunting; however, giving yourself plenty of time to plan, get feedback, and revise will help. Consider the tips below as you work through the process.

Before you write:

- **Review** the prompt: some schools will ask for a general statement of purpose, in which you outline your qualifications for and interest in the program; others will provide a specific prompt or series of prompts.
 - Regardless of the format, make sure you clearly understand the question(s) being asked of you.
- **Research** the program: when committees read applications, they look for applicants who demonstrate a strong fit for the specific program. Research the particulars of the program you are applying for (coursework, professional or research opportunities, field experiences, professors) and use these details to illustrate your interest and fit.
- **Speak** to professors in the field: Your professors are great sources of information on graduate school. Some of them have served on graduate program application committees themselves and can provide perspective into the process. Others may know details about specific programs or can put you in contact with individuals in your field.
 - If you ask well in advance, a professor with whom you have a strong relationship may be willing to read and provide feedback on your personal statement.
- **Reflect** on your own experiences: Ask yourself questions about why you are pursuing this specific program and what you hope to achieve. You can use this brainstorm to begin drafting your statement.
 - **Motivation:** What makes you want to pursue this degree or field of study? How did your interest in the field develop? What makes your life story interesting or unique, and how has this shaped your career or academic goals? Have you experienced any adversity or challenges in your educational journey, and how did you overcome these?
 - **Fit:** What academic, community service, or professional experiences have you had that demonstrate your ability to be successful in this program? What are some of your major accomplishments and achievements, and how do these illustrate your strengths? Why are you a strong candidate for this particular program?
 - **Goals:** What do you hope to gain from this program, and how does it align with your career goals? How will this program prepare you for your future?

As you draft:

- Whatever organizational approach you choose, be sure you are responding to any given prompts fully and addressing your **motivations** for undertaking graduate study, the **experiences** that have prepared you for graduate study, and specific reasons you are a **strong fit** for the particular program you are applying to.
- While there are various ways you can organize a personal statement, the following outline may help you begin to arrange your ideas:
 - **Introduction:** Begin with a narrative “hook,” if possible, that depicts a key moment or event in your academic or professional journey that demonstrates your interest in or passion for your field
 - **Transition/Connection:** Connect the story to your background in your field, an include a clear succinct statement indicating what you are applying for and why
 - **Description of relevant experiences:** What have you achieved or done so far in your field; what did you learn from these experiences and how do they make you a strong candidate for graduate study?
 - **Discussion of interest and fit:** Why are you interested in this particular graduate program? Connect this to the previous section—how would this program give you the opportunity to develop or expand upon the skills and qualities you have described.
 - **Conclusion:** keep this brief and positive; if possible, connect back to the theme from your narrative introduction

Tips for revising:

- Read through what you have written and ensure that when you discuss your experiences, you are answering the questions “how” and “so what?” for your reader. Be sure you explain what you learned from your experiences and how they prepare you to study and engage with peers in your field.
- Avoid covering material that appears elsewhere in your application; try not to simply list content that is already contained on your CV. Instead, elaborate and provide details to explain and contextualize your CV.
- Be concise and clear in your writing. If you are not given a maximum word or page count, consider keeping your statement to 1-2 single-spaced pages at most.
- If you are applying to multiple schools, tailor each personal statement to each particular school. While you do not need to rewrite the entire thing, making revisions based on the particular school or program will be necessary—and will be noticed and appreciated by search committees that may see many, very general personal statements.
- Try to frame your experiences positively whenever possible. Your personal statement is a great place to address any gaps in your application or struggles you have encountered, but always try to emphasize your potential rather than your limitations.
- Keep in mind that the specificity of your proposed research agenda may be more important if you are applying for doctoral programs as opposed to master’s programs.
- Have multiple people read your draft—professors in your program, friends already in graduate school, WCC consultants, etc. Proofread multiple times. If you’re applying to multiple schools, make sure that all references in your personal statement are to the right school/program and that you’re adhering to the appropriate application guidelines.