

Dartmouth College

Center for Professional Development

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The Personal Statement

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What is a Personal Statement and Why Is It Important?

Graduate and professional schools make their decisions to admit applicants based on test scores, undergraduate academic performance, co-curricular activities, recommendation letters, an interview, and a written essay. Many schools will also ask for a personal statement. The personal statement gives you the chance to write about yourself.

You are competing with hundreds of other applicants who have similar test scores and grades. The personal statement can be the factor that differentiates you from the other candidates. It gives the admissions committee a chance to get a glimpse of you as a person rather than as a set of numbers.

The Challenge of Writing a Personal Statement

A personal statement is a very different kind of writing than the analytical writing required in many of your college courses. Your personality needs to emerge from the writing. Admissions Officers will evaluate your ability to communicate clearly and concisely. Your personal statement should be grammatically correct and error-free.

As You Begin to Write Your Personal Statement

Think about your life and why you are applying to graduate or professional schools. Ask yourself, "What do I want the admissions committee to know about me that is not already in my application?" To get started, you might want to ask yourself the following questions:

- What is important to me?
- What am I interested in?
- What am I proud of?
- What significant experiences have I had?
- What kinds of qualities are necessary for the profession I wish to pursue?
- Why do I think I possess these qualities?

After you have thought about your life and goals, think about the profession you are intending to enter. What are the skills and values of people in that particular profession? How do they match with yours? How can you highlight those values and skills in your personal statement?

Writing Your Personal Statement

Start early, plan on writing and revising several drafts. Schedule specific times for this important and time-consuming task. Understand the questions thoroughly. Brainstorm your achievements, career goals, leadership, and personal interests. Narrow your emphasis to one specific theme or point. Begin your essay with this theme and the following paragraphs should logically develop and illustrate it.

Work towards a rough draft. Then revise it. Have others read it. Continue to revise the draft until you have a clear, concise, error-free essay.

Interesting and Distinctive Topics

- Significant travel, work or volunteer experience
- Loss of a family member or friend
- Personal triumph, achievement or revelation
- Overcoming or understanding a hardship, disease, injury or loss
- Significant personal influence in your life
- Significant piece of learning, text, reading or painting

It should be clear why you want to enter the field, but avoid writing about why you want to be a doctor, lawyer, and so on, unless specifically asked. In addition, do not waste space telling the admissions committee what the profession is like. Similarly, do not write your life story or concentrate on a high school or earlier experience. Avoid using your statement to provide a laundry list of your accomplishments; this should be found elsewhere in your application. In addition to the content of your personal statement, presentation is also important. Follow writing guidelines and use a font size that is easy to read!

Last Updated: 9/6/12