



Writing Your Personal Statement

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. A good essay might be the deciding factor in an admissions decision; an unconvincing or unremarkable essay can adversely affect your chances of admission.

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.

The most effective essays convey a personal dimension. They describe an individual, distinguished by intellectual motivation and accomplishment, social concerns and contributions, and personal values. You may want to develop the essay around an experience, an accomplishment or an interest. It may help to imagine yourself in an interview situation with the admissions officer, or simply talking to a good friend whom you have not seen for a while. What do you want the admissions officers to know about you? Above all, be sure your essay is interesting and well written.

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!

Resources at Dartmouth

Faculty - If you are applying to graduate school in a specific field, it is advisable to have a faculty member read your essay.

The Student Center for Research, Writing, and Information Technology (RWiT) - First floor of Berry Library, behind the Computer Help Desk. Trained peer tutors will work with you on your personal statement. (www.dartmouth.edu/~rwit/)

Resources in Career Services

Asher, Donald. *Graduate School Admission Essays*. (CA: Ten Speed Press, 2000).

Graduate School Admissions Adviser (NY: Kaplan Publishing, 2001).

Jackson, Evelyn, W. & Bardo, Harold, R. *Write for Success: Preparing a Successful Professional School Application*. (IL: National Association of Advisors for the Health Professions, 1999).

Law School Admission Council. *So you want to be a lawyer: A Practical Guide to Law as a Career*. (PA: LSAC, 2001).

Stelzer, Richard J. *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School*. (NJ: Peterson's Guide, 2002).

Wright, Carol L. *The Ultimate Guide to Law School Admissions*. (PA: Marriwell Publishing, 2003).