

Personal Statements and Essays

Every fellowship or graduate school application requires a statement that asks, in one way or another, for the candidate to describe their academic or other interests. This personal statement is your introduction to the selection committee. An outstanding personal statement will not win you a scholarship, but a poorly prepared one can deny you the chance to be considered as a finalist.

CONTACT

Location: [Unity Hall](#)

Phone: [508-831-5381](tel:508-831-5381)

Fax: 508-831-5846

academic-advising@wpi.edu



Personal Statements

Because personal statements are personal, there is not one format or approach that will work well for everyone. They are also short -- 1,000 words or less -- so you should identify the three or four most important points that you want to develop. Other parts of your application (including letters of recommendation) can present other important information. Use your personal statement to say what only you can say because it is what is most important to you. Personal statements are often read quickly and in bulk, so do your best to make yours stand out and a pleasure to read.

Essays

The essay is an exercise in self-reflection, and to do this well requires many drafts and revisions. Consider the questions posed in [making connections](#), and take an inventory of everything you have done as an undergraduate. Selected parts of this inventory will be featured in the essay eventually, but try to be inclusive at first. Read the advice on [starting the writing process](#), and start to write before you are ready.

Be honest with yourself. Do not try to guess what the committee wants to read. Consider your audience to be intelligent non-specialists for fellowship competitions, or to be professors in your field for graduate school essays. Remember that your essay is a writing sample. The essay will be read for indications of clear, well-organized thinking and effective communication.

Grab the readers' attention right away by taking them into the heart of your discussion; maintain focus with a consistent story line; consider using one or two anecdotes that can help you focus and give a human face to your discussion; provide a compelling snapshot of who you are and what contributions you want to make; indicate what your priorities are and the kind of passion you bring to your work. The [Writing Center](#) on campus is a very helpful resource, and can be utilized during all parts of the writing process.

Academic Proposals

The academic proposal required by some competitions and by graduate schools has a more defined focus than your personal statement or essay(s). Common elements include a description of your course of study or project, and why you have chosen this particular institution, country, or setting. You should provide evidence that you are qualified to undertake the program you propose, and that it is consistent with your long-range plans. For study abroad project proposals, provide evidence of cooperation of the host institution or individuals with whom you propose to work, if possible. For graduate schools admissions essays, discern what is being asked for in each essay and keep the focus on that: speak mainly about your research interests if that is what they are asking you to address. For a plan of research essay, devote considerable effort to your "methods" as you need to demonstrate you have a plan, not just a good idea.

Additional Information

- [Writing Personal Statements Online](#), by Joe Schall, includes sample essays; this is the essential resource.
- [Definition of a Personal Statement](#) by Mary Tolar, excellent advice for nationally competitive fellowships
- [Tips for Writing a Personal Statement](#), Carnegie Mellon Health Professions
- [Graduate School Statement](#), Berkeley Career Center

Dissertations, Research Proposals, and Foundation Grants (which differ from personal statements):

- [The Art of Writing Proposals](#), SSRC, standard advice in the social sciences, relevant for all fields
- [A Guide for Proposal Writing](#), NSF Division of Undergraduate Education