

Recommendations for Personal Statements

Do

- **Start early.** Most statements require more than 3 or 4 drafts.
- Decide or discover as you write what your **main take-away message** is to the admissions committee. This will help you decide whether certain details are relevant or not.
- **Tell a story.** Your purpose is to create a compelling narrative that persuades the committee you are a strong candidate and a good fit in their program.
- **Write a lot.** Don't limit yourself to word limits early on. Write your best response to the question and worry about cutting and editing later.
- Make sure you have **addressed all the portions** of the question asked.
- If you are applying to more than one school, be especially careful **not to recycle statements** from one school to the next.
- Research the **school** and the **program** thoroughly. The more you know about them, the better you can document your fit to that particular program.
- **Stay positive** in your narrative. Focus on your intellectual autobiography and your goals, and do not draw attention to things you haven't done, programs you didn't get into, etc.
- **Be specific** when describing your goals or experiences. This will help create a concrete picture of you as a candidate and it will help you stand out.
- **Complete** the statement, **edit** to make sure the structure fits the subject and your goals, and **proofread** for grammatical errors.

Don't

Don't Overpersonalize your statement.

- Personal details are only useful if they serve the main goal of your statement.
However, the **focus needs to be on your intellectual development.**
- Avoid anything that detracts from that, such as excessive focus on difficult experiences and profiles of various influential people in your life.

Don't repeat your awards and accomplishments from your CV.

- The statement is your only chance to tell your personal narrative so that the committee can get to know you as a person and so you can stand out.

- **Avoid listing resume items.** Instead, **focus on the story** that emerges from your personal and professional details that make you a great fit for the program.

Don't appeal to cliches.

- You want your statement to be memorable, so your narrative needs to create a unique portrait of you as an individual.

- Therefore, **avoid language that could apply to anyone else** or to any other field: "I want to be an engineer because I want to help people;" "ever since I was a child I liked to take things apart to see how they were put together."

Don't give a chronology of your life.

- There are many ways you can organize your statement, such as beginning with a pivotal event and then showing how you got there, or focusing on a few themes that showcase a series of your qualifications or traits.

- Whichever structure you chose, it should be in the service of your main message to the committee. **Try not to let the order of events in your life determine the structure of your statement.** You want to create a narrative that features certain skills and personal characteristics, and to do that you need to restructure your biographical elements.

Don't try to say everything.

- A personal statement is a carefully constructed message to the admissions committee. To be most effective, you will need to focus on the experiences and educational highlights that make you the candidate they will encounter.

- You will not be able to tell them everything you did, and you don't need to. Your challenge is to create a personal portrait composed of the most relevant details that work together to give one message.

Don't dwell in the past.

- Programs want to learn about **who you, the candidate, are today.** Spending too much time with events and experiences from high school or earlier takes away from the focus on you as the mature, prepared candidate they are considering.

Questions to ask yourself before you write: *

(from Purdue Owl: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/>)

**** Not all the questions will be relevant to the type of statement your particular program is requesting. These are examples of questions to help generate content.***

- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre test scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, and/or persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you.