

“Words That Can Make You Money”:

How to Write an Effective **Personal Statement**

A personal statement is written when you apply for a scholarship, a degree program, or anything that asks you to “present yourself” in writing. The cover letter you write for a job application, for example, is a type of a personal statement. Here are some useful steps and pointers.

I. Prewriting.

1. Brainstorm: What are your academic goals? Your career goals? What and/or who has inspired you to have these goals? What obstacles have you faced? Challenges? Hardships? What special skills do you have? What are your priorities in life?
2. Imagine the people who are reading your application. Imagine that they first look at the other materials you are asked to submit—your transcript, your resume, letters of reference, etc. Ask yourself: What story about me do these materials tell? What assumptions about me might they have? What images of me might they have?

Now ask yourself, **What *additional stories/ images do I want them to have?*** Answering this question is a good way to begin your personal statement.

II. Writing.

The people reading your application will not only read yours, but many, many others. How do you stand out? How can your personal statement make your application rise to the top?

Finish the following sentence: “I bet I’m the only person applying who...”

Applications ask for a personal statement so that the people reading them can get to know you as a person. Focus on YOUR life experiences. Think in terms of concrete images and anecdotes. If your goal is to be a ____, and your aunt inspired you to become a ____, can you recall the moment when you decided you had this goal?

Here are some specific guidelines to keep in mind:

DO:

Answer the Question (s). Most applications present you with a question or two. For example, “What are your career goals?” Answer this question clearly and directly in your first paragraph. “My career goals are....”

Mention how the scholarship will help you and/or how the job or program is a good fit. Match your goals to the goals of the scholarship/job/program. A little research into the organization offering the scholarship/job/etc. can be very helpful.

DO:

Address questionable aspects of your other materials. This can be hard, but it's necessary. If your transcript shows that you had a bad semester last year, mention this and give a brief reason. If your goals are to become a nurse but you haven't yet taken any science classes, briefly explain why (perhaps it's a new goal). You don't want to dwell on negative points, but if you imagine that the application committee will have a question about something, they probably will.

DON'T:

Write too much or too little. Often the prompt for a personal statement will give a word count. Aim for this number, so your statement doesn't seem skimpy or overkill. A cover letter for a job application, by the way, should be 1-2 single spaced pages.

Be controversial or use informal language. If your career goal is to become a judge who legalizes all drugs, include the part about becoming a judge, but leave out "legalizing drugs." Don't risk offending someone who is reviewing your application. On a similar note, you dress nicely for an interview, right? Your personal statement should also look professional. Leave out the slang.

Doubt yourself, or emphasize what you *can't* do or *don't* know. Self-doubt is a part of human nature, but your personal statement should sound capable and confident. Often this is a matter of phrasing. Instead of saying "I don't know much about___," you can say "the more I learn about___".

Bluff. Sound confident, but not *over*-confident.

III. Organize, edit, proofread, and revise.

Spend as much time on this piece of writing as you would a term paper. Personal statements are often short, so they seem like they shouldn't be too much trouble, but these words have the potential to get you money! Make them worthwhile. Take your first, second, third draft to Writing Center tutors to help you revise.

IV. Getting started. There is no set structure for a personal statement. Truly. Make it your own. Start with a short story, or end with one, or have one in the middle. That said, if it helps, a sample structure could be:

1. First paragraph: Answer the question(s).
2. Second, third, etc.: Explain why you answered the question this way. Give details, anecdotes, and images. Remember to discuss your personal experiences.
3. Conclude with how the scholarship/program/job is right for you.

Good luck!