

Writing Your Personal Statement: An Exercise in Argument

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Personal statements, also sometimes called “statements of purpose” or “application essays,” are difficult to write. How do you make yourself stand out, especially if your most “unique” experiences fall into roughly the same category as others’ supposedly “unique” experiences? How do you genuinely interest your readers when they know you’re *trying* to sound interesting? How do you display your knowledge and preparedness without sounding arrogant, preachy, or boring? These are tough tasks. Indeed, a good personal statement will be among the most challenging documents you’ll ever write. Moreover, since your future rests on this one short piece of writing, it’s also among the most *important* documents you’ll ever write.

A good first step in writing a personal statement is to think of it not merely as a descriptive piece of writing, but as an **argument**. This may sound strange, since you certainly don’t want to sound combative or argumentative in any way. Still, a personal statement is an argument in the sense that you are trying to persuade an audience to adopt a certain belief—namely, that *you are an applicant who, for specific reasons, will be a good addition to a certain institution, organization, or group of award recipients*. In a sense, then, the first difficult step of writing has been accomplished before you even begin: you know your “thesis,” even if you won’t write it as an explicit statement. The task is to support this powerful main idea.

How do you begin? First, bear in mind that successful arguers know how to make skilled use of three different kinds of appeals: **logos**, **pathos**, and **ethos**.

Logos is the appeal to fact, logic, values, and rational belief.

“I am well-prepared for such study, as I have worked with Professor Smith for the past two years studying *Aspergillus flavus*, a pathogen affecting grain corn.”

Pathos is the appeal to emotion, feeling, and human sensitivity.

“The effect of *Aspergillus* on local crops was devastating for the farmers we met that semester. Some, in fact, had lost their entire year’s profit.”

Ethos is the appeal from character.

“Although I was at first disheartened by the challenges we faced, I knew that my knowledge of biology was invaluable, and I became more determined than ever to find answers for the local farming community.”

In personal statements, **ethos** is often especially important. Ethos concerns your character and personal qualities. The writer in the above example demonstrates that she is sensitive to the plight of others and, like most humans, feels vulnerable to a sense of defeat: “I was at first disheartened.” She is also, however—and most importantly—someone who *rises to a challenge*, specifically by applying relevant and helpful skills and resources. This will be an attractive quality to most schools or organizations.

Typically, admissions committees are most concerned about whether you have the motivation and wherewithal necessary to succeed in a rigorous program, so consider describing at least one time when you overcame an obstacle, or a time when you succeeded despite severe constraints or lack of resources. Many programs will specifically prompt you to write such an essay.

Planning the Essay: It's All About YOU

The personal statement is all about YOU, it's true, but you still need to ensure that readers will enjoy reading you talk about yourself. How do you do this?

Steps:

1. Know why you're applying.

This may sound obvious, but it's perhaps the most commonly disregarded step. Readers can sense half-heartedness or ambivalence; it's incredibly difficult to write an effective personal statement if you don't understand *why* you want what you *say* you want.

- **What do you like about this field? How do you feel when working in it?**
- **What will your daily work and life be like if your application is successful?**
- **How does this position or profession match who (and how) you like to be?**
- **What doors would this position open? What doors would it close?**

2. Know your audience.

Of course, you can't fully know your audience, but you can do some homework about the places to which you're applying and make educated guesses about the following:

- **Who probably sits on the admissions or awards committee?**
- **What are their priorities and major concerns likely to be?**
- **What discourse style do they probably consider most appropriate?**
- **What kinds of disciplinary knowledge do they want new admits to have?**

3. Know your competition.

Most likely, the applicant pool is full of people who look very similar to you. To help yourself stand out, begin by making a mental checklist of things to avoid:

- **What general points would most applicants for this spot be likely to make?**
- **What kinds of stories do you think get told over and over again?**
- **What do you think is the typical organization of essays for this particular prompt?**

4. Know YOUR STORY.

Answer the following prompts with very specific details:

- **What are your special accomplishments or experiences—both personal and professional?**
- **Do you remember learning a key concept or theory in your field of study or desired profession? Why do you think this concept stood out to you?**
- **What specific kinds of projects do you envision accomplishing in the future?**
- **Are there any ways in which you are a non-traditional applicant?**
- **Based on past experience, what evidence do you have that you can succeed in this position?**

Writing the Essay

Introduction

Don't stall yourself by getting hung up on an opening. Brainstorm some possibilities for a good opener, which might take the form of a brief story, a quote, or a provocative statement. Set these different possible openings aside as you work on drafting the body. Inevitably, gradually, the best opening will present itself to you.

Body

In the body, you might try to introduce a theme or a central metaphor that you then unfold throughout the essay with **specific examples**. Avoid sweeping or obvious statements such as, "It is very important for a student to have good analytic skills." Use analogies and metaphor when appropriate. Most importantly, **avoid repetition** of your main ideas.

Always, always, *always* keep within the word or page limit. Make your paragraphs balanced (of approximately equivalent length), and make absolutely certain that each paragraph follows logically from the previous one and communicates one clear main idea.

Conclusion

Resist the urge to begin your conclusion, "In conclusion," followed by repetition of your main points. A summary of what you've just written will waste precious words, and worse—it will bore your readers. End with a simple, straightforward statement of confidence and enthusiasm.

Style & Correctness

Don't "overwrite" in a stiff tone full of empty abstractions. Avoid cliché and automatic language. Avoid overusing the empty "to be" verbs (*is, are, was, were*) as well as the pronouns "it" and "there." Vary your sentence length and structure to avoid simplicity and chopiness. Use active voice whenever possible. The most common mistakes in essays are punctuation errors, ambiguous pronoun references, imprecise phrases, agreement errors, tense shifts, and dangling or misplaced modifiers.

Common Goofs to Avoid

Failure to answer the prompt.

Return back to the prompt often, checking to be certain you're answering it. Some prompts are surprisingly specific, and it's easier to stray than you might think.

Using a gimmicky quote or opener that goes nowhere.

Don't use a quote just for a quote's sake. *Anything* you use as an opening should introduce a central theme developed throughout your essay.

Failure to proofread forwards, backwards, upside down, and out loud.

Yes, read your essay *backwards*, one sentence at a time, to make sure you have no mistakes. Reading backwards let's your I sea miss steaks that ewe or the spellchecker mite over look.

Sending Place X Your Application to Place Y.

All that work right down the drain. Remember, your *future* is riding on the little bit of extra time it takes to read *every single word* of your essay just one more time.