

Personal Statements

A personal statement is an essay submitted as part of an application to a graduate program, internship, or scholarship opportunity. This piece is often an admission committee's first impression of you as the applicant beyond what is written on your transcript or resume. In an ideal personal statement, you will answer a general prompt with a narrative or anecdote that highlights your unique traits, abilities, and experiences.

What should a personal statement include?

First, a personal statement should answer the prompt. All stories, anecdotes, and other explanations should be framed as answers to the prompt. Second, personal statements should discuss topics that are not clearly illustrated in your existing documentation, such as extracurricular experiences, personal interests and motivations, and your goals for the future. Third, personal statements should express your voice clearly and be free of all spelling and grammar issues.

Answer the Question

Whether or not you answer the given question has the potential to make or break your personal statement. If the prompt asks you about a time when you were attacked by mountain lions, don't talk about a time when you baked cookies for homeless people (unless the two somehow relate).

If you are asked more than one question, make sure that you cover them all clearly! Study the prompt carefully before you begin drafting a response. Even if the prompt appears to only be one question, it may still be deceptively complex. This is a common strategy to weed out applicants. Do not let this tactic filter you out before you even begin to work on your personal statement.

If you are given a word limit, make sure you do not ignore or exceed the limit. Treat a word count limit like it is a maximum value. Respecting the limit shows that you are capable of following directions and expressing yourself concisely. A personal statement that is at or slightly below the word count is ideal.

Reveal Something Unique About Yourself

Most modern admissions programs use the personal statement as a window into your life beyond what transcripts or letters of recommendation can say about you. Avoid writing about the straight A's you earned as an undergraduate (for example); you have been given a limited word count in which to reveal something more personal. Work on highlighting why you are what the program or scholarship is looking for. Use your essay to explain why you are more qualified than other applicants.

Edit and Rewrite

Your first draft will not be perfect. Ask other people to read your personal statement and discuss it with you. Your intended audience is a group of strangers, so avoid asking too many close friends or family members to read it over. SJSU Writing Center tutors or other peer tutor resources can help you look over your work and discuss strengths, weaknesses, and changes.

Use the Five W's and One H

The fastest, most direct method of writing strong, specific statements is to make sure you are answering the five W's and one H: who, what, when, where, why, and how.

For example, compare the following selections:

“A few years ago, I did some volunteer work with a local animal shelter.”

“During the summer of 2019, I volunteered 20 hours a week at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in memory of my dog Cookie. I fed, bathed, and exercised dozens of animals; assisted with the allocation of donated funds and resources; and promoted the organization at local events.”

The first sentence is vague—it does not adequately address who, what, when, where, why, and how. Concrete details can be easy to overlook, but they are critical to building a strong, well-rounded personal statement. You are introducing yourself to a complete stranger, so make the best, most specific impression possible.

How Can I Plan, Organize, and Write My Personal Statement?

Once you understand the prompt, the next step is planning and organizing. The best method to use for this stage is to make an outline. You may use whatever outlining format works best for you, but do not skip this step. With a limited word count, you must make sure that you have enough space to discuss everything you find relevant.

Narrative in Personal Statements

Writing a personal statement has some commonalities with writing a research paper. Both need to answer an overarching question supported by well-organized evidence. Both need an engaging introduction to hook potential readers, and both need to remain on topic. Rather than relating a number of unrelated incidents, pick a focused story that highlights your personality and values.

One of the easiest ways to convey personality, explain potential inconsistencies in your documentation, and/or discuss influences in your professional life is to structure your personal statement around a narrative thread. There are no right or wrong choices of narrative for a personal statement; in fact, the more unique you can be, the better. However, avoid sacrificing clarity or concision for a flashy show of organization.

One of the simplest ways to organize a personal statement is in chronological order. You can tell a linear narrative starting in childhood that ends with your goals for the future, or you can explain how your high school or undergraduate experiences prepared you for a job position.

Cause and effect is another effective method of organizing a personal statement. You can start with a sharp hook that explains an influential event in your past (either positive or negative) that had significant ripple effects or consequences in ways you did not anticipate.

Things to Include

Like any good narrative, make sure your personal statement has a clear beginning, middle, and end. Your readers should be drawn in from the first sentence. Each body paragraph should be relevant to your theme or highlight something new about you. Keep major ideas in their own paragraphs, and ensure that the flow of information is steady, logical, and clearly explained.

Things to Avoid

Avoid disconnected rambling. Admissions committees must read thousands of personal statements, and a disorganized first impression can ruin an otherwise perfect application. Do not spoil a good introductory first impression with a poorly organized body and conclusion. When changing subjects, avoid confusion or messy transitions by clearly relating connections between subjects in the first sentence of a new paragraph. Deeper details can be added after this introduction as you move through the rest of the paragraph.

How Can I Include and Discuss Protected Characteristics?

There are eight protected characteristics recognized by the federal government: race, skin color, religion or spiritual beliefs, sex, nationality, age, disability, and genetic information. Characteristics that are not protected federally are education level, immigration status, political viewpoints, military service record, criminal record, and economic class.

These topics should be handled and discussed with care, compassion, and respect. This should not discourage you from writing about these topics, especially if they are important or formative to your personal narrative in some way, but they should encourage mindfulness and tonal awareness. If you choose to include these topics in your personal statement, make their connection and influence on your personal life as clear as possible. Avoid mentioning these topics if you are simply writing what you think your admissions committee wants to hear. Hollow or inauthentic narratives will be obvious to your readers.

[!] IMPORTANT [!]

Under NO circumstances should you preach the superiority of a certain viewpoint or advocate hate against a group, whether it is protected federally or not. Regardless of your personal views, you do not know who will be reading your personal statement.

Activity 1: Specific Details

Below are five sample sentences used in personal statements. Choose which ones answer the five W's and one H effectively (who, what, when, where, why, and how).

1. Once I made a special database that sorted customer information from most to least money spent.
2. In fall of 2021, I used my skills with Adobe AfterEffects and Cinema 4D to create an animated Instagram ad as a commission for Corsair Gaming Inc.
3. My workplace gave me lots of skills in using different social media platforms.

4. I was given a lot of different tasks that scared me, but I easily overcame the challenge.
5. During my 2022 internship at Fidelity Investments, I led a small team of other interns to create clear client data visuals, analyze the information, write a report, and present all our important findings to our supervisors.

Activity 2: Revision

Below is a sample paragraph of a personal statement created with ChatGPT. It packs in plenty of important terminology, but it is general, vague, and impersonal. Rewrite it to be clearer and more personal, while answering the five W's and one H. (Note that many answers are possible since the content provided here is so vague—you will have to add in details relevant to you.)

I have been described as a dedicated and motivated individual. I am eager to explore new opportunities and work on expanding my skill set in a challenging environment. I have a lot of different experiences with working in different companies, with most of my experience being in teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving. I believe that I can make a meaningful contribution to any organization that values innovation, excellence, and commitment.

Activity 1 Answer Key

1. Vague and unspecific—does not answer the five W's and one H.
2. Specific—answers the five W's and one H.
3. Vague and unspecific—does not answer the five W's and one H.
4. Vague and unspecific—does not answer the five W's and one H.
5. Specific—answers the five W's and one H.