
Writing Personal Statements

PLANNING

- Convey the person behind the facts:
 - Don't make your personal statement a mere catalog of events: events are important only as they build a case for you as an applicant.
 - Avoid vague generalities and clichés.
 - Your goal is to show how you are distinct from the many other applicants.
- Consider:
 - your life experiences
 - the purpose of your application
 - the purpose or mission of the institution or program to which you are applying.
- Ask yourself what the reviewers who read your statement need to know about you to be convinced that you are an ideal candidate for their particular program.
- Include the following topics where relevant and significant:
 1. life and formal education (elaborate on how this fits your current goal—don't merely reiterate your transcript)
 2. informal education—your reading, friends, travels, volunteerism, hobbies, and other experiences
 3. ambitions
 4. fears and handicaps, to the extent that you have overcome these, including how you overcame them (if relevant to your current application)
 5. what you think the fellowship, program, or institution offers you (be specific enough to demonstrate knowledge of the fellowship, program, or institution)
 6. what you think you will offer the fellowship, program, or institution (perhaps not said outright, but clearly present in the statement's details—and without a sense of boasting or bragging).

WRITING

- Get the words down. Write as if the letter were to go in the next mail, twenty minutes from now. If the right words won't come, use others or leave a blank. Just get it down on paper.
- If you are applying to more than one institution, develop different versions of your statement, each shaped to fit the specific program. At the very least, mention the specific program by name.
- If you start with many ideas and details in your first draft, you can then select from among them to emphasize the experiences and qualifications that are most closely aligned with the focus of each program. For example, your summer work in a lab might be worth two full paragraphs of an application to a psychology program that emphasizes research, but only two sentences of an application to a counseling-oriented program, in which case you can devote those two paragraphs to your volunteer work at a suicide prevention phone line.

REVISING

- Add specific details to support general ideas; show with examples what you have stated as ideas.
- Read the first paragraph. Is it interesting? If not, discard it and write a new one. Often the second paragraph of a first draft serves as a much better opening.

- Have someone read the statement and discuss it with you; read it aloud to yourself as you revise it.
 - Does your personal statement give the impression you wished to convey?
 - Does your statement emphasize the principles that matter most to your reader?
- Read your statement for conciseness.
 - Can you cut off the first sentence or two without harming your message?
 - Can you cut out words, combine sentences, vary the order of phrases?
- Read your statement for unity.
 - Does every detail lead to and support the conclusion that you are the ideal candidate?
 - Is every detail consistent with your statement's main message, purpose, and tone?
- Read your statement for coherence.
 - Does every paragraph lead convincingly to the next?
 - Does your statement move forward smoothly, or does it circle about like a helicopter spinning out of control?
- Give space to important events; cut down unimportant ones.
- Note the construction of your sentences.
 - Are sentences varied in length and structure? Try inversion, subordination, combination.
 - Are your sentences effective and forceful? Are they clear?
 - Have you used concrete nouns and active verbs?
 - Get rid of as many verbs like *is*, *was*, and *appears to be* as possible.
 - Avoid wordy phrases such as *I think* or *I believe* and avoid starting a sentence with *There is* or *There are*.

EDITING

- Your final presentation must convey the sense that you care, so do not make careless errors.
- *Do not exceed length limits.*
- Proofread for grammar. Try reading your statement backwards, starting with the final sentence and moving one sentence at a time to the beginning.
- Check spelling and punctuation.
- Follow format instructions precisely. If none are given in the application materials, use these:
 - 12-point font size
 - Times or similar font
 - 1-inch margins
 - double-space.
- Print out on good quality paper using a laser-quality printer.
- Check that an electronic version will transmit correctly.
- Ask trusted readers, including a professor in your academic department, to read the final version before you send it out.
- Check it again.