WRITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS

CDC CAREER DEVELOPMENT CENTER

KAGIN COMMONS • (651)696-6384 • EMAIL: cdc@macalester.edu
SKYPE: MACCDC • www.macalester.edu/cdc

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Introduction: What is a Personal Statement?

A personal statement is your opportunity to bring your individual voice and personality to your application. Typically, personal statements are requested as part of graduate school and fellowship applications. Many brief biographical statements often give only “bare facts,” but no sense of the person whose life experience makes up those facts. Your personal statement should strive for a different effect. Your application materials—such as transcripts, resumes, and application forms—contain the facts about you. The personal statement should convey the person behind the facts.

Remember that all writing has a purpose, and that the purpose of the personal statement is to convince your reader that you are an ideal candidate to embark upon whatever adventure it is to which the reader guards the gate. You are in the process of convincing a gatekeeper to let you pass—by granting you a fellowship, admitting you to a graduate program, or giving you a job interview.

Some book, journey, volunteer experience, or person may have affected your life (in a manner relevant to this application) to such an extent that you will want to dwell on it for two or three paragraphs. Care should be taken, however, that you do not throw your personal statement out of proportion by slighting parts of your life and over-developing others; many students are liable to write at length about the matters which they take up first and then to lose heart toward the end. We were all born. We all grew up. Only use this type of common detail in clear support of your goal—to get through the gate. Make certain that you choose carefully which elements to emphasize so that each and every element, each and every word, serves your purpose: convincing the gatekeeper to let you pass.

Brainstorming

Events are important, but only as contributing factors in the building of character. Don’t make your personal statement a mere catalog of events or a list of vague generalities or clichés. It needs to convey a specific sense of you as distinct from the many (in some cases, hundreds) of others who will also apply. Ideally, you want to be telling a story. While drafting your personal statement, consider the following:

- How have the specific activities, events, people that you mention in your statement shaped you?
- How do they support your statements about your goals, your dreams, your wishes?
- How does your statement elaborate on the rest of the application in such a way as to convey who you are as a person?
- How do all of the words in your statement point to one inescapable conclusion: that you are an ideal candidate, that you should be accepted?

Beginning to Write: Creating an Outline

When you begin to plan your statement, you will find that many ideas and pictures flash into your mind, some ideas wholly unrelated to each other and to your purpose, some pictures in which you are quite certain your readers (a committee of busy people
who have many, many statements to read through) will have no interest. Don’t ignore those ideas and pictures on that account, at least not yet; write them down.

The 1930 Macalester College A Guide to Freshman English suggests using slips of paper to organize your essay—this still works, as does using note cards. If you are comfortable composing on a computer, you can make your notes in a word document, putting each idea, image, or picture in a separate paragraph and skipping a line between each (this makes sorting easier). Alternatively, you may want to use the outlining feature to first create a list of images, pictures, ideas, and then to sort and organize them. Separate sheets of paper, note cards, or the word document work better than a single sheet of paper because you can add details if the idea or picture becomes clearer or more vital to the statement; you can reject the idea without lots of scratching out if it turns out to be irrelevant; and you can easily arrange and rearrange the order of your ideas as you plan.

Revisit the Questions Asked

Consider not only your life experiences, but also the purpose of your application (to receive a particular fellowship or to be admitted to a particular school) and the purpose (or mission) of the institution to which you are applying. Ask questions, and find answers. Sample questions include:

- What purpose is the fellowship to serve?
- Does the medical school you are applying to produce practicing doctors or researchers?
- Is the Psychology program you want to enter clinical or experimental?
- Does the English Department where you are applying focus primarily on Early Modern literature, or Post-Modern?

Your statement should reflect knowledge of the institution or program to which you are applying; often this knowledge is reflected by the choices you make about which of the ideas and pictures from your experience you include, how you elaborate on your experience, and how you present yourself in the statement. As you think about these things, continue to note down everything that comes to mind, even if you think that you might not use it. You can always reject an idea later.

What do you want the reader to know about you?

When you think you have exhausted the subject of yourself and your relation to the institution or program to which you are applying, you may then concentrate upon your audience, asking yourself what the reviewer who reads your personal statement would like to know about you. While the personal statement is about you as a person, all material that you feel would be uninteresting or irrelevant should be cast aside; the rest should be arranged in an order which will be clear and interesting.

Include important topics.

Now, in the interest of completeness glance through your notes to see whether you have touched on the following topics:
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, and other experiences
3. Ambitions and hobbies
4. Fears and challenges, to the extent that you have overcome these, including how you overcame them (if relevant to your current application-goal)
5. What specifically the fellowship, program, 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)

You may expand some of these areas and combine others or you may organize them in a different order or have them sprinkled through a narrative (or chronological telling). When you have made your notes and put them in order, sit down and prepare to write.

Write at white heat.

As soon as you can see your way to a beginning, or even before, start your fingers moving; show some faith in them and your mind will probably follow. Write at white heat. Write as if the letter were to go in the next mail, twenty minutes from now. Write as if your reader were before you, key in hand, and you were trying to tell this gatekeeper who is about to walk away all about yourself and why you should be let through this particular gate. Get the words down—some words at any rate. If the right ones will not come, use others or leave a blank. Write! Write! Don’t look back, don’t hesitate, until the goal is passed and your whole thought on paper. If you wish, you may choose to have someone you trust read this draft and give you comments, someone who knows you and can suggest details that you have forgotten, or someone who is familiar with the program or institution to which you are applying.

Note: If you are making more than one application where separate statements are possible, you should consider developing different versions of your statement, each shaped and fashioned to fit the specific gatekeeper to which you are applying. Tailor your essay to the specific program or school to which you are applying. With word processing, this is fairly easy. At the least, you can mention the specific program by name—for instance, the University of Minnesota Department of Biology by name rather than generically writing “sociology” or “graduate school,” then change to John Hopkins’ Biology Department in the version that goes to John Hopkins. If you start with many ideas, you can go further for more impact; some ideas can be emphasized in one letter while others receive emphasis in another. For instance, your summer working in an animal research lab might be worth two complete paragraphs when applying to a Psychology program emphasizing animal research and experimentation, but only two sentences when applying to the program that is counseling oriented, where you give those two paragraphs to your volunteer work at the local suicide prevention phone line.
Revising

Add specific details.

Now you are half done. Add specific details to support more general ideas; show with examples what you have stated as ideas. Now is the time to look for the living verb, the concrete noun which would not come. Turn your sentences about, cut out superfluous words, polish until your idea grows clear and shining.

Read the first paragraph. Is it interesting? If not, discard it and write a new one (sometimes the second paragraph serves as a much better opening), for if the first paragraph (or sentence) does not hold the reader’s attention, the rest might only get skimmed. Read the last paragraph, does it satisfy a reader by providing closure?

Have someone else read it.

Have someone whose opinion you trust read the statement and discuss it with you; read it aloud to yourself as you revise it. Set it aside for a day or two and pick it up again to re-read it.

- Does your personal statement give the impression you wish to convey?
- Does your personal statement emphasize from your own life the principles that matter most to your reader?

Read your personal statement for brevity.

- Can you cut off the first sentence or two without harming the picture?
- Can you cut out phrases here and there throughout the statement?
- Can you cut out words, combine sentences, vary the order of phrases?

Read your personal statement for unity.

- Does every detail lead to and support the conclusion that you are the ideal candidate?
- Is every detail consistent with the overall statement?

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.

To what element in your statement have you given most emphasis, either by space or position? Give space to important events; cut down unimportant ones.
Note your sentence construction.

Note the construction of your sentences. Are they elementary and monotonous (I did this; I saw that; I learned the other thing), or are they varied in length and structure? Try inversion, subordination, and combination. Are your sentences effective and forceful? Are your sentences clear? Have you used concrete nouns, active verbs? Get rid of as many verbs like was seen, is, and appears as possible.

Avoid careless errors.

Last, but by no means least, your final presentation must convey the sense that you care, so avoid careless errors. If you have not yet used a word processor, now is the time to type the personal statement on a computer. Look at the length guidelines in your application materials: do not exceed the length limits. Condense and cut material, if necessary, to keep your statement to the specified length.

To the gatekeeper reading your statement, grammar matters. Proofread for grammar. Be careful to violate none of the rules of spelling and punctuation.

Follow formatting instructions that came with the application materials precisely. If the application instructions do not specify format, use 12-point font size, times or similar font, 1-inch margins, and double-space (many applications will ask for single-spaced personal statements and some will give other margins—always follow the specifications in your application instructions). If submitting a paper copy, print out on good quality paper using a laser-quality printer that has enough toner to produce dark, legible letters.

Finally, have someone else look at the final version before sending it out, to be certain there are no obvious errors. And then check it again.

Did you know?

Both the Macalester Career Development Center and the MAX Center will help you revise your personal statement and other application essays. Don’t hesitate to contact each office for more information.
Quick Personal Statement Tips

Planning
- Convey the person behind the facts.
- Consider:
  - your life experiences
  - the purpose of your application
  - the mission of the institution or program to which you are applying
- Ask yourself what the reviewer who reads your personal statement would like to know about you.
- Include the following topics where relevant and significant:
  1) life and formal education
  2) informal education
  3) ambitions and hobbies
  4) fears and challenges, to the extent that you have overcome these, including how you overcame them
  5) what you think the fellowship/program/institution offers you
  6) what you think you will offer the fellowship, program, or institution
- Convince your reader that you are the ideal candidate.

Writing
- Write as if your application were due twenty minutes from now!

Revising
- Add specific details to support general ideas; show with examples.
- Read your statement aloud to yourself as you revise it.
- Have someone read the statement and discuss it with you:
  - Does your statement give the impression you wish to convey?
  - Does your personal statement emphasize the principles that matter most to your reader?
- Read your personal statement for **brevity**, **unity**, and **coherence**.
- Note the construction of your sentences.

Editing
- The final essay must convey that you care. **Avoid careless errors.**
- Do not exceed length limits.
- Proofread for grammar.
- 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
  - inch margins
  - double-space
- Have someone else look at the final version before sending it out.
- Check it again.
Additional Resources

Grinnell College: Writing Personal Statements
http://www.grinnell.edu/academic/writinglab/writingguides/cutchins

Purdue University: Writing Personal Statements
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/

Florida State University: Writing a Personal Statement
http://career.fsu.edu/IMAGES/PDFS/Guides/WritingAPersonalStatement.pdf

Carleton College: Writing the Personal Statement
http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/asc/writingresources/personal_statement/
**Notes:**

**Next Steps:**

### Highlighted CDC Services

**Career Counseling Appointments for**
- Clarify strengths & interests
- Discuss potential career plans
- Review resume
- Plan job search strategies
- Interview prep

**Networking & Personal Branding:**
- Tools to Access Mac Alumni
- Social Media Inventory
- LinkedIn Profile Review

### Complimentary CDC Guides

- Resume & C.V. Guide
- Talking about your Skills Workbook
- Interviewing
- Resources for Health Sciences
- Applying to Grad School
- Financing Grad School

**All guides are available for download on the CDC Web site.**

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**Need help? Questions?**
- Scheduled 30- or 60-min. appointments
- Drop-in Appts: M-F: 2-4pm
- Appointments in person, phone & Skype.

**Connect with CDC**

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Updated August 2013. Please contact the CDC for permission to reprint.
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