

# Writing a Personal Statement

*(aka Statement of Purpose, Statement of Intent, Application Essay)*

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The personal statement has no set form or structure. As a result, many find it to be the most challenging document to produce for an application. Some ads will provide more guidance on content or length, so be sure to follow these carefully. The personal statement requires some creativity, as you will have to decide on the right balance between biographical details and educational and/or professional aspects. For a highly competitive program or position, assume that all high-ranked candidates will have very similar grades, degrees, and qualifications. You should therefore view the personal statement as your opportunity to explain why your experience and background are unique, why that matters for the job you're applying to, and thus make your application stand out.

## **Do I need a personal statement?**

- If the application asks for one, yes!
- If it is optional, provide one!
- If they don't ask for one, you can include a condensed version in a cover letter.
- If you're submitting a personal statement, you may or may not need a cover letter.
  - *Keep the letter simple and short.*
  - *If uploading materials to an application website, a cover letter may be redundant.*
  - *If e-mailing your application, you may consider the e-mail to be a cover letter.*

## **What is the personal statement for?**

- To introduce yourself.
- To outline your purpose and goals in applying to the position.
- To give insight into your personality and philosophy.
- To demonstrate your writing skills and ability to effectively communicate.

## **What is the Writing Process?**

- Carefully read any prompts and follow instructions on length or content.
- Research the institution and position you're applying to.
- Take a personal inventory.
- Write a draft statement.
- Re-read it and ensure it answers the following questions.
  - *Are my goals well-explained?*
  - *Are my reasons for applying to this institution and position explained?*
  - *Have I demonstrated knowledge of this program?*
  - *Have I backed up any claims I made about myself?*
  - *Have I written clearly and authentically?*
- Have a colleague or senior faculty read it for you.
  - *Do they believe you wrote it and that it describes the person they know?*

- Revise for content.
- Spell-check and grammar check. Repeat!
- Ask a friend, spouse, or colleague to check syntax.

### **What should I do?**

- Start early!
- Write in the first person.
- Write with confidence.
- Read any instructions, guidance, or prompts.
- Organize your ideas.
- Know your audience.
  - *Who will be reading this statement?*
  - *Would only certain people/backgrounds understand it?*
- Be authentic.
  - *Write about something you believe, something you care about.*
  - *Write in your own voice.*
- Introduce yourself.
  - *Where are you now and what are you doing?*
- Demonstrate you are a multidimensional person. Show you have a personality.
- Highlight notable elements of your CV, and bring them to life.
- Provide evidence to back up any claims about yourself.
- Lay out your short and long term career goals.
  - *Why do I want to be in this job, where do I want to go with it?*
- Research the institution and position you're applying.
  - *Demonstrate knowledge about where you're applying.*
- Give specific examples of why your abilities and attributes relate to the current position.
  - *How would you advance their own goals?*
- Have perfect spelling and grammar.

### **What should I NOT Do?**

- Ramble
- Lie or exaggerate
- Repeat everything in your CV.
- Copy or adapt someone else's personal statement.
  - *Write in your own voice!*
- Use overly complicated language or sentence structure.
- Use overly vague or empty language, e.g. rewarding, challenging, invaluable, meaningful.
  - *Why was it rewarding?*
- Write what you think the hiring committee wants to read.
- In the case of MP-RAP, one personal statement is used for all applications.
  - *Don't try to make everyone like you.*
  - *It is a match, so give yourself a chance to choose the program that matches you.*
  - *And don't use flattery!*

- Try to be funny, clever or rely on clichés.
- Brag about accomplishments and success without context or purpose.
  - *What did these mean for you and what opportunities did they create?*
- Write about only adversity and challenges.
  - *Personal circumstances or tragedy is fair if relevant and handled carefully, but beware of appearing to prey on emotions.*
- Write about politics, religion or culture.
- Forget what you wrote on interview day.
  - *Be prepared to discuss it. Interviewers will expect you to be able to talk about it.*

### **If no personal statement is required, what should be in my cover letter?**

- In this case, the cover letter needs to do what the personal statement would do (see above).
- A cover letter should be one or two pages long.
- You may include your anticipated date of availability to start a new job.
- If you're submitting this on paper or in a PDF, it would be appropriate to use one of the [old-school formats](#).
- If you can, personalize each cover letter to each job.