

# Personal Statements

*Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.*

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The personal statement is an opportunity for you to give an admissions committee insight about who you are as an applicant in essay form. The essay format of a personal statement allows for greater detail and explanation than documents like your resume, CV, and transcripts can provide. The detail you will need to provide, however, will vary greatly depending on your field and the preferences of the schools you apply to.

It is therefore essential that you work closely with advisors and professors (and often graduate advisors at the schools you are applying to) to determine **your field's expectations** for the personal statement and **the preferences of the schools you are applying to**. But as a general rule, your statement should help an admissions committee “get to know you” by providing insight into who you are or what you would like to do in your field.

This handout explains the steps you'll need to take to prepare, write, and revise a personal statement.

## Differing expectations for personal statements

When you first begin researching, you may be confused by conflicting advice, field-specific jargon, or differing expectations between departments, schools, or fields. The following sections contain some considerations for you to look into with mentors and advisors.

### Personal statement vs. statement of purpose

The language professionals use when talking about the personal statement sometimes indicates the kinds of expectations they have for the document. For example, some people call it the “personal statement” to emphasize a statement containing substantial *personal* content, such as an applicant's personal goals, academic journey, or personality. However, others call it a “statement of purpose” to emphasize a statement of your purpose in entering a program, such as your research interests or career goals. And many schools expect the personal statement to synthesize research background and interests with personal background, goals, etc. Look into how much personal or research content a school or field typically expects in a statement.

For the purposes of this handout, the term “personal statement” is used more generally to indicate an essay-document submitted with an application. Ask your mentors what they mean by the terms they use to advise you.

### Centralized vs. individual applications

Some applications are submitted through a **centralized application system** (such as MCAS for medical school, or ADEA AADSAS for dental school). These systems typically ask you to submit one statement that will be distributed to every school you are applying to. Other applications, however, may ask you to submit an **individual application** with a personal statement written just for their school.

If your applications ask you to submit statements individually, take advantage of the opportunity to tailor your statement to that school. You might describe certain researchers, programs, or resources that interest you at their school. And overall, essays submitted individually provide you the opportunity to describe your “fit” with their program.

## Researching your field, programs, and schools

Most applicants spend much more time preparing to write their statement than actually writing. Much of this time is spent soliciting guidance on what and how to write. Applicants typically spend months

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researching current trends in their field, discovering their own research interests and which programs they are interested in, and learning which faculty members interest them within those programs.

## Research checklist

Consider the following not as a linear process, but actions that can launch you into the work you will need to write your personal statement.

- 1) **Arrange meetings with advisors and professors or professionals** who are most knowledgeable about the kind of work you hope to do in the programs you are applying to, as well as in your career.

Ask them what the personal statement typically looks like in your field, what experiences are prioritized, and what admissions committees hope to see in a personal statement. In order to prioritize the most current and accurate advice, pay close attention to advice from those who have recently served on admissions boards, as well as those who recently completed a program similar to yours.

- 2) **Begin collecting materials.** Most schools post application materials online. Such materials might include personal statement prompts and schools' web pages on how to write the statement.

You might also begin collecting information on interesting faculty members or researchers in the programs you are interested in, including their bios and publications. These materials can help you explain your own research interests or reasons for applying.

- 3) **Read and analyze prompts carefully.** Some applications do not include a prompt and simply ask for a personal statement. However, if you are provided a prompt, take advantage of the opportunity to analyze why that admissions committee might be asking what they are asking. This kind of analyzing is sometimes called looking for the “**prompt behind the prompt.**”

For example, if an application asks, “Why do you want to attend our program?” consider that this question is *explicitly* asking you to describe your motivations and goals, but it is also *implicitly* asking you to describe how your desire to attend their program will align with their program's values and goals. Envision how you might respond to such a prompt in a way that shows how your aspirations will meet their program's objectives, culture, and/or unique opportunities and resources of that specific program.

## Brainstorming using common prompts

The following are some common prompts used by admissions committees. Remember to synthesize your qualifications and aspirations with the program's values, practices, and objectives.

1. **How have your personal, academic, and work experiences prepared you for graduate school and pursuing your research interests?**

Your answer will not limit your opportunities once you are accepted to a program. Rather, this kind of prompt allows you to demonstrate your ability to analyze what you have learned from your personal, academic, and work experience and how it can inform research or professional work.

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## 2. What are your career goals and how will graduate school help you pursue them?

You don't have to be incredibly narrow, and you can change your mind about this question once you are accepted. However, this kind of prompt allows you to demonstrate your ability to set goals and chart a path towards obtaining them. Use your research about your field, the school, and the program to elucidate how this program will enable you to reach these goals.

## 3. Why is this school a good fit for you?

This prompt gives you an opportunity to describe not just your qualifications or aspirations, but how well they might *fit* into a specific program's culture, values, objectives, and/or methodologies. Reasons could include your interest in specific classes, research opportunities, the program's emphasis on a certain methodology or line of inquiry, the surrounding community, or proximity to your home or family.

For example, let's say an applicant to psychology programs plans to submit an impressive resume detailing extensive research experience, but the program they are applying to focuses much more on clinical practice than research experience. It is possible the admissions committee could reject this application not because the applicant is unqualified, but because the program does not appear to be a good "fit" for this seemingly research-oriented applicant. The personal statement thus provides this applicant a place to describe their interest in clinical work, or how their research experience in fact led them to change paths by entering a clinically-oriented program. Sometimes describing how you might "fit" into a program is as important as demonstrating your qualifications.

## 4. Choose a mentor from this department.

Choosing a mentor can be a tricky question because there are so many variables involved. The mentor you name could be retiring soon, currently uninterested in the work you would like to do, or simply the wrong personality to be your mentor.

To avoid limiting your opportunities to one professor, use this kind of prompt to demonstrate your ability to look into a mentor's research, qualifications, and interests and line them up with your own research project or academic goals. Admissions committees commonly ask this kind of question to assess your ability to envision and initiate possible collaborations with their department members.

## 5. What experience do you have working with diverse populations? OR Why are you a diverse candidate?

This kind of question may be looking for a number of responses depending on how you define "diverse" in this context. For example, you could discuss your cultural, ethnic, or socioeconomic background. Or you might describe how your unique experiences or interests can contribute to a robust academic atmosphere, research methodology, or professional environment.

## Writing

The following passages contain advice on how to compose a personal statement.

### One statement vs. answering multiple questions

Some graduate programs ask applicants to answer one prompt, and others ask for brief responses to a set of questions.

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**Longer statements** (between 500 and 2000 words) typically expound on qualifications and experiences by tying them into a theme, or “thesis,” about the kind of candidate you are. Avoid simply restating your resume by fleshing out a select few experiences and making connections to your future as a researcher or professional. This model works especially well if you have significant related work experience to your proposed program of study or if you have impressive academic research you want to highlight.

Unlike longer statements, **shorter statements** do not necessarily need to read like a coherent whole because of the need to answer the questions as directly as possible. However, a short essay still allows you to expand on a mini-theme or mini-thesis by describing one or two significant moments, events, or themes and how they set you apart from other applicants.

## Show, not tell

Rather than simply stating your qualifications, refer to specific experiences that show your qualifications in action. Use vivid language to make your personal statement engaging.

*Weak Example:* Ever since I was a kid, I’ve wanted to help people. Through volunteering at food coalitions, I’ve seen first-hand how sympathy can make someone’s day better.

*Strong Example:* Every day, John would shuffle in alone and sit at a table in the back. He’d pull a crumpled newspaper out of his coat pocket, his old fingers smoothing it out on the table. When his food was ready, I’d sit next to him and take a few minutes to talk about whatever he was reading....

## Discrepancies in your academic record

If there are discrepancies in your academic record, you may choose to address them in your personal statement. Many schools, however, ask for an additional statement to explain these types of situations

## Revision

Students commonly go through 5, 10, or even more drafts, sometimes starting over several times to strike the right tone and find the right phrasing. Don’t skimp on time at this stage, and get input from several people. Consider scheduling several **writing center appointments** to work on successive drafts.

## Editing

Your personal statement is probably the most important document you will submit to graduate programs. Once you are happy with the results, have someone proofread your final version for stylistic mistakes. If you are struggling with grammar or specific phrasing, consider hiring a professional editor.