

WHAT IS A PERSONAL STATEMENT?

Graduate and professional schools often require some sort of written statement, often called a “statement of purpose,” “personal statement,” or “letter of intent,” as a part of the application. Some statements require specific information; for example, the applicant’s intended area of study within a graduate field. Others are quite unstructured, giving the applicant the freedom to address a wide range of matters.

WHY IS THE PERSONAL STATEMENT IMPORTANT?

You are competing with hundreds of other applicants who have similar test scores and grades. The personal statement can be the factor that differentiates you from the other candidates. It gives the admission committee a chance to get a glimpse of you as a person rather than as a set of numbers. It is also your opportunity to demonstrate your writing ability. The importance of the statement in comparison to other application materials varies from program to program.

WRITING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

The personal statement is a very different kind of writing than the analytical writing required in many of your college courses. It is an opportunity to write about yourself, and your personality should emerge in the statement. Follow the steps below to begin the writing process:

1. **Read the instructions for the personal statement carefully.** Make note of specific questions you need to address.
2. **Brainstorm ideas.** Think about your life and why you are applying to a specific program. Ask yourself, “What do I want the admissions committee to know about me that is not already in my application?”
 - What is important to me?
 - What am I interested in?
 - What am I proud of?
 - What significant experiences have I had?
 - What kinds of qualities are necessary for the profession I wish to pursue? Why do I think I possess these qualities?
 - What are my career goals?

WRITING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

3. **Narrow your emphasis to one specific theme.** Begin your essay with this theme and the following paragraphs should logically develop and illustrate it. Some examples of interesting and distinctive topics are:
 - Significant travel, work or volunteer experience
 - Personal triumph, achievement or revelation
 - Overcoming or understanding a hardship
 - Significant personal influence in your life
 - Significant piece of learning, text, or reading and how it affected or influenced you
4. **Work towards a rough draft.** Get assistance from the Writing Center if you want it. Here are some important reminders as you begin to write:
 - It should be clear in your statement why you want to enter the field, but avoid writing about why you want to be a doctor, lawyer, and so on, unless specifically asked.
 - Do not waste space telling the admissions committee what the profession is like.
 - Do not write your life story or concentrate on a high school or earlier experience.
 - Avoid using your statement to provide a laundry list of your accomplishments; this should be found elsewhere in your application.
5. **Ask for feedback** from the Writing Center, faculty, and career advisors.

RESOURCES

Amherst College Career Center – Career advisors can provide feedback regarding the graduate and professional school application process and specific requirements regarding personal statements and other application essays.

Faculty – If you are applying to graduate school in a specific field, it is advisable to have a faculty advisor in that field read your essay.

Amherst College Writing Center – You can sign up for an appointment using the online scheduler.

Purdue University Online Writing Lab – Provides comprehensive advice, including examples and advice from admissions officers.