

Help With: Personal Statements



Along with a resume, you may need a personal statement if you are applying for graduate school, a scholarship, or some type of internship. Many of these programs will require you to submit a resume or a writing sample, but the personal statement serves as a sort of introduction for you and to explain your reasons for applying. Sometimes a personal statement can be integrated into a cover letter, but it is typically a separate piece of writing.

Unlike matters of grammar, there isn't a correct way to write a personal statement, but here is some advice that will usually help you make a better one.

Don't:

☒ Don't repeat your resume. A personal statement which gives all the dates and details of your resume is boring and merely repeats your resume. The reader is more interested in seeing a narrative or pattern—the big picture of your life.

☒ Don't make excuses or beat yourself up. You are not in confession—you are selling yourself as though you are a product. If you had poor grades but lots of experience, don't apologize or write, "Although my grades are not very high, I feel that..." Talk up your positive accomplishments by emphasizing the things you *were* or *are* good at.

☒ Don't be cute or slangy. Personal statements starting with, "Have I got a deal for you!" or "Forget the other guys, pick me!" which try to be humorous usually don't work and they annoy your readers. You are not the first person to think of these jokes or hard sells. Neither should you attempt to show off with your vocabulary in order to sound intellectual.

☒ Don't audition for *American Idol*. Weepy, teary personal statements which begin with, "Ever since I was a little child I had a dream that I would float upon clouds like the eagles" nauseate people who read them every day. Certainly you want to have some passion, but the readers want to see concrete evidence that you have a commitment to the program and not just fine words. If you want to be a nurse, don't write poetry about the smile on a child's face. Discuss the nursing trade magazines you read, the volunteering you've done, and the research you've done about the institution you're applying to.

Do:

☒ Approach the administrators of the program not as a beggar, pleading for a chance, but as a professional and as a peer. In a way, you are not asking for a "favor," but proposing an arrangement that benefits everyone. Explain what *you* can do for *them*: If you accept me, this is what *I* bring to

the table; I would like to make the program better by being committed to doing these things and being active in these other opportunities. No one cares how much you want to be in the program; the readers want a reason why they will be better off choosing you.

☑ Research the program. Show that you've taken the time to find out the specifics and details. Who works in the program? What is the location like? What are their specialties or plans? What is its past history? Get on the internet and find out.

☑ Have a concrete future plan. What specifically do I want to do *in* the program, and after I finish? How does the program fit into a bigger career plan?

☑ Try to have a point. Your readers will find your essay more interesting if it has some form of central idea to it, and a structure which connects back to one memorable theme, whether it's experience, responsibility, flexibility, or whatever. Remember, you are selling *yourself*.

Sample Personal Statement

Ima Student
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Dear Dr. Frankfurter,

I am writing to apply for the travel abroad program for 2010 sponsored by Acme University for a semester in Belgium.

Right now I am a second-year student at Acme University and am an architecture major. I was born in Seoul, Korea, and moved to the USA when I was a child. In high school I was a treasurer for the student union and a reporter for the newspaper club. In university I am presently a member of the university choir. Last summer I went on a volunteer trip to Mexico to help build houses for poor families. I have tried to have a variety of experiences because I believe that people who have a well-rounded life will be better in their careers.

I would like to go to Belgium because I like to travel and I want to see the beautiful buildings in Brugge. I am interested in architecture and photography and I would like to see the cathedral and the canals in the city in autumn. I also know your program is well-known in the field of urban design and your professors have published several books on public squares. I would like to work with professors such as Dr. Buns in the area of park planning.

I want to be a good representative for Korea and for the university by promoting them when I am in Belgium. I think the experience would be good for my career and would help the university by showing them that many different people take classes here.

Thank you,
Ima Student

This statement is very abbreviated, but it has the important elements—the writer asks for something specific (the program name), summarizes a personal history with the theme of well-roundedness, gives precise reasons for applying which suggest personal commitment, and offers something back (a good foreign reputation for the program).