



GUIDE TO WRITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS FOR FURTHER EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Personal statements are part of the application package to many professional and graduate school programs. Sometimes they respond to a specific question but often the questions are open-ended. Although they vary in length, 500 words are common. They are also known as letter of intent, personal essays, statement of purpose or application essays.

Why do schools request them?

Personal statements are intended as an opportunity for you to present yourself to the application committee. While the personal statement is not the most important part of a graduate school application, it may be a deciding factor to a committee looking at a borderline acceptance. It should reflect the relevant skills and characteristics requested by the program including how your past professional, academic and personal goals align to the program's mission, vision and values. The personal statement should go beyond what has already been revealed in your application. The most important thing to remember about writing personal statements is that they should portray your uniqueness through highlighting and reflecting on your most pertinent experiences.

HOW TO PREPARE

Start early and research

Read the instructions carefully for each program. You must tailor each application. Selection committees will give you specific instructions to follow and ask for specific information, be sure to read it carefully.

- Research the institution to understand the culture and vision.
- Research the department to know their strengths and their faculty's areas of expertise.
- For thesis-based programs, include information about possible professors you would like as supervisors.
- Explore their website and, if possible, visit the campus in person.
- Talk to the admissions officers and other professionals directly either at their office or attend education fairs and information sessions.

Know yourself

You will have to describe your strengths and fit for each program you are applying. If you need assistance identifying your skills, consider attending the 'Know Your Skills' workshop, and check out the resources on the Career Exploration & Education website by visiting studentlife.utoronto.ca/task/know-yourself. Talk to your family and friends as they can offer a unique perspective on your skills and abilities. If possible, discuss your options with a professor or teacher assistant — they will be able to speak to your strengths with respect to the discipline in which you wish to study.

Brainstorm

Begin by spending some time reflecting on your life and experiences. Don't make any judgments or edit your thoughts at this point. Possible questions for you to consider are:

- What experiences or education made me want to pursue further studies?
- When did I become interested in this field?
- What appeals to me about the program — what is unique about it?
- What can I bring to this area of study — my unique perspective?
- What do I plan to do once I finish my studies — my long-term goals?



OPEN-ENDED, ESSAY-STYLE PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Open-ended, essay-style personal statements are flexible. The style of instructions and question(s) allows maximum flexibility in what you choose to write. For example, law schools will often use this approach, encouraging applicants to share their narrative and express their interest in the legal field. Often, these statements are lengthier compared to question based personal statements.

Research the program, department, and academic institution

- What is the program looking for in a candidate? (e.g., skills, academic and non-academic experience, fit, career goals, etc.)
- What aspects of the program/department/academic institution appeal to you?
- Is your program research based or course based?

Analysis

- Read the instructions and/or question(s) carefully. Sometimes it may be a simple statement such as “Why are you interested in this program?” Other examples include: How does this program connect with your career goals? Tell us how your academic and non-academic experiences have influenced your decision to pursue graduate studies in this field? Tell us about your research interests.
- What do you think is behind this question/ What do you think the admissions committee is looking for with this question? (e.g., skills, qualities, strengths, academic and non-academic experiences and achievements, research experiences, fit with program, etc.)

Components of your answer

- Have you included why you are interested in this area of study?
 - Focus on experiences, courses, personal experiences of why you how you became interested in this area
 - Include aspects of the area of study that appeal to you (e.g., skills utilized, nature of work, impact on society, etc.)
- Have you included information about your experiences that is relevant to your program of study and have you stated what you have gained from that experience? (e.g., relevant skills, suitability for graduate school; reaffirmation of interest in pursuing graduate studies). Examples of experiences can be drawn from:
 - Academic experiences (courses, papers, group projects, research experience, field work, work-study, abroad, conference presentations, publications, lab experience, independent research projects)
 - Non-academic experiences (paid or unpaid professional experiences, extracurricular activities (e.g. peer tutoring, note-taking), volunteer work (e.g. hospital friendly visitor))
 - Personal experiences that have shaped your decision to pursue graduate studies
- If it is research based, have you included information about research areas of interest, research project ideas, any previous research experience, potential faculty members that you would like to work with or have already connected with?
- If it is course based, and there are different program streams, have you indicated which streams you are most interested in and why?
- Have you described how the program will fit with your future career goals?
- Have you described what aspects of the program, department and/or institution appeal to you?
- Consider how you would like to organize the information that best fits your writing style?
 - Chronological order (e.g. experience at a young age, followed by high school experience, then university)
 - Organized by experiences or themes that don't follow any chronological order.
- Do the ideas you are presenting flow well together?



QUESTION-BASED PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Question-based personal statements often have focused, structured question(s) which you are writing a response to. For example, a teacher's college program may ask you to write four short-responses to four questions that align to their core departmental values. You will want to ensure that you are answering the question(s) succinctly, providing evidence of any claims made in your statement.

Research the program, department, and academic institution

- What is the program looking for in a candidate? (e.g., skills, academic and non-academic experience, fit, career goals, etc.)
- What aspects of the program/department/academic institution appeal to you?

Analyze the question(s)

- Read the question(s) carefully. Examples include: Tell us about a time where you wish you had approached a situation differently? Provide an example of how you have used problem based learning in the past.
- What do you think is behind this question/ What do you think the admissions committee is looking for with this question? (e.g., skills, qualities, strengths)

Components of your answer

- Did you consider multiple examples before choosing the one you picked?
- Have you chosen the right example(s) that will speak to the points you have identified in your analysis?
- Why do you think the example you used is the most effective example for the question?
- If the question is asking about a negative event/situation (e.g., dealing with a failure), have you ensured that you have spent time discussing the positive aspects of that experience?
- If your response can be connected to the program, have you made the connection?
- Have you addressed the points the program is looking for in your response?
- If the questions overlap in content, have you repeated yourself within your responses? If yes, how can you change the content to prevent the repetition?
- Have you answered the question(s)?
- Are you within the character/word limit?

WRITE YOUR FIRST DRAFT

Make sure your first paragraph is engaging. Don't just say what you think the committee wants to hear, but write from the heart. Be confident and positive — it's not always what you say but how you say it. Focus on specific experiences and achievements to make a powerful impression.

Always keep in mind the audience who will be reading this document. Professional schools have a different focus than masters or Ph.D. programs. When you finish the draft, set it aside. The checklist available in Appendix A is a great way to double check your application material.

Edit

After taking a break, come back to your draft and consider these questions:

Did I answer the question or questions as specified in the application?

Does it reflect the real me?

Does it include any irrelevant personal biases?

Does it have any clichés?

Have I chosen the right key experiences to highlight?

Am I being repetitive?

Does the document reflect strong interest in the program?

Have I used the pronoun "I" too much?

If asked about undergraduate research projects:

List projects in order of interest;

Use working titles;

Name professor and supervisor;

Explain relevancy of the research to the program and Identify relevant skills.

If you can, ask several people to review your personal statement.

Prepare your final copy

Proofread for errors and make sure the institution's name is spelled correctly. Make sure it is presented in a professional manner, neat and is within the word or page limit.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Career Exploration & Education

careers.utoronto.ca

Sign up at clnx.utoronto.ca to attend a Career Chat on Exploring Further Education.

Chat online with Career Exploration & Education or call 416-978-8000 to book a one-on-one Personal Statement review.

Recommended websites

- [Sample statements by discipline](#)
- [Sample statements and advice from admissions people](#)
- [More sample statements](#)
- [Advice](#)

Recommended electronic resources at the University of Toronto

- [The Writing Centre on Effective Admission Letters](#)
- [Sample statements from the Faculty of Law](#)
- [Wischnitzer's Residency Manual—Personal statement instruction and samples for medical school applications](#)



APPENDIX A: FURTHER EDUCATION APPLICATION CHECKLIST

Checklist for research or professional statements/letters

Application specific questions

Is my proposed thesis topic/research area of interest immediately evident?

or

Is my overarching, concrete and professional* rationale for pursuing X professional school immediately evident?

* This means a rationale that is not solely personal, familial or emotional, but rather connected to a professional or academic experience.

Have I demonstrated my research potential?

Have I demonstrated my knowledge of my area through specific examples rather than broad general statements?

Have I demonstrated my knowledge while avoiding jargon?

Have I indicated why my area of interest matters?

Have I indicated that I am academically prepared to pursue this area by including: relevant coursework, research projects, conferences attended, internships, awards, etc.?

Have I argued the relation of my experiences rather than just summarizing my CV?

Have I discussed why Program X is a good fit for me by indicating why the program attracts me, which faculty I may be interested in working with, how my research interests are related to the research strengths of the school?

Have I explained anything in my academic background that needs explanation? (e.g. gaps in your academic record, a poor GPA in your first year, a GPA lower than your prospective school's cut off?)



Have I demonstrated my professional competency?

Have I demonstrated my fit for the field by using specific examples and staying away from broad general statements?

Have I articulated the key professional experiences that demonstrate my competency? Bear in mind that professional schools are often looking for signs of:

Professionalism (evidence of reliability, perseverance, responsibility, etc.)

Communication (evidence of collaboration, teamwork, presentation skills, etc.)

Advocacy (evidence of community service, volunteer work, social engagement, etc.)

Academic standing (evidence of achievements, advanced study, special initiatives, work with well-known scholars, conferences, publications, etc.)

Have I discussed the relation of my experiences, showing how I am a professional, a communicator, an advocate & a scholar through concrete examples, or have I just summarized my CV?

Have I discussed why School X is a good fit for me, based on future goals and current achievements, rather than for personal reasons that are likely inappropriate to the application? (i.e. don't say "because it's close to my house")

General questions

Have I ensured my statement is not merely a general autobiography that doesn't specify or emphasize the key academic, professional or volunteer experiences that lead me to apply to the program at hand?

The same question, asked a different way: have I made sure to avoid evidence without claims?

Have I avoided claims without evidence? Have I avoided using words like "challenging" "hardworking" "helpful" "valuable" "satisfying" "appealing" "meaningful"...without providing information that either expands on or proves my claim?

Have I ensured that I have neither too little nor too much autobiographical information?

Have I followed the instructions exactly?*

** Note here that while we caution you to avoid heavy autobiographical content, some schools (like U of T Law) do ask for this kind of information, as a means to draw out diverse experiences or show evidence of overcoming obstacles. Bottom line: follow the prompts.

Have I chosen an effective order of information?

Have I made a deliberate, thoughtful decision about structure, rather than listing information without thinking about sequence?

Have I selected the ideal order of information?

Have I avoided copying a generic online template that will not best demonstrate my individual experience?

To summarize: have I explicitly or implicitly stated:

Why I want to pursue my particular program of study at the particular school in question, using specific, concrete evidence?

Why I am an ideal fit for the program, using specific, concrete evidence?

What I can contribute to the field, using specific, concrete evidence?

Additional considerations when applying to further education

Resume or CV

Does my resume/CV capture all of my relevant professional experiences?

Does my resume/CV include all of relevant awards, course projects, research experiences, and presentations or publications?

References

Have I arranged letters of reference to meet the expectations of the program?

Are my referees able to speak to the strengths highlighted in my application document?

Have my referees provided feedback on my application materials?

Expenses

Have I researched scholarship, fellowship, grant, and loan options to cover the cost of the program?

*This checklist was prepared by Career Exploration & Education
with materials from the Arts & Science Writing Centre.*