

Haverford Writing Center

Some Tips for Writing the Personal Statement

Whether you are writing a personal statement for an internship, fellowship, grad school, or professional school application, it is a critical part of your application package. Here are some general tips for writing a good essay:

- Understand the program to which you're applying. Are you certain it's a good fit for you? Have you researched it thoroughly and talked to faculty members familiar with the program and to students who are currently enrolled in it? Researching the program and writing the application may help you discern whether this program is indeed right for you.
- Understand the prompt. Generally, a personal statement is a place to explain what experience, interests, and passions you will bring to this project or program and how the program will enable you to pursue your goals and make a long-term contribution. If the prompt asks you to explain your proposal project or course of study, do so; if it doesn't, this information may belong in a different part of your application.
- Understand your audience. Generally, applications are read by committee members with varied backgrounds and interests. Make sure that your essay can be understood by a non-specialist (unless you know that the essay will be read only by specialists in your field).
- Keep in mind that this essay is one part of your application package. It should not simply reproduce material that is already included in your resume or c.v., transcript, letters of recommendation, and other parts of your application. The essay gives you an opportunity to give a committee a sense of who you are in a way that can't be conveyed by the rest of your application.
- Remember that you can draw on many of the same strategies you use when writing academic essays. Brainstorm; write a draft or drafts that you share with others; revise; revise again, making sure that you cut anything unnecessary; share your revisions with others; check to be sure your essay adheres to word limits; and proofread carefully.
- Your personal statement should form a coherent, compelling narrative that shows how past experiences and interests led to your interest in this project and explains how the project or program will give you training and experience that will shape your future choices and contributions.
- Above all, try to enjoy the process! Writing a personal statement offers an opportunity for self-reflection and storytelling. If you enjoy writing it, others will enjoy reading it.

Getting Started:

Spend some time brainstorming. Here are some ideas for productive brainstorming and some questions you might ask yourself.

- Schedule a conversation with a friend or a Writing Center tutor to talk about why you're interested in this program and what you can bring to it. If you've already formulated some ideas, try verbally persuading a friend why you would be a good fit for the program. Having a conversation is sometimes a more fruitful first step than trying to write a draft.
- Make a list of relevant courses, internships, work experiences, personal experiences. Then use another piece of paper to draw connections between these experiences and make a map showing how they contributed to your decision to apply to this program and how they qualify you to do so. Your essay should not take the form of a list, but a list or map can be a good place to start.
- Can you identify some particular moments in your education and experience that have been turning points? What was it about a particular mentor or experience, whether in an academic context or not, that led you in a new direction?
- Are there specific values, beliefs, or goals that shape your decisions?
- Why are YOU the right person to carry out this project or embark on this course of study? How can you effectively convey in your personal statement that you are uniquely suited to the project you're proposing or the program to which you're applying?
- If you're proposing a short-term project, how does the proposed project fit in with your long-term goals? Even if you're unsure of specific goals (e.g. attending med school), do you have broader goals that will shape your decisions about future plans? How will doing this project help you along the path to long-term goals? What do you anticipate you will learn? What unique skills or interests do you have to contribute? How does the project tie in with your academic pursuits and intellectual interests? Are there courses you've taken, books or articles you've read, other projects you've completed that led you to an interest in this project?
- Are there other, non-academic aspects of your life experience or your way of perceiving the world that tie in directly with this project or program?
- Try writing two or three different versions of the essay in draft form; share these with friends, tutors, or faculty members and see which version they find most persuasive and powerful.