



# Writing Personal Statements

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## What is a Personal Statement?

Your application should "write a story." That is, the selector should come away from the application knowing where you have come from, including any hardships you overcame, seeing where you are, and understanding where you are going. You want to direct your story in such a way that the program seems a natural "next chapter" in your narrative. You want to leave the selector thinking, "I want to meet this person." You should tell an interesting story with a protagonist (you) who shows ongoing growth. (Taken, with some changes, from *Writing Your Story: The Application Essays* by Ken Brashier, Assistant Professor of Religion, Reed College)

## A Personal Statement Is:

- **A picture:** Your personal essay should produce a picture of you as a person, a student, a potential scholarship winner, and (looking into the future) a former scholarship recipient.
- **An invitation:** The reader must be invited to get to know you, personally. Bridge the assumed distance between strangers. Make your reader welcome.
- **An indication of your priorities and judgment:** What you choose to say in your statement tells the committee what your priorities are. What you say, and how you say it, is crucial.
- **A story, or more precisely, YOUR story:** Everyone has a story to tell, but not all of us are natural storytellers. If you are like most people, your life lacks inherent drama. This is when serious self-reflection, conversation with friends, family, and mentors, and permission to be creative come in handy.

## A Personal Statement Is NOT:

- **An academic paper with you as the subject:** The papers you write for class are typically designed to interpret data, reflect research, and analyze events or readings – all at some distance. We are taught to eliminate the "I" from our academic writing. In a personal statement your goal is to close the distance between you and the reader. You must engage on a different, more personal level than you have been trained to in college.
- **A resume in narrative form:** An essay that reads like a resume of accomplishments and goals tells the reader nothing that they could not glean from the rest of the application. It reveals little about the candidate.
- **A journal entry:** While you may well draw on experiences or observations captured in your personal journal, your essay should not read like a diary. Share what is relevant, using these experiences to give a helpful context for your story. Include only what you are comfortable sharing and are prepared to discuss at an interview.
- **A plea or justification for the scholarship:** This is not an invitation to "make your case." Defending an assertion that you are more deserving of the scholarship than other candidates is a wasted effort – you've likely just accomplished the opposite.

Above all, a personal statement is **authentic**. Don't make the mistake of trying to guess what the committee is looking for, and don't write what you think they want to hear. They want to know you. (From *Definition of a Personal Statement* by Mary Hale Tolar, Deputy Executive Secretary, Truman Scholarship Foundation)

## How Do I Write a Personal Statement?

The personal statement comes from inside you, passionate and gutsy. Its composition is organic, a natural growth dictated by an obscure, internal logic. You don't "make it up"; instead you listen. You "get it down." Writer Julia Cameron believes we have two brains: logic brain and artist brain. Logic brain writes term papers; artist brain writes poetry. To write an effective personal statement, you need to use the artist inside you. If the personal statement is

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giving you writer's block, use the following techniques to jumpstart your creative flow:

- Engage in a mindless, repetitive activity. Turn off the TV and stereo. Go for a run, do dishes, dig holes. Do anything that keeps you busy but allows your mind to wander. Ideas may come thick and fast.
- Begin writing as soon as you wake up in the morning. Don't shower, don't eat (OK, you can have coffee), just turn on the computer. So you're not fully awake; that's good. Neither is your logic brain.

Now do this every day. Well, maybe not every single day; make appointments with yourself. You won't have brilliant ideas each time. Some days you sit and stare at the computer screen. Nothing happens. You suddenly remember a test you should be studying for. But you sit there, you focus and eventually, an idea bubbles to the surface. You start writing.

In these ways you also outwit the "censor"; that nasty voice in your head that reminds you, before you've ever written a word, that you can't spell, that you never got As in English. Sometimes the censor waits until you get a sentence or two down, and then sneers: "You call that interesting?" The censor is a perfectionist. To writer Anne Lamott, "Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor." The censor insists, "I just want it to be right!" Instead, you can't write at all. So write, write anything. And yes, it will be terrible. You're afraid someone will read it and discover you are a fraud. So you do it again. Don't revise, rewrite.

Revision comes later, when you're dressing it up. First you have to get it down. You'll probably throw out at least half of what you write. Don't think of it as wasted time and effort. I call this process "writing through." You write through the thick layers of fat, slowly trimming it away to get to the meat. (From *Getting Creative with the Truman Personal Statement* by Jane Curlin, Ph.D. Director of Student Academic Grants & Awards at Willamette University; writer & consultant.)

### **Questions to Ask Yourself:**

It can be helpful to ask yourself some specific questions that may lead you to a more general expression of yourself, such as:

- What errors or regrets have taught you something important about yourself?
- When have you been so immersed in what you were doing, that time seemed to evaporate while you were actively absorbed?
- What ideas, books, theories or movements have made a profound impact on you? Be honest.
- To what extent do your current commitments reflect your most strongly-held values?
- Where or how do you seem to waste the most time?
- Under what conditions do you do your best, most creative work?
- To what extent are you a typical product of your generation and/or culture? How might you deviate from the norm?

The easiest way to begin writing a personal statement is simply to start writing. Don't start with the object of "writing the personal statement;" just write honestly and truthfully about yourself and the significant moments and people in your life. You will need to write many, many drafts of your personal statement. For your first drafts, don't worry about how badly you're writing. In fact, it is better to just start and get something down on the page. The best (and most successful) personal statements I have seen are the result of 10 or 12 drafts of something that is then entirely thrown away. Those 10 or 12 drafts were very important nonetheless. The final personal statement was entirely different from those drafts, but the moment of truth for the students writing them was when they started all over after all of the struggling. The new essay still needed some revision, of course, but that one night of throwing away and starting anew was the defining moment in their personal statement odyssey.

- Everybody has a story. Maybe you didn't endure a traumatic childhood, or spend a year in Bosnia working with refugees, but you have had experiences that are interesting and have been formative to your development as a person and a scholar.
- What's your line? Telling a story chronologically may help you to remember key moments and turning points, but there are more compelling narrative techniques. What are the threads that tie together the separate pieces of your life? If your life were a mosaic, what would the picture be of?



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- Think strategically. You can't reveal everything about yourself in 1000 words, so you must decide what personal characteristics to emphasize in your statement. What are the most important life experiences, service activities, values, and ambitions that define who you are?