**Writing Personal Statements**

A personal statement is a piece of persuasive writing in which you make your case for why you fit a particular opportunity, whether it is applications for fellowships and scholarships or for graduate or professional schools.

The personal statement gives you a chance to demonstrate that you can organize your thoughts and communicate clearly, so be sure to put some labor into the actual writing, rewriting, and proofreading of the statement. Expect to work through several drafts, and ask several people to read the drafts. A sloppy personal statement communicates that you don’t care much about the opportunity for which you are applying.

A personal statement is not “personal” in the usual sense. It does not focus on information about family, childhood, or hobbies and is not primarily about expressing your personality. Rather, it is an argument intended to convince the admission or selection committee that you have the commitment, ability, experience, and potential to succeed in the opportunity. If you lack substantial experience in the proposed field of research, then your statement should clarify how your experiences in other fields prepare you for this opportunity. It should also give enough sense of your unique qualifications that you will stand out to reviewers. However, do not use a quirky or gimmicky writing style or information about your foibles to try to distinguish yourself—this will backfire.

**What to Include in a Personal Statement**

**Origins of your interest in a particular field:** This could be a book you read, lecture you attended, or experience you had—say, hiking with your family in the summers as the source of your interest in forest eco-systems, visiting India as the source of your interest in global poverty relief, or reading *Pride and Prejudice* as the source of your interest in nineteenth century courtship customs.

**Ways in which you have developed your interest:** Additional reading, experiments, internships, course work, summer jobs, science fairs, travel experiences, writing projects, etc. Give some details about what you gained from a particular course, or how a particular project or paper helped you to develop intellectually.

**Reasons for changes in your interests and goals, or inconsistencies in your record:** These changes should be addressed in positive rather than negative terms; not “I became bored with engineering and switched to physics,” but “Through a bridge-design project, I discovered a new interest in thermodynamics and decided to focus my studies on physics.” If there is anything unusual or problematic in your record—say, some poor grades, several school transfers, or time away from school—this information needs to be explained in as positive a light as possible. If you were immature and screwed up, then matured and shaped up, say so and point to the proof, such as improved grades or a stellar recent employment record. Remember, failure of one kind or another, if you learn from it, is good preparation for future success. This difficult information should be nestled in the middle of your statement somewhere, not in the first or last paragraph.

**Emerging and ongoing questions:** What kinds of unsolved puzzles, problems, potential research paths are of interest to you? Which of these have you explored in school or extra-curricular projects? What were the designs and outcomes of these projects? What sorts of projects do you hope to pursue in the future?

**Special skills you have developed relevant to the opportunity:** This could be general knowledge of a field acquired through reading and study, or special practical skills—data analysis, fossil preservation, interviewing techniques, writing skills—that will qualify you to conduct a particular type of research or work in a particular field. Be specific about how you acquired these skills and at what level you possess them. Don’t claim fluency in a foreign language if you can only read it and not speak it, for example.

**Knowledge and/or skills that you hope to acquire through participation in this opportunity:** What is particularly intriguing to you about this opportunity? How will it help you to acquire new skills or carry forward your own research questions?

**Future plans and goals:** Do you plan to go to graduate or professional school and in what field? What are your post-graduation goals and why? How would this opportunity help you to achieve those goals?

**Specific reasons why you are interested in this opportunity:** Do some research on the program or opportunity and make specific points about why you are interested. If you are applying to a particular school, mention which classes or professors you hope to work with. If you are applying for a particular fellowship or research opportunity, describe how it fits into the trajectory of your development.

**Character traits, talents, or extra-curricular activities outside the field that help to qualify you:** If you are particularly tenacious about overcoming obstacles, creative at problem-solving, adaptable to unfamiliar circumstances, or just great at organizing teams of people, these qualities can be mentioned as relevant to the research experience. Sometimes the evidence for these traits may be other than academic: you have overcome a disability or disadvantage of some kind in your life, or you have persisted in a particularly challenging task, or you have lived in different parts of the world and adapted to difference cultures, or you have organized teams of volunteers in the community. Make clear what traits have been developed by these experiences and how these will help you in the research experience. Acknowledge your strengths, but humbly, and don’t make outlandish claims about what you intend to accomplish in the future.

**Organizing Your Statement**

There is no one right way to organize a personal statement, but it must be organized. You want to make your “story” engaging and accessible to your reader and highlight the most significant aspects of your experience. A chronological organization can work, or you may want to organize your essay by grouping together certain types of skills and experiences. Put some extra work into your first and last paragraphs because these are the ones your readers will remember most clearly. Most people’s openings are uninformative and their closings redundant. If you can make yours emphatic, informative, and engaging, you will stand out from the crowd.

Some prompts ask only for a statement of your interests and some ask for answers to specific questions. Be certain to answer the question being asked, but remember that the objective is to convince the committee that you are right for the opportunity.

**Writing Personal Statements Online Help**

* [Writing Personal Statements Online](https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingpersonalstatementsonline/), by Joe Schall
* [Definition of a Personal Statement](http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/FS/personal.pdf) by Mary Tolar
* [Writing a Personal Statement](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/), Purdue Writing Center
* [Graduate School Statement](http://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/GradStatement.stm), Berkeley
* [Writing Tips: Personal Statements](http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/tips/personalstatement/), University of Illinois

This document borrows from a handout prepared by Professor Stacy Hubbard, Department of English, SUNY Buffalo