

HOW TO WRITE A PERSONAL STATEMENT

A personal statement, letter of intent or application letter may be used when applying for jobs, internships, and graduate/professional school programs. It challenges you to concisely outline your strengths, goals, experiences and qualifications while demonstrating good writing skills.

Prep Work

Before you start writing, gather your transcript, resume and application. Brainstorm information you may need to include: names of past supervisors, applicable job titles, experiences, past successes, job skills and personal traits you want to specifically communicate.

Writing Tips

Answer the Question: If the application asks you to state the reason you are applying to a particular academic program or company, do not spend the entire letter talking about your qualifications. Instead, talk about what attracted you to the company or program. Keep the question in front of you as you write, and refer to it often.

Consider The “I” Problem: This letter is about you. It is okay to use first person; it keeps your writing more active and succinct. However, do not start every sentence with “I.”

Avoid Unnecessary Duplication: Do not reiterate information that is already seen elsewhere in your application, resume or transcript. If the reader has access to your transcript, you do not need to list your grades and course titles. You can be more general in mentioning these topics. For example: “I was on the Dean’s List” or “I have taken numerous courses in the field of nutrition” and then move on to discuss appropriate experiences in more detail.

Make Your Statement Distinctive: To make your letter unique, include at least one detailed example specific to your experience. For example, describe how an important family member or personal moment influenced your decision to pursue a particular career or degree.

Be wary of using humor to connect with the reader. Most of us are not very good at making someone whom we have never met laugh. The safe option is to avoid “funny-business” unless you are absolutely sure that it will work.

Keep It Brief: To keep your essay brief, write concisely yet detailed. Essays are typically limited to 250–500 words or one typed page. Focus each paragraph on a single idea (e.g. one paragraph on the strengths of the program, one on your research experience, one on your extracurricular activities) to keep the essay from becoming too long.

Use a dictionary and thesaurus to provide more word variation and to avoid repetition. However, be careful not to be overly zealous in your use of vocabulary. “I endeavor to pursue my doctorate in the field of cognitive psychology because I believe human thought permeates all facets of human behavior, from exam-taking to abhorrent aggression, and I believe that, as a cognitive psychologist, I would find the profession fulfilling to such a degree that I would be ecstatic regarding my chosen profession,” would sound more sincere like this: “I want to pursue my PhD in cognitive psychology because I think it is an intriguing field, and I know I would be happy working in it.”

Personal Statement Format

Requirements for personal statements differ, but generally a personal statement includes certain information and can follow the format below:

Introduction: Gain the reader’s attention by starting with a catchy opening, such as the distinctive personal example. Then, connect the example to the actual program/position for which you are applying. Mention the specific name of the program or company, as well as the title of the position or degree you are seeking. Be straight forward and avoid using clichés, egotism and famous quotes.

Detailed Supporting Paragraphs: These paragraphs should address specific questions from the application. Each paragraph should be specifically focused and support a topic sentence. You may address your qualifications, why you are interested in the program, etc. Keep your examples relevant to supporting your qualifications.

Conclusion: Tie together the various examples and claims you have raised in the essay, and reiterate your interest in this specific program or position. You might also mention how this job or degree is a step towards a long-term goal.

General Suggestions: In applying to multiple graduate schools/companies, have at least one paragraph that you change so your essay will sound individualized. For graduate schools, you might specify that you have similar research interests that match faculty interests at that institution. For companies, you may share an interest in their mission, leadership style, product, etc.

Cover Letters

A cover letter (see Cover Letter Tip Sheet) contains many of the same elements as a personal statement, but it is presented in a business letter format and may be shorter and more specific than a personal statement. Also, your cover letter usually asks for an interview in the conclusion.



Revising the Personal Statement

Because this document is designed to either get you an interview or a place in a graduate school program, you must allow yourself enough time to revise it thoroughly. When revising, check both the content (Did I address the question? Is there enough detail?) and for technical errors (Is the writing clear? Are mechanics and punctuation correct?). Spell- and grammar-checks are helpful during revision, but do not rely on them exclusively. Read through the essay yourself and have others (professors, career counselors, writing center staff, parents, supervisors, etc.) review it as well.

Personal Statement Checklist

- Spelling and grammar checked
- Opening paragraph includes distinctive personal experience
- Genuine interest is shown in the kind of work to be done
- Tone is positive and presents a Win/Win scenario
- Printed on one side of resume quality paper (when applicable)
- All text is left justified
- There are spaces between paragraphs
- Content is positioned on the page well
- Only one font is used and margins are balanced
- If mailing, paperclip; do not staple

Don't...

- Try to be funny or make jokes
- Start every sentence with I or my
- Include hobbies/interests unless relevant
- Use vocabulary you don't normally use
- Use famous quotes
- Repeat things already in your application
- Lie or embellish the truth
- Say you are going to do something before coming to the university/organization
- Include same boring phrases/hobbies as everyone else
- Take any political viewpoints

Additional Resources

- petersons.com
- studential.com/guide/write_personal_statement.htm

Sample

As a child I often accompanied my father to his small coin shop and spent hours watching him work. When I was older, I sometimes set up displays, waited on customers, and even balanced the books. This experience instilled in me the desire to own and manage my own business someday, yet I understand that the business world today is more complex. This complexity requires more education, and with that in mind, I am applying to the Master of Business Administration program at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB).

In addition to my helping out in my father's business, I have had numerous other work experiences that further enhance my qualifications for this program. My resume enumerates the various positions I have held at Kerasotes Theaters, Chili's restaurants, and Indiana University's new Student Recreational Sports Center (SRSC), and what all of these positions have in common is an emphasis on serving the public effectively. Further, as an assistant manager at the Showplace 11 and a staff coordinator at the SRSC, I have gained valuable expertise in managing employees and creating work schedules. Both of these positions have allowed me to develop my sales and people skills, which are extremely important in an increasingly service-driven marketplace.

Not all of my work experience has been as a paid employee. Part of my volunteering experience at Middleway House, the local battered women's shelter, involved extensive work on computers, including word processing, organizing databases and creating spreadsheets. Also, I recently participated in an internship program for academic credit with the Eli Lilly corporation in the personnel division. As a management intern, I was able to watch the workings of a major corporation up close and would like the opportunity to combine my experiences with the theoretical background available in the MBA program at IUB, with its emphasis on computers, marketing and human resources.

My successful internship is one element of my overall academic success as an undergraduate here at IUB, yet I have also made time for a variety of extracurricular activities, including working for my sorority and competing in intramural basketball. My positive experiences here have resulted in my desire to stay in Bloomington to continue my academic endeavors; furthermore, continuing my education here would allow me to make important business contacts, with the career goal of opening my own computer consulting firm in the Midwest.

Resource: indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/personal_statement.shtml