

Style: Writing a Personal Statement

While applying for graduate school or financial assistance can be menacing enough for the average student, the thought of writing a personal statement may be even scarier. What is a personal statement? How personal should I get? Do they want me to beg for admittance or money? All of these questions can be found floating through the minds of students working to author the perfect personal statement. Here are some tips that may help to focus your statement and give you some clues about what the committee may be expecting:

For academic admissions / applications

(from "What Do They Want?" by Mark Fenlon, University of Texas Undergraduate Writing Center)

From a study of 150 graduate faculty members in several disciplines at the University of Texas, Fenlon gathered data on how they evaluated personal statements for graduate admissions. His discoveries may apply to personal statements for various other purposes as well. As a rule, bad personal statements carry more weight than good ones, and liberal arts faculty consider them more valuable than science/engineering faculty, who may look more closely at GPA or test scores. In either case, personal statements may "swing the vote" between equally qualified candidates.

1. Readers prefer statements that create mature, likable, down-to-earth, and positive impressions of the author. Qualities perceived as negative include dullness, narrowness, naïveté, and egocentrism. "Arrogance" was not a factor, according to these faculty.
2. Audience awareness is key. The younger and more inexperienced the student, the harder he or she may have to work to overcome a generation or maturity gap. Qualities, interests, or hobbies interesting to other college students (Fenlon uses the example of medieval role-playing games) may not be impressive to "serious academics" on admissions committees.

Successful Strategies for Personal Statements:

Writing Style

- Be specific and use concrete examples as opposed to broad descriptive statements.
- Many faculty (85%) of those surveyed recommend avoiding cliché's, or "half-witted statements" like "Because of my desire for artistic expression, I've decided to teach English in middle school." Also avoid attempts at humor or self-deprecation.
- The essay should be an example of your best (well-organized, error-free) writing. Readers react negatively to lack of focus, rambling, typos, misspellings, and grammar errors.

Academic Focus

- Tie your motivation for applying to their program to the proposed course of study.
- If write about a specific scholarly interest, be sure the department has faculty in that area.
- Research the academic interests of the department or talk to the graduate advisor before applying.

Personal Matters (race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, personal problems/circumstances)

- Science faculty advise using extreme caution or completely avoiding personal matters.
- Those in liberal arts, however, say use personal info only if it's related to academic goals.
- Avoid any hint of self-pity; avoid making your audience feel uncomfortable.

For UHCL financial aid applications:

(from Leslie Wells, UHCL Financial Aid Office)

- **Your statement should focus on you.** While it is okay to discuss your skills or any training that has prepared you for the field of study, keep the technical details brief. The reader is looking for a chance to get to know *you*. Possible items to discuss include...
 - education or career goals
 - why you are interested in your field of study
 - what you have overcome to be here
 - why you deserve the scholarship
 - your plans for the future
 - how you intend to use your degree
- **Make your statement interesting.** Let the reader see the interesting person you are; to do this, include specific examples, situations, and details that will set you apart from other applicants. Be sure you have more than just general statements that may apply to any grad student, any full-time parent, any international student, any veteran, etc.
- **Be original!** The readers can guess that you may like kids if you want to be a teacher; rather, let them know about the experience in your life that helped you to choose the field of teaching.
- **Be positive about yourself and your circumstances.** Yes, you need to let the reader know that you would appreciate the scholarship, but don't sound pathetic or like a beggar ("woe is me"). Instead, show that no matter what the obstacles, you have worked hard to be here and will continue to work hard, hopefully with some help from the scholarship committee.
- **Remember to write about yourself!** While your family may inspire you, or you may have been involved in numerous useful organizations, the personal statement is about *you*. It is okay to let the reader know the impact that others have had on you, but use that info as a means of showing how *you* have grown because of them, or how you were impacted.

While these statements may seem scary at first, they are really your chance to shine as a student and let the scholarship committee members see that you are the student who deserves their funding. Remember that this is a statement about you and it is your time to let them know who you are as an individual, where you are going, and why.