

PERSONAL STATEMENT FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

CLEMSON UNIVERSITY MICHELIN[®] CAREER CENTER

Personal Statement (Statement of Purpose, Candidate's Admission Statement, and others) is where you can explain why you're applying to graduate school, what interests you about the program, and what your future goals are.

How To Make It Good

1. Make it Persuasive
 - How right the program is for you.
 - How right you are for the program.
2. Make it Personal
 - Involves honesty and distinctiveness.
 - Feel free to acknowledge personal challenges you've faced but focus on facts and on the future.

Getting Started

You should begin compiling information three to four months before you fill out your application. You should reflect on the following:

1. Personal History
 - Are you heading for graduate school straight from undergraduate? If so, what has happened during your undergraduate years to make you certain that you already know what you want to do with your life?
 - Are you a nontraditional student, five, ten years past undergraduate school? If so, an interesting part of your story will be what in your adult life has led you to return to school.
2. Personal Life
 - Were there any unusual or difficult circumstances in your childhood? In your undergraduate years?
 - Do you have family relatives, especially in your chosen field?
 - Was there an adult in your life who was especially influential?
3. Academic Life
 - Which ideas, fields of research, or problems especially intrigue you?
 - Among the professors you have studied with and in reading you have done, who has influenced you the most? Why?
4. Work Life
 - Includes jobs, volunteer work, extracurricular activities, and so on.
 - "Real-world" work experience is major influence behind a nontraditional student's decision to go on to graduate school - "moment of truth" in this type situation can make a compelling statement.
 - Traditional students should demonstrate familiarity with and competence in the field they want to enter through their work or activities because an admissions committee might ask "What does she know about this field at the age of 21

Writing a Draft

After doing preliminary “research”, pick your story and write a personal statement draft. Don’t edit or worry about the length, just WRITE.

Next, put your draft away for at least 2 weeks – don’t even look at it!

At this point, it is more constructive to focus on what the essay shouldn’t be than what it should be. Here are some essay approaches that usually don’t work out:

1. *Funny*
 - Very few people can do funny so for the most part play it straight.
2. *Maudlin*
 - It is fine to acknowledge the role personal difficulties have played in your decisions about graduate school but keep the emotion to a minimum and focus on the facts and the future.
3. *Iconoclastic*
 - There is a persistent rumor that unusual, even outrageous, responses to a personal statement will get the admission’s committee’s attention and it will but it is almost always negative attention.
4. *Exhaustive Life History*
 - Don’t try to be comprehensive or strictly chronological and avoid beginning statements such as “As a child, I…” or “Such and such has always been my passion…”
 - You don’t have to prove that you were born to your field of interest, in fact your story may be more intriguing if it shows how you were not born to a field but came to it through life experiences.
5. *The Resume*
 - Since you are free to attach a copy of your resume or CV to all graduate school applications, there is no need to waste your essay space by recounting your work history.
 - If your statement is about how your work experiences have led you to apply, then keep the focus on the why and the how, not on the what of your work and your job history.

Next Steps

When you are satisfied that you are on the right track, do some editing. Also, get some feedback from a couple of people you know well. Some questions to consider are: is the essay coherent, does it reflect your story as they understand it, and most of all does the essay make them say, “yeah, that’s you.”

At this point, you should look at the essay more closely. Now it is time to focus on what the essay is.

1. *Stress Unique Material*
 - Use the essay to talk about something that doesn’t come up anywhere else on your application, you want to give the admissions committee something new to think about.
2. *Concentrate On One Theme*
 - “What led me to apply to this program,” “The person who has most influenced my thinking,” and so on.
3. *Show, Don’t Tell*
 - Admissions committee has no reason to believe any general statement that you make about yourself unless you back it up with facts and evidence – that is what makes it persuasive.
4. *Tell Why, Not What*
 - Use your essay space to explain why an event was significant to you and what you learned from it – provide enough background so that your reader can follow what’s happening, but no more.

5. *Extracurricular Activities*

- All that interests the admissions committee is the depth of your involvement in your field, play up these activities on your application – don't load up on unrelated information. This will be considered irrelevant and at worst, may make you look scattered and unfocused.

The Most Common MISTAKES Applicants Make When Writing a Personal Statement

1. Sloppiness

Avoid formatting, and grammatical errors by carefully proofreading your work. Leave adequate time to edit your writing.

2. Writing One General Statement for all Schools

Be specific as to why each particular school interests you and how you will contribute to the program. Read each school's instructions and be sure to follow the guidelines for their essays.

3. Boring Content

Have a positive tone, vary the length and structure of your sentences, and use precise language. Avoid numerical lists, clichés, and chronological histories.

4. Sounding Like Everyone Else

In your preliminary self-assessment, identify your strengths and decide what sets you apart from other applicants. Communicate that uniqueness in your personal statement – what motivates you, what are your plans for the future, etc.

5. Being Shy

Write with confidence about your intellectual development – what events or ideas have most influenced you, how have you changed intellectually as a result, etc

6. Writing What You Think Someone Else Wants to Read

Don't do this if what you write doesn't truly reflect who you are. Enrolling in a program that isn't truly suited for you will only make you uncomfortable later and decrease your chance of success.

7. Dwelling on Crises

The explanation of crises and misfortune are essential if they affected personal and academic development and perspective. A superficial mention that doesn't provide the reader with insight is useless and too much disaster and destruction also reflects negatively.

8. Failing to Check Spelling and Grammar Carefully

9. Appearing Unrealistic

When discussing goals and plans, make sure that they and the related timetables are feasible.

10. Spinning Irrelevant Yarns

Make absolutely certain that whatever you decide to reveal about yourself and your life addresses the question asked.

Please refer to *Kaplan Graduate School, Admissions Advisor, Graduate Admissions Essays*, and other materials that are available in the Career Resource Library, for more information and sample essays.

