



k o o d o s

WRITING YOUR WAY INTO COLLEGE

*A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO
WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT
THAT WORKS*

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WRITTEN BY AN ADMISSIONS INSIDER



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About the Author

I'm a first-generation college student and have worked for the past couple years as a seasonal college admissions reader for the University of Washington.

During my years as a reader, I've gotten the opportunity to read thousands of application files for high school students and transfers from all over the United States, including applicants from every academic and socioeconomic background.

I have a passion for making higher education accessible to all students and this desire as well as my experience has positioned me to provide coaching and advising on the topics of writing personal statements, college admissions and navigating post-secondary education.

As a graduate of one of the top military colleges in the world, West Point, and a two-time earner of advanced degrees, I have the personal experience to understand how difficult it can be to get into top schools and my goal is to help students from all backgrounds succeed in this process.

I also had a past job as a writing consultant, where I worked with college students at every level helping them craft essays and research papers from multiple academic disciplines. In my job as a writing consultant, I'd wager to say 50-60% of the students I saw, wanted help with personal statements, resumes, or cover letters, so I've developed a keen sense on what the average college admissions essays looks like and I know how to make it stand out amongst the thousands of others an admissions officer will read during a typical admissions cycle.



Founder and Lead Coach, Koodoos

Joy G. Turner

Over the course of the last 10 years:

- I've earned \$10,000s in graduate level scholarships and grants
- I've read and evaluated 1000s of personal statements from students in every degree major and level of education including PhD candidates and engineering school applicants
- I've worked on the admissions staff of a top research university where I learned the exact academic and socioeconomic indicators they use to evaluate candidates
- I've worked for years as a writing consultant and worked with 100s of clients to help them craft high-quality and professional writing
- I've been awarded prestigious honors such as being named a 2018 Presidential Management Fellow Finalist and a member of the University of Washington Husky 100.

I'm writing this guide because my goal is to help students and applicants craft personal, one of a kind essays for college applications. With an abundance of tutoring and test-taking prep widely available to students, the test scores among students applying to top schools are virtually identical and provide little means for admissions staff to distinguish candidates from one another. For this reason, the personal statement has become critically important in selecting students for the incoming cohort.

I have multiple years of experience working with writers and applicants to draft the perfect essays for scholarships, internships, and college admissions, and know I can help you craft an essay that is impactful and memorable.

As the personal statement, becomes more and more essential in selecting the incoming class, you'll want to know that your personal statement stands out as among the best.

Let's get started.

Joy A. Turner

Step 1. Before you Start Writing

Purpose of the Personal Statement

A personal statement, also known as a statement of purpose is a priority tool for assessing applicants for college admissions that admissions teams use the tools is useful to colleges because it essentially serves as a self-manifested demonstration of one's unique qualifications. The personal statement also provides a glimpse of your writing ability, creativity, and career goals. Admissions committees look to personal statements to gain insight about the applicant and understand their motivations as they relate to school and career choices.

A successful personal statement, or what is commonly known as a statement of purpose for graduate students, should highlight the writer's achievements, goals, background, and special attributes. A good personal statement also addresses who you are, how you got to this point, and where you want to go.

The personal statement is designed to:

1. Tell the reader(s) something about you and why you should be accepted to the school that they cannot learn from reviewing your transcripts, test scores, CV, or other materials.
2. Demonstrate that you can write clearly, coherently and effectively.

A personal statement is required for most college applications including those for admission as an undergraduate, a transfer student, or a graduate student.

Personal statements can range in length from 350 words to several pages. Most are between 500 and 2000 words, which means you have limited space to describe your experiences, achievements, and goals.

Generally, personal statements fall into two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement, which allows you maximum flexibility in terms of what you choose to write about.

2. The response to very specific questions like, “Explain why you’re a good fit for X Program,” that are more frequently used for graduate school statements of purpose and short response essays.

Who reads your personal statement?

So, I’ve seen the question pop up over and over again from applicants wanting to know who is actually reading their personal statements.

For most undergraduate applications, personal statements and the applications overall, are read by admissions office staff members or admissions committee members who have specialized training and experience reading and reviewing college applications. Usually between one and three professional admissions staff or committee members will read your application.

I began my work reading and assessing college applications for the University of Washington as a graduate student, so it’s also not unheard of to have your personal statement read and evaluated by trained student employees or temporary admissions office staff members.

The admissions committees for graduate programs are usually composed of professors and staff members of the program or department you’re applying for. They will want to know why you’re choosing a major in their specific profession and why you think you will do well in it for the long term.

Still, it’s nearly impossible to know for sure who will read your application, especially at large universities, so consider that anyone could be looking at your personal statement. This includes people from a range of backgrounds, ages, and belief systems.

Nonetheless, each person who reads your application is working on behalf of the college or university and are eager to accept students who are a good fit. The personal statement is your opportunity to make your case for admission.

Understanding the Prompt

Before you start writing your personal statement or college admissions essay, you need to understand the essay prompt. As simple as it seems, this can be difficult if you can't figure out exactly what the prompt is asking.

Remember, there are generally two types of personal statements: the general, comprehensive kind and the type that answer a specific question.

Regardless, of what type the college you're applying to calls for, there are number of holistic questions you should consider when trying to understand your college essay prompts.

What does the prompt ask about me?

Academic and Personal Goals. A typical question might be "How will attending X College help you achieve your goals?"

Academic History. For example, is there anything in your academic history that warrants further explanation like a dip in grades junior year or a withdrawal from a core class.

Previous Learning Experiences. Consider listing applicable research, projects, and work experience.

Extracurricular Activities. Discuss your involvement with extracurricular activities, clubs, or community programs (don't include anything from before high school).

Financial Situation. Questions about financial situation, ability to pay tuition, or fund your education in general, most commonly appear on scholarship essay prompts.

What does the prompt ask about the school I'm applying to?

Program Fit. Example - What makes you a good fit for the MA program at University X? Colleges want to know how your unique skills and experiences will align with their program focus and values.

College Fit. More generally, universities are also interested in WHY you want to attend their school and how that desire aligns with the culture and atmosphere of the college. A common question you might see is "why do you want to attend Y university"?

What keywords does the prompt use?

For the most part, there's little difference in the meaning of the words listed here as examples, but I still advise writers to carefully consider and do exactly what the prompt requires. This is especially important if you re-use essays or templates.

Examples:

- Describe
- Share
- List
- Analyze
- Evaluate

What official requirements does the prompt include?

Word Count or Page Length. Don't go over the limit and expect essay readers not to notice.

Online Form vs. Email Submission. Which does the application require - submission via an online application or website? Or a pdf or doc file sent to the admissions office contact email?

Formatting. Consider the requirements for font size, spacing, page margins, and headings. These requirements shouldn't be considered just suggestions and I recommend sticking to any formatting rules the application lists. Don't tick off the person reading your application by leaving off the title for your essay to save space when the instructions strictly call for one.

After carefully considering the prompt, it's time to choose a topic.



Choosing a Topic

And so, here comes the difficult part about writing a personal statement.

You must choose a topic.

My number one recommendation - Write about something that reflects your life authentically and communicates what you're passionate about.

Admissions officers don't want to read in personal statements what they can read on a resume or transcript. So, when choosing a topic for your personal statement, pick something to write about that motivates you, intrigues you, or exhibits a part of yourself that you would be incomplete without.

That being said, you also have to choose a topic that addresses the essay prompt. It's not easy to do both, but it's definitely possible after a bit of brainstorming and pre-writing.

The topic of your personal statement may span multiple years of your life or cover a single event, like your 1st place win at the State Robotics tournament. The personal statement is just that, personal. As we stated earlier, it's your opportunity to show your writing ability, creativity, and goals.

For this reason, the topic you choose should allow you to communicate a personal story that clearly indicates your ability to write and be vulnerable about who you are and who you want to be.

Still, it's important to be reflective in the telling of your story through the topic you choose as way to create distance between you and the experience and demonstrate both the maturity and insightfulness admissions officials expect from students who eventually enroll at the university.

So, choose wisely.

As a guide, here are some questions to consider when brainstorming a topic, story, or focus for your personal statements.

Questions to Ask Yourself Before You Start Writing

Questions about Your Academic Plans and Career Goals	Questions About Yourself and Background
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your short term and long-term career goals? • What challenges in the workplace have you faced that have prompted you to return to school? • How have you already learned about this field that prepares you for the next step? • Have you been employed in any capacity or volunteered in your chosen field? If so, what have you learned from that experience? • What is your undergraduate major? Who or what has inspired you to pursue this major? • Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess? • Why might you be a stronger candidate for admission—and more successful and effective than other applicants? • What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you? • What makes you special? • What is impressive about your experiences or life? • What are your future goals? • What skills/characteristics of yours will contribute to your success in the field?

Questions about Your Academic Plans and Career Goals	Questions About Yourself and Background
<p>example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are your major accomplishments, and why do you consider them accomplishments? ● How have you been challenging yourself in school to prepare for graduate school? ● Why are you interested in pursuing graduate study in this field? Are there any courses and/or extracurricular activities you have completed to get you started in this area? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Where were you born? Your ethnicity? ● Are you the first in your family to attend college? ● Have you overcome any personal or economic struggles? ● Who or what was your motivation to continue your education? ● What are the opportunities and/or challenges you find in your community?

Personal Statement Considerations for Undergrads, Transfers, Veterans, Grad Students, and Job Seekers

As you apply for college programs at various points in your life, your personal statement should differ as a result. Admissions committees expect a personal statement for a transfer student to be much different from a college admissions essay for an incoming freshman student. With that in mind, here are some unique considerations to keep at the forefront of your thinking when writing personal statements as an undergrad, transfer, veteran, graduate school applicant, or job seeker.

Writing a personal statement for undergrad

When applying for undergraduate admission, you should primarily focus your essay on what has shaped your interests throughout your life, specifically over the last four years of high school. You should also focus on your academic studies and experiences in high school as well as how they've prepared you for a college-level curriculum. Another important topic you should write about for your essays is how you will fit into the culture of the college and what unique attributes you'll bring to campus. For diversity and

supplemental statements focus on your community, personal identity, and any adversity you've experienced in your life.

Writing a personal statement for veterans

As an active-duty veteran, I'll be the first to say that in the military we get accustomed to writing in a very specific military-style, which is characterized by communication of the bottom line up front and a focus on informing the reader. This concise and straightforward style is essential for military communications but doesn't work well for writing personal statements that are meant to be somewhat creative and introspective. So for veterans, remember to inject your personality into your writing and ditch the objectivity characteristic of the military writing style. Further, most college admissions committees are comprised of civilians with little experience working with military personnel or reading military correspondence. So, avoid using military jargon or translate military speak to the civilian equivalent.

Some schools might also expect you to discuss your military service and how those experiences have influenced your educational and career goals. I recommend including this type of information in your personal statements in so far as you would with any other job you've had in the past, especially if the experience has been a significant part of your life over the last few years.

Writing a personal statement for transfer students

As a transfer student, you should have a bit of a different focus for your personal statement than the average high school senior. For instance, you might want to discuss the specific reasons you wish to leave your current college/university or program of study. You might also devote space in your statement to explaining your current academic interests and what prerequisites you will complete before transferring.

Personal statements from transfer students should reflect the experience and maturity of someone who has already attended college. It should also demonstrate your understanding of the effort it takes to pursue a college education, and balance competing demands in a university setting.

For transfer students, the college application essay is also your opportunity to take responsibility for less-than-perfect grades, recognize academic challenges, and explain the steps they have taken to conquer them.

Writing a personal statement for graduate school

Often, the readers of your graduate school statement of purpose want to see you answer three general questions:

Why us?

Your graduate school admissions essay should hone in on the specifics of why you want to study in the program you're applying to. Why are you applying to *this* school, department, internship, or program and not some other? What is special about them? Are there specific professors you'd like to work and conduct research with and why? What are your connections to the program's location?

Why you?

What is special about you? What is in your background, interests, or achievements that shows you are an ideal candidate? Remember though that grad schools, more than undergrad program, also expect to benefit from having you as a student, so it's important to also explain how you will contribute to the culture, reputation, and work of the program through your research and leadership activities.

Why now?

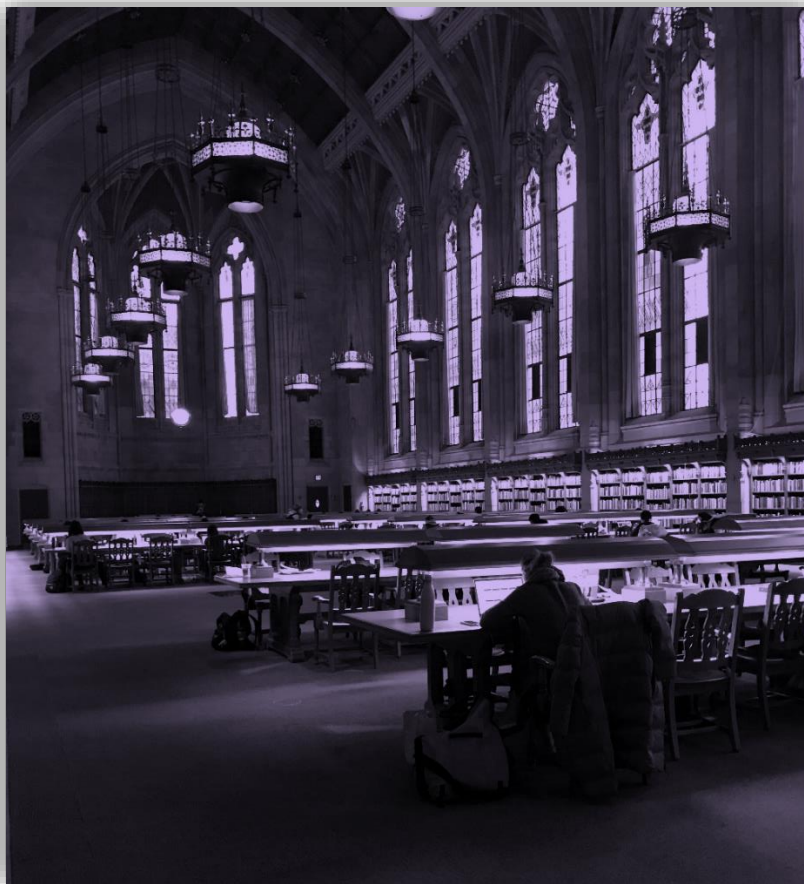
Grad school admissions committees and department heads are also hoping to understand why you're applying at this point in your life, whether that is straight out of undergrad or after a 10-year career. More importantly, they want to know how the decision to pursue a graduate education right now fits in with your long-term goals?

Your answer to these questions should continuously circle back to how studying in the program will help you attain your academic and career goals.

Writing a personal statement for a job or internship

A personal statement for a summer job or internship will differ than a personal statement for college admissions in that it should stress the qualifications that will make you successful in the workplace or lab. Your focus for these essays should be on the skills, experiences, and education that makes you a good fit for the job. Include content that explains the personal strengths and traits that have prepared you to be successful in the position you're applying for.

My recommendation is to take the job listing, write out the key attributes and skills the position calls for, and to focus your essay narrative on describing the particular experiences and learning that has prepared to fulfill those criteria.



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Step 2. Writing your Personal Statement

Using Style in Your Personal Statement

The style you choose to use for your personal statement offers important clues about you and your character. Much like your high school English class essays, the style of your personal statement can reveal your ability to write, your attention to detail, and how you choose to communicate. Alternatively, a statement of purpose that fails to convey an appropriate style demonstrates undesirable characteristics like laziness, an inability to communicate appropriately, or a lack of real interest in the application process.

Personal statements and other college admissions essays are meant to communicate your admirable traits while at the same time describing your background, skills, and experiences that make you an ideal candidate. For this reason, I recommend you stick to using 1 of 2 styles when writing your college admissions essays: the narrative essay or the persuasive essay.

In narrative writing, the main purpose is to tell a story - your story. In telling your story, you communicate to admissions officers details about your background, life, and experiences that aren't otherwise obvious on your resume or transcript. A narrative is personal by nature, so it works well as a means to convey what makes you unique and offers a glimpse into how you see yourself and the world around you.

Key Characteristics:

- Your story is told by you through first person/ your own point of view
- Your essay uses elaborate detail that uses the five senses to convey feelings
- Your personal statement has characters and/or dialogue
- Your essay has definite and logical beginnings, intervals, and endings
- Your essay uses situations like actions, motivational events, and disputes or conflicts which are eventually resolved
- Your essay has a conclusion that relates back to your academic or personal goals, interests, or motivations

In using a persuasive writing style for your college admissions essay your main purpose should be to convince the reader of why you're the best-

qualified candidate for admission. To convince others to agree with your point of view, persuasive writing contains justifications and reasons like a description of your skills, previous jobs, relevant certifications, and applicable honors. This type of writing is typically used for cover letters and letters of application and thus are also a good fit for graduate school statements of purpose which should follow a similar format.

Key Characteristics:

- Your statements are equipped with reasons, arguments, and justifications for why you should be admitted
- Your essay attracts attention, stimulates interest, and maintains the focus of the admissions reader
- You ask the reader (admissions team member) to agree with your reasoning
- You ask the reader to do something (admit me!)

There are many different styles of writing to choose from when writing college admissions essays. A narrative style or persuasive style provides the most useful format for structuring your essay as they help to convey the information about you admissions officers want to know most. So, stick to one of these two styles and you'll be set in writing a top admissions essay.

Using the Narrative Essay Style

A personal narrative works great when writing a personal statement because it allows you to relay the authentically relay your thoughts, feelings, and experiences about a certain event. Since a personal statement serves as your opportunity to communicate your individuality and what inspires, the narrative should be a go to format for your college admissions essays.

In writing a personal narrative as the primary basis of your college admissions essay or personal statement, your goal should be to construct a coherent story from the facts of a situation or series of events. Ideally, this narrative consists of a beginning, middle, and end. In personal narratives, you are both the storyteller and the main character.

The beginning of your narrative essay should draw the reader in with an exciting start which introduces the story you're telling. There are numerous ways in which you can write this opening. For instance, you can:

- Write in chronological order, starting at the beginning of the situation or series of events
- Start in the middle of the action filling in gaps later using dialogue or recollections
- Start with a fact about your life, background, or community that will take on a larger meaning as you piece together the narrative

Next, you should give relevant details about the story or event. The middle of your story can detail a series of events or facts that occur in the narrative you're telling. This is also the place where the characters in your story change or grow and you begin to resolve any the prevailing issue(s). Be careful not to lose your reader at this stage of your narrative by following these guidelines:

- Be descriptive by using sensory details to better convey feelings and help the reader visualize your story
- Show, don't tell as means of avoiding sounding preachy, moralistic, or coming off as pretentious
- Build to the climax of your story tying together the individual details

Lastly, you want to write the ending of your essay. Ideally, this coincides with the final part of your narrative which should:

- Reveal what lessons you learned in living through the experience you related
- Describe how the events or situations changed you in a positive way or how your thinking has evolved
- Relate a revelation about the situation or event that speaks more broadly about your beliefs and motivations
- Include a statement that looks ahead towards the future especially as they relate to your personal and academic goals

Using the Persuasive Style for the Cover Letter Essay or Statement of Purpose

The statement of purpose, or what I like to call the cover letter essay because of its similar structure, is generally used for graduate school applications, takes on a persuasive style and focuses much more on describing the skills, experiences, and education that has prepared you for the program you're applying to than a personal statement would. Its main purpose concentrates less on telling your story through a narrative and more on communicating the qualities that make you a perfect candidate. Ideally, the statement of purpose should convey your genuine interest in and enthusiasm for the program of study you're pursuing, and what you have done in the past to nurture that passion as a way to persuade the admissions committee of your unique fitness to be admitted.

Here are 4 steps for writing a statement of purpose or college admissions essay using a persuasive style:

1. Start off your statement of purpose by describing your motivations for applying for and how it fits in with your academic and personal goals. Basically, you should be answering the question - what makes me want to learn more about this subject?



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2. Next, you should communicate the past subjects you've studied, previous jobs you've held, and relevant skills and certifications you've obtained that prepare you for the curriculum or program of study. This is the part where you really get to brag on yourself in discussing your relevant qualifications and unique skill set that ideally prepare you for success in the field you've chosen.

3. Follow that up by communicating your interest in attending the particular university you're applying to. It's important to articulate why you're choosing X school or Y program at every level of education. As an example, you might state your interest in *working with Prof. Baker who is an expert in a rare 16th-century form of restoring ancient artifacts*. Admissions officers and committee members want to know that you did your research and have a compelling and personal reason for wanting to attend their institution. In this section, be sure to also include statements about what you can bring to the university's campus and how you will contribute to the prevailing culture of the college or grad program. Again, think, *why should they pick me?*

4. Lastly, don't forget to include in your statement what attributes and traits make you special because, yes, it matters to admissions committees what kind of person you are and student you will be. As an example, you could focus on describing the parts of your personality that demonstrate your ability to learn and think as well as your desire to collaborate and communicate effectively as a student-scholar. Colleges want to know that you possess the traits that will contribute to both your growth and the betterment of the department and university community. One of the important things to remember is that the best way to communicate your traits is to use an anecdote or experience from your past, that shows rather than just lists what makes you a top candidate.

No matter what, remember to be authentic and your uniqueness will shine through in your statement of purpose. Follow these 4 steps and you'll be on your way to writing a winning statement of purpose.

Using Tone Effectively in Your Personal Statements and Other College Admissions Essays

Tone is more than what you write, it's how you write it, and the tone of your personal statement can significantly impact your college application. Your choice of words, level of formality, and the writing style you choose to use comprises your writing tone and can reveal a significant amount about how you view yourself, your academic/career path, and your community. It's easy for an essay reader to forgive flaws in your writing style as multiple styles can work. It's less easy to forgive a tone that is too harsh, moralistic, or pretentious.

Writing a personal statement usually calls for a semi-formal, conversational tone in order to convey the right attitude to admissions readers. Think how I would tell my story to my YouTube audience vs. how would I tell it to my best friend. The difference is, with an audience, there's still some separation between you and the people you're talking to, whereas with your best friend you're not really holding anything back. In personal statements, you should be vulnerable and introspective. With your best friend, you can be a sloppy crying mess.

Too informal and generic: When I was in 9th grade, me and my friends used to get together to work on math homework after school.

Better: As a freshman, my friends and I would often stay around after school ended, working on our math homework, and forming what we liked to call our "Math Club".

How to Use Tone in Your Personal Statement:

- Avoid an overly formal or ceremonious tone
- Avoid sarcasm or being highly condescending
- Don't make generalizations
- Don't "otherize" your peers or people from different backgrounds or cultures
- Don't use slang, especially words that are regional or generational
- Avoid pop culture references. Often times, what you think of as universal knowledge, really isn't and the reader will have no idea what you're referencing

Tone Can Be Established in a Number of Ways:

- How you talk about yourself
- How you talk about your peers
- How you talk about your community and the world around you
- What you choose to reveal about yourself
- What people you choose to include in your essays

Other Notes on Tone:

Be specific

It's better to discuss one interesting and relevant experience than to gloss over a bunch of mediocre events that don't really add to anything to your narrative.

Communicate confidence, without being arrogant

It's important to demonstrate your confidence in your ability to be successful in adding to the campus culture and completing the curriculum. Don't go overboard though in describing your qualifications. As an example, you can say you that "I was happy to be among the top students in my graduating class" instead of stating that you were "among the most accomplished and educated scholars within the graduating class at my undergrad institution."

Everything in moderation

The key is not to be too extreme in your commentary as you typically don't know who will end up reading your college admissions essay. You shouldn't take on the task of explaining the rationale for any extreme ideologies, good or bad, that it would be impossible to really explain the nuances of in 650 words or less.

Overall, the tone you use in your personal statement should mirror the tone you would use when giving a briefing or presentation - be interesting and be aware of your audience. With this combination, you'll do great when writing your personal statements and college admissions essays.

Appealing to the Reader's Senses

When you're writing a narrative or telling a story in your personal statement, using sensory details is one of the more effective ways to captivate the reader

which makes your essay more likely to stand out. Sensory details help the reader figuratively see, hear, feel, smell, and taste your words.

If you haven't started writing yet, but you have an event or story in mind, you can create a chart like the one the next page as a way to draft and organize the sensory details you want to include.

Here's a paragraph from Wright State University that offers a good example text:

“Grandmother Workman lurched over and grabbed the pale skin of my thin forearm with her leathery hand. The folds and creases beneath her skin coiled themselves out like electrical wiring, like the bloated, roughly-textured relief map of the world that his mother just posted above his bedside table. I looked ahead toward the winding spiral staircase, fidgeted with a small hole in my baseball jersey, and bit my lip. My mouth filled with the sweet, coppery taste of blood as she leaned in closely toward me, breathing her hot breath on the damp hair at the base of my neck. She smelled of wet cigarettes and bacon. As we slowly climbed the long, steep staircase, the only sound was my grandmothers’ labored breathing and the mournful creak of the wooden stairs.”

And here's the table I would use to highlight the sensory details in this story during the pre-writing phase of my essay:

Sensory Details				
I saw	I heard	I felt	I smelled	I tasted
● pale skin	● lurched	● leathery hand	● wet cigarettes and bacon	● sweet, coppery taste
● folds and creases beneath her skin	● labored breathing	● fidgeted with a small hole		
● bloated, roughly textured	● mournful creak	● damp hair		
● winding, spiral staircase		● roughly textured		

Courtesy of koodooslearning.com

		• hot breath		

If you've already written your personal statement or essay, go back through it and underline all the places you use sensory details. If you find that you don't have many spots underlined, I recommend revising your text to include more sensory details.

You can use the shorthand below to quickly mark the sensory details you underline during your initial review:

See – S

Hear – H

Feel – F

Smell – Sm

Touch – T

No matter if you're writing about a specific event or a personal narrative that includes details from your entire life, you should include sensory details. It's one of the most effective ways to ensure the people reading your essay are engaged in what you wrote.

Insider Tips to Woo the Admissions Officers

There are some clichés in personal statements that seem to happen over and over again. While having one or two clichés won't prevent you from getting into a good college, it is nice to avoid them as don't add depth to your writing, nor do they particularly work to help your application stand out. There are also a number of common occurrences I've seen when reading personal statements that are just annoying and don't add any value to the application.

To help you out, here's a short list of clichés and topics/ideas to avoid when writing your personal statement:

Citing Einstein or any Other Famous Person

Remember that personal statements are about YOU. Quoting Einstein takes that focus away from you and places it on someone who the reader already knows, so they're not really learning anything new in reading your essay. Instead of quoting Einstein, reflect and communicate your own ideas about physics or science and turn that into a mantra or saying that exemplifies who you are. This gives the application reader a glimpse of your personality, ideas, and beliefs, which is much more beneficial in relating what you stand for and why you should be selected.

Bashing Your Own Generation or Peers

Avoid this altogether. Understand that each generation is unique, and this is what makes progress and change possible. No application reader wants to read through a personal statement in which they applicant only sees despair and destruction ahead because of the belief that current generations aren't as successful as ones of the past. Instead of criticizing your peers, focus on describing your personal and professional goals and how you hope to connect with the folks in your community (from all generations) to ensure that our world becomes a better place. Focus on the positive, not the negative.

Whine about obviously insignificant events impacting their grades

I tell most applicants to do their best to especially avoid using the additional information section on applications to make an excuse as to why their grades may have slipped. Don't get me wrong; there are definitely legitimate and very real reasons as to why your grades may have been impacted by an event in your life (i.e. you were in a coma and missed three weeks of school). If your reason doesn't involve a medical issue, major life event (like a death in the family), or school transfer, you should probably avoid talking about it altogether. Of course, every situation is different, so this list isn't all-inclusive.

Write about something completely unrelated to the prompt

Stay on topic. There's nothing more annoying than reading through an entire personal statement or supplemental essay and realizing the writer didn't even attempt to answer the question the prompt asked. Don't write about "why you want to attend X University" if the essay instructions say to "describe a time in your life when you had to make a tough decision."

Reduce diversity down to a story about how multicultural their friend group is

There's just so much more to talk about that when application readers see this, it can seem as if the writer just treated it as a throwaway question. There is a story to tell in having friends from different ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic groups, but when a prompt is asking you to describe how you'll contribute to diversity on campus or to discuss personal adversity you've experienced, they're wanting to know that you have an informed perspective on the nuances of identity, equity, and inclusion. So, if you don't think you have anything useful to say for diversity questions, think deeper and consider questions like:

- how do my goals work to promote equity in the world?
- how has my personal identity informed my goals and choose to apply to X College?
- what impact has my cultural background had in my choice to attend college or pursue a particular career path?
- what am I going to bring to campus that helps create or maintain an inclusive learning environment?

Keep in mind that while most colleges have standard rubrics for evaluating applicants, each application reader is different and has their own pet peeves when it comes to reading files. This is just one opinion, but hopefully, it can still help you avoid some of the common clichés and pitfalls writers can fall victim to when crafting a personal statement.



Other Do's & Don'ts for Writing the Perfect Personal Statement

As the name implies, personal statements are inherently personal and meant to communicate your qualifications and show what kind of person you are. For this reason, each statement an admissions team member reads is uniquely different from any other, as it should be. That said, there are still some general do's and don'ts to consider when writing your personal statement.

Do:

- Focus on why the event or experience you're communicating is significant to you and what you learned from it when writing a narrative for your personal statements.
- If submitting an essay over email, pdf, or other document format, use readable fonts, conventional spacing, and margins.
- Always articulate your specific reasons for applying to each school or program. Don't be generic or vague.
- If you're writing a grad school application essay or applying as a direct admit, don't forget to mention specific faculty with whom you are interested in working.
- Use concrete examples and relevant anecdotes to validate the skills and experiences you list on your resume and personal statements

- Connect life experiences to your professional goals and career motivation.
- Get feedback from trusted individuals who aren't afraid to give you objective and constructive criticism
- Be selective when choosing supplemental materials or additional information to submit
- Provide an explanation for irregular grade trends, discrepancies on transcripts, or circumstances that affected test scores.
- Use present tense when possible.
- Follow the scholarship application submission rules precisely.
- Proofread your essay once all edits and revisions are made.

Don't:

- Submit the exact same essay to multiple schools. I've read many essays that included the wrong school name.
- Use a moralistic or preachy tone.
- Repeat information elsewhere in your application to the point of redundancy.
- Discuss money or securing a "high-paying" job as a motivating factor.
- Exceed the prescribed word and/or page limits.
- Lie or exaggerate your qualifications or experience.
- Plagiarize the content of your essay.
- Discuss potentially controversial topics like politics, money, or religion.
- Remind the school of its ranking or tell them "how good they are."
- Simply list the honor awards or achievements that you included on your application.
- Don't compliment yourself with praise that makes you seem immodest.

The Diversity Statement

Today, almost all college applications for school in the U.S. require applicants to submit a diversity statement, or short response essay related to diversity, with their application submission. In addition, providing a personal statement, the University of Washington, for instance, asks freshman applicants to respond to the prompt:

“Our families and communities often define us and our individual worlds. Community might refer to your cultural group, extended family, religious group, neighborhood or school, sports team or club, co-workers, etc. Describe the world you come from and how you, as a product of it, might add to the diversity of the UW.”

But why do colleges want you to submit a diversity statement in the first place you ask?

Well UW states on their website, that the university “strives to create a community of students richly diverse in cultural backgrounds, experiences, values and viewpoints.” For this reason, admissions officers look to admit applicants who will embrace and enrich the multicultural and intentionally inclusive environment colleges strive to be. So, without a face to face interview, submitting a diversity statement is the most straightforward means to assess your openness and ability to foster a culture of diverse identities and viewpoints on campus.

As an admissions professional, I sometimes get asked the question, “For someone who is white and middle class, how can I write about how I will bring diversity to a school?” Well, let me tell you. It’s possible to do and it’s possible to do it without treating the diversity statement as a throwaway part of your application. Don’t simply write about, for example, how you like to eat ethnic food or play soccer with people of color. These topics, for the most part, don’t show a genuine interest or commitment to diversity and equity.

As a means of jump starting your brainstorming process, here are 5 ways to write an effective diversity statement for your college admissions applications:

1. Show what you know.

Show that you have a deep understanding of the true costs of social inequity in the world. If you were born upper class with two well-educated parents, this might mean writing about how you recognize injustice in the world and that it's imperative to dismantle injustice and oppression. You can supplement this information by sharing your core values, especially those that relate to inclusion, diversity, and equity for all people.

2. Provide examples.

Provide examples of experiences that demonstrate your commitment to fostering the success of marginalized and oppressed people including people of color, women, LGBTQ folks, religious minorities, and other groups. Discuss any volunteer work, projects or research you've done on behalf of marginalized communities. Did you build an app that helps disabled people navigate city streets? Did you create a nonprofit that donates school supplies to kids who families who can't afford to buy them?

3. Relate your professional goals.

Talk about how your professional goals will promote equity and diversity in your community and more largely, in the world. For instance, if you want to be a doctor, discuss the lack of access to adequate healthcare around the globe and how your goal is to work to eliminate socioeconomic and cultural barriers that prevent people from receiving care.

4. Discuss your travels.

Share your experiences travelling or living abroad and relate how the communities and cultures you saw and experienced differed from your own lifestyle or changed your previously-held beliefs. Just be sure not to "otherize" the places and people you discuss. Also, be sure to avoid clichés or describing your experiences as shocking in some way. You don't want to come off as naive or judgmental to admissions officers. Try relating how your travel experiences informed your personal development and impacted your views on culture and diversity. If you grew up outside the United States, you might discuss what cultural aspects of living and going to school in the U.S. interest you.

5. Share your story.

If you have overcome personal adversity to get to where you are, you should discuss it in your diversity statement. Some examples of personal adversity include being bullied in school because of your sexual orientation, experiencing homelessness, or enduring racism in your community. If, on the other hand, you were raised with relatively

little to no adversity, socioeconomic or otherwise, it's important to acknowledge your privilege. It's possible to talk intelligently about diversity, even if you are a straight white male, by demonstrating that you have the awareness and desire to work to dismantle inequity, and encourage diversity as a means of promoting inclusion.

Overall, keep your statement focused on communicating your beliefs about diversity, equity, and inclusion, and no matter who you are, you should be able to write an effective diversity statement.



Step 3. What to Do After Your Initial Draft

6 Questions to Ask Yourself After You've Written Your First Draft

It's important to consider grammar, style, and organization when writing your application essays because bad writing is the absolute first thing any admissions committee member notices when reading admissions essays. Most college applicants, however, don't have issues with the grammar and so it rarely has a major impact on a candidate's score.

With this in mind, I tell writers to instead focus on the content, clarity, and composition of their college application essays by examining the following questions:

- Do I make my point early on?
- Is there a bunch of extra detail in my essay?
- Have I answered the question?
- Am I confident, without being arrogant?
- Do I provide insight into my personality?
- Did I show that I can think critically about the multicultural world I live in?

Do I make my point early on?

Don't write a lengthy essay and wait until the last paragraph to make your main point. I once had a writer talk extensively about the chronic illnesses her mother and sister faced while living in a country with limited access to care and medicine. However, the story wasn't as clear and impactful as it could have been because the writer waited until the end of the essay to communicate that this motivated her to want to become a doctor.

Is there a bunch of extra detail in my essay?

It's important to provide enough detail to readers so that the story you're telling makes sense to someone unfamiliar with your life. However, extraneous details can distract from your writing and are ill-advised since most admissions essays have a strict word count. If your personal statement is about your internship in the Netherlands, you don't need to go into detail about the color of the bus you rode to the internship site every day.

Have I answered the question?

This is probably the simplest and easiest mistake writers make when crafting their personal statement. Go back over the prompt and then highlight in your essay the exact ways in which you answer the questions being asked of you. Your ability to follow simple instructions can also say a lot about whether you're capable of succeeding in the unstructured learning environment a college campus can be.

Am I confident, without being arrogant?

The line between confidence and arrogance is thin, but it's nonetheless important to distinguish yourself from other applicants by conveying why you're the best candidate. One way to accomplish this is by speaking to who you are without showing off. Don't just say "I'm brilliant and destined to lead a top tech company one day!" when you could instead communicate this by writing about the app you developed during your summer break.

Do I provide insight into my personality?

Don't forget that the primary purpose of the personal statement is to introduce you as a person – not just as a student. All of your academic and professional accomplishments are on your resume, so there's no need to regurgitate the same information in your statement of purpose. Don't shy away from sharing your personality with the admissions committee and beware of using essay templates as they can minimize your ability to share your authentic voice.

Did I show that I can think critically about the multicultural world I live in?

More than an introduction to your personality, the college application essay is also a glimpse into your personal beliefs and how you navigate the world. Universities want to know that their students can learn and work effectively in a multicultural environment as college campuses become more diverse. I know for a fact that some colleges include cultural awareness points as a part of a candidate's score, so it's important that you don't neglect this topic in your personal statements. And it's not enough to write about how you have a diverse group of friends. Instead, you might try talking about the ways in which your personal identity has influenced your educational path or how your goals will work to increase social equity and promote diversity.

Ask yourselves these questions after you've written your first draft and you'll definitely end up with a more focused and authentic product.

How to Effectively Revise Your College Admissions Essay

The revision process is one of the more critical steps in writing effective personal statements and essays. Still, you make ask WHY EXACTLY is revising my essay important? Three main reasons:

- To develop better content
- To correct formatting and grammatical errors
- To become a better writer over time

So, how should you go about revising your essay. Here are some tips:

1. Put it down for a while

It's important to have fresh eyes when you're ready to start making revisions. Otherwise, you won't notice errors or mistakes that need to be fixed.

2. Read your essay out loud

Your writing should sound both conversational and professional, especially when it's meant to provide a glimpse into your personality.

3. Check the topic of the paper

Do you still agree with it? Do you stay on track throughout the essay? Did you answer the prompt as it was asked? Yes, should be the answer to each of these questions.

4. Check for flow and logic

Your essay, like those you wrote in high school English class, should have a beginning, middle, and end and flow logically as they reader moves through your essay.

5. Add detail

Anyone who doesn't know you should be able to read your essay and understand your experiences.

6. Check and fix grammatical errors

This should be one of your final steps. Feel free to use services built into programs like Microsoft Word or Grammarly to save time.

7. Verify that you've met all the official requirements

Ensure your paper is formatted properly (font, margins) and complies with the stated word limit.

Good writers will use all of these methods to craft a good personal statement. To make the most of the revision process, it's important that you get an early start on your papers so that you have time to complete any large-scale revisions your paper might need.

Ultimately, revising is an ongoing process that takes time and effort.

Conclusion

Whether you're writing a personal statement for undergraduate admissions or grad school, the process can be perplexing if you don't plan in advance and give yourself plenty of time to think about what you want to write. Remember, the personal statement is your opportunity to show who you are outside of what can be read on your transcript or resume, so think of it as your chance to show off what makes you unique.

Make the most of our personal statement by demonstrating your creativity, passion, and personality. Don't forget to be both vulnerable and introspective. And remember colleges want to admit a talented, holistic group of students, so remember to be yourself when writing your personal statement and what makes you a perfect fit for the college will shine through.



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