

Tips for Writing a Personal Statement for Graduate School and Fellowships

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Research the programs extensively: Use the internet as a resource to find out as much as you can about the school and/or fellowship to which you are applying. Apply to programs that fit your identity as a future professional and demonstrate in your essay how the specific program suits your goals. For graduate school, be aware of what research interests and specialties the faculty members have. Talk to friends, professors, and alumni who are familiar with the school or program to which you are applying to find out as much information as you can.

Carefully read ALL application instructions: Some programs will give explicit instructions, and some will be sparse. It is important for you to have an understanding of what the school/program wants before you begin writing. Follow the instructions EXACTLY, both in terms of length limitations and addressing ALL aspects of each question. If the instructions are very open-ended—for example, “Write an autobiographical essay.”—focus on summarizing significant events that helped shape you as a person and influenced your ambitions to go to graduate school or pursue a fellowship opportunity. Give specific details that illustrate your general point. The recipients read hundreds of essays; yours needs to stand out!

WRITING YOUR STATEMENT

(If you are applying for a ‘prestigious fellowship,’ the competition is very keen. It requires not only high academic achievement, but also evidence of academic and personal leadership. Your essay/personal statement needs to reflect that.)

Approach writing a personal statement in the same way you would approach an assignment: When you begin a paper for a college course, you have an awareness of your need to write formally, proofread, and address the specific assignment the professor has given. Approach your personal statement with the same seriousness. Ask yourself the following questions: Who is my audience? What is this program looking for? How can I appeal to the requirements of the program? Did I answer all of the specific questions?

Consider your audience: Employ a professional tone when trying to convince your audience to select you. Try to appeal to your program’s specific criteria and strengths while relating examples of how your background matches those criteria and strengths. Also, be sure to clarify culturally specific terms and organizations; for example, do not assume that your audience is familiar with HASC or NCSY. Spell out the entire title of the organization rather than use the acronym. **Think about what makes you stand out as an individual among hundreds of other applicants:** You will be competing with many qualified peers for acceptance into a graduate school or fellowship program. Considering the applicant pool, what can you say about your experience and qualifications that other students cannot say about themselves? What details can you give that will make you memorable to an admissions or selection committee? What makes you unique?

Give yourself ample time to work on your personal statement: A personal statement, like many other types of writing, should be written in multiple drafts. Your first draft should not be your final product! Allow ample time to seek feedback from the Writing Center, the Career Development Center, faculty, and others who could be helpful. Deadlines are critical. Fellowships and graduate school deadlines, in particular, are never waived. If the application or letters of reference are late, your application will not be considered. If your application is to be submitted by Yeshiva University, you must submit it to us by the internal deadline specified.

Writing process: A great way to start the writing process is to sit down and get all your thoughts on paper. Start by simply listing the elements you are considering including in your statement. Take a break from writing for a day or more; when you come back to your notes with fresh eyes, you will be able to organize your thoughts

logically. Reviewing your work in stages will help you determine what part of your draft is essential and what details you may be able to eliminate. Strive for quality not quantity; rather than listing numerous biographical details, develop two or three examples of your most recent and relevant research projects or professional experience that will set you apart from other applicants. Developing examples includes reflecting upon and evaluating how each experience shaped your decision to pursue your future goals. A good question to ask yourself is: “What did I learn about myself, about others, or about my future career from each experience I choose?”

Create a strong introduction and conclusion: If you find writing introductions difficult, work on your introduction after you finish your essay. Once you have developed your significant life experiences as the body of your essay, consider what all of the experiences show about you. How can you introduce these examples in a comprehensive way that reflects you? As a conclusion, make sure that the last sentence of your essay gives completion to your personal statement.

Be positive: A personal statement is a space for you to highlight your accomplishments and strengths. Avoid apologizing for your grade point average or complaining about a teacher who discouraged you. Focus on the positive elements of your background that will distinguish you in an appealing way.

Use specific language: Avoid superlatives and absolute terms like “none” or “never.” Rather than say “I have always wanted to be a speech therapist,” be more specific: “Having a grandmother who suffered a stroke has helped me value the importance of speech therapy in daily life.” Also, try to avoid repetition in your essay.

THINGS TO AVOID

Sounding too casual or cliché: The following statement relies on a figure of speech and is unoriginal: “After receiving an A on a very difficult philosophy paper, it hit me like a ton of bricks: I want to practice law!” While this example conveys the writer’s enthusiasm, the writer could be more precise by avoiding the cliché “it hit me like a ton of bricks.” A specific example of being passionate about law results in an original and effective sentence: “As a philosophy major, I have found that the experience of analyzing arguments and identifying counterarguments has solidified my interest in law and refined my ability as a critical thinker.”

Using the second person pronoun “you”: The following sentence is vague and could confuse a reader: “When you think of a career choice, you should commit yourself to something you love.” Who is “you”? Instead of directing a general statement to an unspecified audience, speak from a place of personal experience: “I want to commit myself to social work because I find that helping others cope is very rewarding.”

Short-cuts: Remember that a personal statement is a formal piece of writing; therefore, when writing for a professional audience, it is a good idea to avoid contractions and abbreviations whenever possible. Opt for “I will be an asset to your program,” rather than “I’ll be an asset to your program.” Choose “The New York University School of Public Health will offer me the research opportunities to successfully manage patient care,” instead of “NYU will offer me the research opportunities to succeed in my future career.”

BEFORE YOUR DRAFT BECOMES FINAL

Proofread your work: Double and triple check your personal statement for spelling and grammatical errors. Give it to a friend, parent, or teacher to proofread too. Always make sure you are spelling the school/fellowship’s name correctly and that you are properly referring to the program to which you are applying. Use a clearly legible font, preferably Times New Roman, 12-point size.

Work with the Career Development Center, faculty members, Pre-Professional Advising, and the Writing Center: By working with your campus resources, you will get help from experienced advisors who can guide you through various elements of the personal statement writing process.