



Personal Statements 1-2-3

Introduction

Writing personal statements to include in applications for advanced degree programs, awards, and fellowships is a special genre of writing that carefully balances clear goals with realistic flexibility, preparedness with need, and pride with humility. The more you practice, the easier it will be to reach this balance. This is a task that requires marketing yourself as fit for the opportunity, while demonstrating that to need to continue learning from others in order to maximize your potential.

Although you can take many different approaches to preparing a personal statement, this assignment requires creating an outline for a very standard and reliable essay. The details are uniquely yours. Your experience and views are what makes this essay creative. Yet the format of the essay does not need to be creative. In fact, it's most likely to be reviewed favorably if the admissions committee does not need to search for the information they expect to find in the essay. In STEM fields, the essay should also be direct, without many words devoted to flowery or dramatic descriptions.

Note that you must always follow the instructions for your applications and essays explicitly. For example, if the essay instructions provide suggestions for topics to consider, you must consider those topics. If a word minimum and/or maximum is provided, you may not write less or more than that. (With electronic submissions, your application could be scanned in advance and tossed out immediately if it fails to follow simple rules.)

This assignment fits best with general requests for personal statements, such as this from the [University of Missouri for their graduate program preview weekend](#). *Documents needed: Statement of Purpose (750 words or less), that consists of why you are interested in the specific MU graduate program; and your academic and personal background that prepared you for your chosen field.* This particular program also requires a separate *Diversity Statement (300 words or less) that consists of your philosophy of inclusive excellence. It may include experiences you have being a member of an underrepresented group in your discipline as well as ways you have applied an inclusive framework to past activities and engagements.* These types of statements require you to understand definitions of key terms preferred at that institution, such as diversity and inclusive excellence. You would search their website and publications to ensure your understanding aligns with theirs, before you begin to compile your ideas.

Almost every university provides advice for personal statements through their writing centers. Find yours and compare the advice with what you hear and read below. Choose what will work for you.





Learning Objective

- Apply a formula for drafting a personal statement essay for use in applications for advanced degree programs, awards, and fellowship.

Personal Statement Assignment

1. Watch this [video of Kyle Frantz](#), Professor at Georgia State University, discussing the personal statement essay. Take notes and think about how your experiences to date fit into this model.
2. Check the questions to ask yourself before you write, recommended at the [Purdue University Writing Lab](#). Look for alignment between the video and the questions. Then jot down answers to the questions on paper.
3. Take the outline below and replace the guiding descriptions with your own experiences, interests, and goals. It's hard to do this without a specific program in mind, so find one that interests you. If you are close to applying to an advanced degree program, then look up a program of interest and its guidelines. Use the outline exercise below with that statement in mind, etc. If you are in position to apply to summer programs instead, look up application guidelines to a Research Experiences for Undergraduates program at an institution around the nation. If you are stumped for ideas, consult this [list of graduate programs you could visit](#) for free, if you write a good application. (This list was prepared by [Curtis Byrd, PhD](#)) If you already have a personal statement, then use this opportunity to write a different kind of essay or to update your personal statement into this format, just as an exercise. Save your outline in a Word document with your last name in the filename, and upload for review.
 - I. Introduction – This paragraph provides an overview of what is to come.
 - a. Summarize your academic background, research, and extracurriculars. *As a junior psychology major with neuroscience research experience and leadership roles in PsiChi, Golden Key, and a management position at Home Depot ...*
 - b. State the program, its features, and your fit. *I am honored to apply to join your graduate program in developmental neurobiology at Howard University.*
 - c. Start or end with a quick hook, such as a favorite philosophy, academic quote, or personal experience to demonstrate a tiny bit of your personality here. *Driven by deep interest in adolescent development and guided by a strong work ethic, I am well-prepared and motivated to launch from your program into an independent research career. Client-centered psychology, Carl Rogers, said it best when he noted that we*





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should all aim to align our actual selves with our ideal selves. Your program can help me do just that.

- II. Academics – This paragraph summarizes what you have gained from courses.
 - a. Which courses stimulated or confirmed your interest in this field?
 - b. Write about a challenging project that makes you proud (if it relates somehow to the program, award, or fellowship, etc.).
 - c. What kinds of lessons did you learn about collaboration, team work, or other forms of communication.
 - d. If you had a low GPA to start, or a semester of Withdrawals, you can mention it with a phrase, but not more than that. *After a difficult start when I had not yet hit my stride,...*
- III. Research Experience
 - a. If you have had mentored research experience with faculty members, write about those. What were your experimental questions, hypothesized outcomes, preliminary/full results, and conclusions? What was your specific role? What is the status of the project now? If you presented results, what challenged or motivated you about that experience?
 - b. If you have not had mentored research experience, then you could talk about course-based research projects, using similar questions to those above.
 - c. If you are seeking your first research experience, then you need to show what you know already about research, why you want that experience, what you think you will gain from it, and how to will apply those gains to your future.
- IV. Extracurricular Activities
 - a. Beyond academics and research, how do you fill your time? Write about your employment history, emphasizing the skills you have developed through your paid positions. Or write about your volunteer efforts. Be sure to emphasize leadership positions you may have had.
 - b. Be sure not to get too personal here (or anywhere in the essay).
- V. Interest and Fit for the Program/Award/Fellowship
 - a. This is the paragraph where you show that you know about the program, and you know you are a good fit.
 - b. Mention a few elements of the program that motivated you to apply. If you would be working with individuals during the program, you could name a few possible mentors/supervisors/leaders (unless that is not allowed, per the instructions).





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- c. Argue that you are a good fit for the program. Select terms that might be used in the program announcement to describe ideal candidates for the program, as long as they truly describe you as well. If a separate diversity statement is **not** required, but you want to make a statement about your background and perspective, this might be an appropriate spot. (If a diversity statement is required, then save those comments for that essay.) *Given that three of my five immediately family members have this rare genetic disorder, I will likely bring unique perspectives to the research teams in your developmental genetics graduate program, thereby helping to expand some research questions or potentially suggesting new avenues for research.*

VI. Conclusion

- a. The concluding paragraph rephrases and summarizes the essay, without introducing anything new. Use only a short phrase for each of the major topics in the essay.
- b. Be sure to end with humility, such as indicating that it would be an honor to be accepted into the program, to receive the award, or to be awarded the fellowship.

Note: This is essentially a brainstorming exercise. Have fun with it. Call on peers, mentors, friends, and family members to help bring out your unique experiences and perspectives. Once you get to writing a personal statement for submission, be sure to have 2 – 3 professionals read it for you and provide constructive critique to improve your work.

Georgia State
University

