

Crafting Personal Statements & Portfolios

Your personal statement deserves extra time and attention. Although transcripts determine if you make the first cut, it is your personal statement that distinguishes you from other candidates. Before you begin writing, research the school you are applying to on-line and talk to alumni and faculty. It is important to understand your audience and to express your attributes and talents within the framework of the question(s) asked. Make sure that each of your personal statements is written to address the specific questions on each application. Most schools will provide information about what they expect. Conducting research will help you decide on your purpose in writing your statement, what it will contain, and the style you will use to write it. While your essays are personal in nature, the school is not looking for your life story, but rather your specific interests and goals related to academics. A graduate admissions committee generally consists of professors and students in the specific program. The personal statement is your opportunity to set yourself apart from your fellow applicants.

Brainstorm fully and narrow down topics gradually selecting a meaningful topic that will paint a picture of you and help you stand out. Be sure to ground what you have to say with concrete details. Your goal is to inform a school about **who you are** and **why you should be accepted** to their program by telling an **interesting story** that draws the reader in. Organize your thoughts, create an outline, and decide the format of your essay.

Select your topic demonstrating that you have thoroughly researched the school and incorporate such factors as:

1. Unique experiences, influences, and abilities including short and long-term goals, characteristics that describe you, transferable skills, and personal and academic accomplishments
2. Early exposure to your field and what particular events and more recent experiences encouraged your interest and led you to the goal of pursuing graduate school in a particular field
3. Demonstrated achievements, areas of growth, and specific qualities that distinguish you as a student and will help you in your graduate work (i.e., undergraduate work, development of special skills, specific research experience, project for a professor, field or work experience, community service, study abroad, and extra-curricular activities). Focus on specifics of how you met challenges and skills and perspectives you gained from your experiences.
4. Academic goals, how you developed them, and how being part of this graduate program will help you
5. How the graduate program matches your educational goals and why you will be a good fit and a valuable addition to the school and the graduate program
6. What is different, unique, or note-worthy about your life story
7. Plan and specifics of what you would like to accomplish with your education
8. Statement of purpose describing your specific research interests instead of, or in addition to, your personal essay. You can assume that a faculty member will be reading your statement, but be careful to make it accessible to non-specialists as well. Write in such a way to clearly communicate your enthusiasm for the subject!
9. How your unique background will allow you to contribute to the academic community (i.e., ethnic or religious experiences that have contributed to your academic goals, particular hardships you have

overcome and given you unique perspective and positive goals, extensive experience in a field different from the graduate studies that gives you a unique perspective and possibly a specialization, or a detailed account of a personal experience or story)

10. Positive explanation of any inconsistencies that may exist in your record (i.e., dropped out of school for a year to earn money to finance your education or worked full-time during your undergraduate education to put your achievements in perspective)

Creating your Personal Statement:

A personal statement lets the admissions representative know, in one–two pages, what inspires you, how you write, and why you want to attend the school. When writing your personal statement, it is important to not focus only on the past. Tie everything into the future clearly communicating your goals as a participant in the program and what you hope to do with your education after graduate school. Writing your personal statement provides you with an opportunity to introduce yourself and show the school why you belong there!

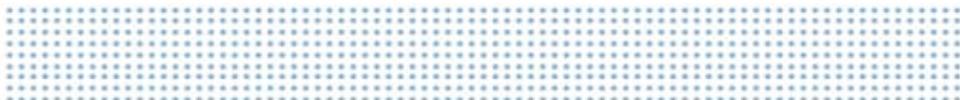
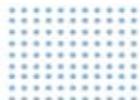
Once you are ready, write an introduction or teaser that grabs the reader’s attention and is well written and structured (three sentences but no more than six). If you want to be more creative, your introduction can tell a story, and the later paragraphs can demonstrate how the story has impacted your life and why you want to go to graduate school. Coming up with an emotional, suspenseful, or comical quote could be an effective way to start, but make sure it is meaningful and avoids being gimmicky. Don’t tell the reader everything in the introduction:

Sample Format:

1. **Start with a creative story:** one story, not two...one. Think about a person, a book, an article, or an event that inspired you to pursue the degree you are going for. For example, I worked with a student who was applying to Vermont Law School's environmental program; he wrote about Dr. Seuss' The Lorax. In one paragraph, he related the children's book to the current environment crisis and the need for more environmental stewards and protectors. He was accepted!
2. **Follow your story with your education journey up to this point:** What have you done to pave the way to graduate or law school? Have you joined a club or professional association? Have you pursued a relevant major or internship? Have you volunteered in the field you are going into? Have you taken specific courses to increase your skill level? Discuss your experience in 1–2 paragraphs, and try to provide concrete examples of your relevant experience.
3. **Why them? Why you?:** The final paragraph shows the recruiter that you've done your research. You want to highlight why, exactly, you are interested in their specific program. Is it the coursework they offer? Is it the internship experience they offer second semester? Is it a particular faculty member? Let them know why they are the perfect choice, and follow it up with a final statement that highlights why you would be the perfect fit for them.

Editing your Personal Statement: Make sure you have asked yourself the following questions about the content, structure and style of your essay to ensure that it is of optimal quality:

1. Have I been specific providing concrete details?
2. Does the essay say something meaningful about me and is it memorable?
3. Is it personal and does it sound like it is written in my voice?



4. Does the essay have a logical, organized, and easy to follow structure that gets across what I am trying to say?
5. Does each paragraph discuss and support the topic and not get off on tangents?
6. Have I varied my sentence structure and length keeping my essay interesting and enjoyable to read? (i.e., simple and straightforward, avoid passive voice, conversational without being too casual or too formal, strong verbs, avoid fancy rhetoric or vocabulary, eliminate clichés, delete redundancies, not overuse adjectives and adverbs, and convey my passion for learning)
7. Have I thoroughly proofread/checked mechanics? (i.e., grammar, capitalization, punctuation, use of active voice, subject-verb agreement, contractions to a minimum, spelling, and typos)
8. Have I checked and rechecked my essay. Read it aloud and have it edited by others for content, structure, style, and mechanics. A flawless document can go a long way toward enhancing your credibility and communicating your seriousness and commitment to hard work.

Make sure your essay is true and don't include anything that is unsubstantiated or regurgitates facts listed elsewhere in the application. Your final paragraph should tie everything together and make a last stab to sell you to the graduate program. For more information on essay editing, please visit Info.GradSchools.com.

Creating your Portfolio: If you are applying for a Master's degree in a fine arts/computer arts/design field, it is likely that you'll have to submit a portfolio. Here are some general pointers for developing and preparing a portfolio for submission:

1. **20 pieces:** You will likely have to submit twenty original works of art.
2. **Submit your best and most recent work:** Admissions folks are going to want to see your talent, not necessarily your development as an artist, so be picky with your choices.
3. **Design-specific:** Try to include slides or documentation of slides, web sites, video installations, interactive media projects.
4. **Provide accurate labels:** Include the title, date, medium, and dimensions (if it's an installation piece).
5. **Great Sample Portfolios:**

– David Damico's MFA Portfolio

– John Moncrief's Portfolio for the Savannah College of Art & Design

– Steven Gutierrez MFA Portfolio

