***A Personal Guide to***

***Writing Personal Statements***

***for Graduate School***

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***Introduction***

Few papers we write in college impact our lives nearly as much as a personal statement for graduate school does. Unlike essays or reports in our undergraduate years of college, personal statements often take months to curate for submission due to their importance.

Not long ago, I worried over my own personal statements. I researched, wrote, edited, asked my friends and professors for feedback, re-wrote, re-edited, received further feedback… And then, eventually, I submitted. I applied to three graduate schools, and one has already accepted me three months before their official application deadline. I am currently waiting to hear from the other two.

In hindsight, my overflowing “GRAD SCHOOL” folder and rough plan of action was helpful, but I could have done better. I could have researched the programs earlier. I could have also asked the program directors more intensive questions regarding the curriculum. If I had thought far enough ahead, I might have realized it was impossible for me to visit the universities during the upcoming semester when I would be working and attending school fulltime.

Despite my early acceptance to one university, I know I could have done quite a few things better.

Resources and mentors were my saving grace, though. While I went through this process, I came across several valuable resources and helpful bits of advice. In this guide, I will share what I have learned and found based on my own experience.

***What is a personal statement?***

A personal statement is an opportunity for students to showcase their academic experience and goals while also inputting more personal details. The personal details help the words on the page be more than just words on a page. Furthermore, a personal statement is different from a statement of purpose, or rather, a letter of intent. According to [an article on Prep Scholar: GRE PREP](https://www.prepscholar.com/gre/blog/graduate-school-personal-statement-examples/), a statement of purpose “tends to be more tightly focused on your academic or professional credentials and your future research and/or professional interests.”

Though I have defined it above, truly, a personal statement is hard to execute. As I stated, it is an opportunity for students to showcase their academic experience and goals while also inputting more personal details, but what does that mean?

Personal is a vague term drawing no boundaries and offering no insight for where to start. A recent [Buzzfeed article](https://www.buzzfeed.com/hillaryreinsberg/career-confidential-college-admissions?utm_term=.uoVPXP5MR#.mm5OpO4MA) covering an admission officer’s experience depicted many applicants oversharing:

You wouldn't believe some of the essays kids write. Last year there was an essay about this girl's sexual exploits, right down to this whole voyeuristic thing about her having sex on golf courses. Why would we want to read about that? We also get a lot of religious-themed essays on why you shouldn't have sex before marriage. I also got what was basically a report on the negative effects of abortion. People write reports on global warming too. That's not a personal statement!

The above topics can certainly be classified as personal, but they are clearly *too* personal. The line was never distinctly drawn, but it can still be crossed. Beyond the inappropriateness of sharing anything of a sexual nature, if you take up a controversial topic, you risk alienating, or even offending, the admissions officer or school itself. Plainly put: the above examples are not an appropriate way of representing yourself to a professional. Do not follow their lead.

In terms of drawing those lines, [AcceptU’s infographic on personal statements](http://acceptu.com/library/uploads/2015/06/personal-statement-grad-1-11.jpg) aptly describes personal statements as: “An effective statement will be like jumping into Chapter 12 of your autobiography.” In another light, [Edgewood College Writing Center](https://i.pinimg.com/originals/48/e9/2d/48e92d9cd1187ca9d30fa9bf69228bd6.jpg) summarizes it as: “’A Portrait of a Young \_\_\_\_\_\_’ (Psychologist, Veterinarian, English Teacher, etc.).”

This idea is expanded upon further in a later section, but in short: a personal statement is a written interview covering who you are, why you selected their institution, and how you are a worthy candidate for consideration.

***Where do I start?***

**Research**

Research. Hands down, you start by researching. Familiarize yourself with the universities and your concentration’s curriculum. Know them like you know your best friend. Why? There’s no doubt you will write about them in your personal statement; you will be expected to display your knowledge of the university in order to show you are an appropriate fit and beneficial addition.

To emphasize the importance of research another way: no one wants to be that kid in class that answers the teacher’s question and are so far off base that it is clear that they have no idea what they are talking about. In fact, it’s like they answered a different question entirely. Other students, maybe even the instructor, tune them out because of it. Graduate admissions officers will similarly dismiss a personal statement if it is obvious that the writer did not do their research on their university.

In a [video produced by thestudentroom](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wy4bEL85mDU) from Oxford, Sussex, Greenwich, and Bangor University (which is posted at the end of this guide), Senior Lecturer Sharif Mowlabus stated: “You want to start thinking about what these [program-specific] terms mean [and] what do they mean to me? And secondly, how can I work them into my statement? So reflecting the language back and showing that you understand what it is we’re offering is really important.”

I found this widespread in my own personal statement research, pervading nearly every article and infographic I read. The main professor that reviewed all of my materials similarly stressed this subject. More than once, she asked me: “What is it about this program or school? Why do you like it enough to apply?”

Her questions guided me to my answers, so below, I have listed a few questions of my own in the hopes of guiding you, as well.

* What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the university?
* How did you come to know of the university? Has a friend or mentor attended or taught there?
* What does the university do for their community? The nation?
* What excites you about their curriculum? Is it the courses or professors? Both? (Be specific!)
* What opportunities are available to you through your desired field or department? (Ex: an English department running a writing center or university journal)
* What are the funding opportunities? Do they offer assistantships or scholarships? What are their deadlines? (The deadlines or applications for funding can be different!)
* What are the overall pros and cons of attending the university?
* What experience or skills could you bring to their program or department?

These questions and your answers should be referenced while writing, but these questions should also help you determine your chosen graduate schools. But what do you do afterwards?

**Plan**

Second to research is planning. Once you have conducted your research and determined the schools you will be applying to, you can orchestrate your plan of action. Upon reflection, had I not planned ahead, I would not have finished everything in time to apply.

I created a list of my three schools, including all application materials and additional requirements, and I highlighted the deadlines for each. Because of that, I knew I would not have the time to gather my materials (my writing sample and recommendation letters) on top of writing a personal statement while working and attending school fulltime.

Additionally, I listed those I needed to request recommendation letters from, and I considered their schedules. Two were professors, so I planned to ask them at least a month before mid-terms so I would in no way inconvenience them. They were doing me a favor, after all. I mention this because I also knew who I would ask to review my personal statement: yet another professor.

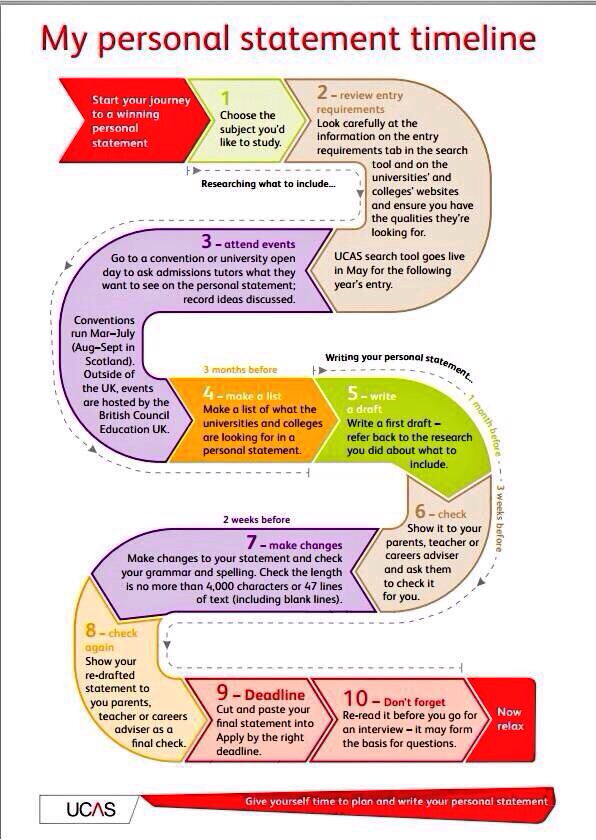
So make contact early on with whomever you would like to review your personal statement. It’s good to know if they do not have the time to assist you. A friend of mine delayed asking their chosen professor, only to discover he was on sabbatical for the next two semesters. She had to find someone else.

With all of this in mind, I estimated dates for when I wanted to have certain tasks completed, including the research itself for all possible universities.

Most applications were due in early December or early January, and because I knew I could not thoroughly write a personal statement while juggling my job and my coursework, I started early. I conducted my research six months before the first application deadline, so most of my groundwork was completed before my Fall semester began. And while I could have taken some time over winter break to complete the applications with later due dates, I would have been rushing the earlier applications if I neglected to start those earlier.

I truly believe, had I not planned ahead, I would not have finished everything in time to apply. I am not the only one that stresses starting the process early, either. Rob Evans, Head of Admissions at the University of Sussex, recommended in [thestudentroom’s video:](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wy4bEL85mDU) “As you start to prepare your personal statement, I think the most important thing is to take your time. Don’t leave it until the night before you’ve been told by your school or college that you’ve had to have drafted it. You need to start weeks, if not months, in advance.”

The concept of taking months to prepare your personal statement is reflected throughout various articles and even infographics. Below, I have included an [infographic timeline on personal statements](https://i.pinimg.com/originals/6c/40/85/6c4085db76a81af4598bbb61fcc9a0de.jpg) as a visual:

The infographic to the left outlines a timeline for writing a personal statement. The timeline total is sadly unclear, as the fourth step occurs three months before the deadline itself.

So, the time three months before the deadline, they suggest you solely research various universities, attend various events at them, and speak to the admissions offices at each. This can take months as well depending on your schedule and how much travel is required.

Once it is three months before the deadline, finally, you determine the institutions you will be applying to before listing what each are looking for in a personal statement.

Afterwards, it seems another two months is spent writing the first draft of personal statement. Three weeks before the deadline, you are recommended to have it looked over for *only* a week from parents, teachers, and career advisors. Then, two weeks before, you are expected to make changes, have it checked again, re-work it again, and apply.

On its own, this is a lovely plan of action, but it may not work for everyone. Some undergraduate students juggle work, take courses even in the summer, or are otherwise committed because of their family or extracurricular activities.

So, consider your life, consider the lives of those you wish to receive feedback from, and customize your own plan of action like I did. Fit it around the life you live. Otherwise, the plan will not work for you, and you may find yourself rushing a paper no one should ever rush.

**Outline**

Outlining, akin to planning, is dependent upon several factors. First, there is the individual university. The reason form letters do not work as personal statements is because each university will have their own guidelines and expectations. Just as your research will dig up the diversity in the universities you are considering, there will be some diversity in your various personal statements. Systematically they will all include who you are, why you selected their institution, and how you are a worthy candidate for consideration, but the details and very construction can be drastically different.

For instance, one graduate school (we will call them Graduate School A) I applied to plainly requested for a one-page personal statement. If I was interested in a teaching assistantship, it should be included somewhere in there. The second graduate school (Graduate School B) asked for a one page personal statement revolving around teaching experience and one’s teaching philosophy since all of their graduate students were required to also teach. However, my third school (Graduate School C) required a two or three-page personal statement outlining my academic interests, professional goals, reasons for selecting their program, and the specific concentration I was interested in studying.

Graduate School A had the least requirements, which allotted me some freedom in structure. I could play with where I wanted to begin writing. I could completely shape the statement to most benefit who I was. I decided to free-write without a length limit, starting from what I felt made me stand out. Along the way, I incorporated my relevant experience and narrowed down the scope to my focus on their program. This statement was the easiest to draft.

As for Graduate School B, I had to dig into my character and work experience to showcase a specific skill-set and perspective while also making it personal. Writing that sentence makes me think back to the beginning of this guide, because Graduate School B’s personal statement does not necessarily fit into the previous definition, which shows how fluid they can be under that vague and boundary-less title.

This was a personal statement I had to take my time outlining. I struggled with changing my opening – my previous focus for Graduate School A was my versatility – but then I realized I wanted to bring my versatility to the classroom. As I thought further, I also realized that my best professors had also been the most versatile with their subject matter. So, while there was some initial resistance in writing, there was some clarity as well. It *felt* genuine.

When it came to writing Graduate School C’s personal statement, with all of their required topics, I knew an outline was necessary if I planned to include all of the information without the use of clunky headings. I separated each requirement and brainstormed a list for each before stepping back to look at the bigger picture. Once I saw the connections, I wrote. It certainly did not have as much freedom as the Graduate School A statement, and I struggled often with the structure like I did with the Graduate School B statement.

Ultimately, it was trial and error. Without outlining, however, I am certain there would have been far more trials and errors than there were. A task is more easily accomplished when you know the direction to take, after all. And despite the fact that the outlining process is both unique to the university and student, it can be simplified.

Top Universities crafted one simplified graduate statement structure in [this article](https://www.topuniversities.com/student-info/admissions-advice/how-write-personal-statement-grad-school), and I have pasted the advised structure below:

* Outline your goals and dissertation idea in the first paragraph;
* Describe how your previous degree has prepared you for your research in the following paragraphs, giving a rundown of any relevant modules or internships you have completed;
* Conclude by explaining why you think the university in question would be the best place to undertake your research, listing any resources, staff members and facilities you would like to make use of.

They also recognize that one size does not fit all, so if you try the above format and do not like it, do not be discouraged. The process is a process in itself, and a tentative template is better than no template at all when you begin writing.

***How do I start writing?***

When I consider how to start writing a personal statement, I also consider how I write any of my creative pursuits; a writer is always told to read as much as possible, because it helps with their writing. It’s another form of practice, this exposure. In this way, writers of personal statements would also benefit from *reading* personal statements.

Below, I have included several personal statement examples. With each one, consider what the words on the page say about the writer themselves. Analyze the opening, the transitions, and the conclusion as if your English professor had tasked you to write a report on it. Pay close attention to the structures as well if you feel yourself struggling with an appropriate format or outline.

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*Each embedded file contains the essay as well as links to the original sources, where further examples and personal statement help can be found. For even more examples,* [*Schmoop*](-%09https://www.shmoop.com/college/personal-statement-examples.html) *has a section of successful undergraduate personal statements. While they are exceptionally original (and therefore wonderful for generating ideas and possible statement structures), they are geared towards undergraduate studies and therefore lack the level of research and program specificity required by graduate admissions officers.*

All three above examples are similar lengths (498 words, 497 words, and 472 words respectively) but are geared towards various fields of interest (the Japanese language, Sociamedical Science, and English literature respectively). My own personal statements for an M.A. in Rhetoric sat between 412-698 words since the requirements changed university to university. When comparing these to my own, the way their tones shifted with their focus and chosen personal aspect/theme became apparent.

In Example #1, the writer is vulnerable with his struggles of learning Japanese, but through that, he also displays his perseverance. The diction itself is informal, which makes his vulnerability more accessible (formal language can often create distance). Example #2 is steeped in familial influences, but the language is more formal given the desired field. Because of the figures in her anecdotes, reaching beyond the formal language is easy. Lastly, Example #3 twists a common cliché – which will be discussed next – topside before taking a nostalgic tone. They long for their chosen study and realized so during their first year post-graduation. However, what is more alluring is how the speaker starts off stating that they would never claim they knew what career path they would take; this identifiable inversion gains immediate interest.

To put it more finely, each example is void of clichés. None begin with “Ever since I was young, I wanted to be…” Actually, this statement, and high school anecdotes, should be avoided at all costs unless the story in you *demands* it. To further emphasize this point, in the earlier mentioned [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wy4bEL85mDU), Senior Lecturer Mowlabus also stated:

I would really steer clear of those general statements. There’s a statistic that’s really quite alarming about the number of personal statements that begin, “From a young age, I’ve been interested in accounting or business studies or media studies,” or whatever it might be. Don’t start from a young age. We’re not interested in your formative years. What we are interested in is what you’ve been doing very recently.

Beyond avoiding general claims or high school anecdotes, admissions officers reading personal statements desire authentic windows into who you are and why you believe you are a fit for their program. This involves knowing the program, but this also requires sharing yourself in a, you guessed it, *personal* way. A unique way. One how-to article regarding personal statements on [Petersons](https://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools/write-graduate-school-essay.aspx) phrases it: “Form letters aren't persuasive, and generic essays won't help your application package.”

So dive deep and find your Chapter 12. Find the narrative in your life, in you, that will illustrate what makes you a one-of-a-kind addition just as those in the examples above have. Here are some questions to get you thinking:

* When you think of your desired discipline, how has it impacted you? How do you feel about it? Why?
* What is your earliest memory of interest? (For instance, I remember the exact moment I started down my writing path. I was a bullied sixth grader listening to [“Hummingbird” by NeverShoutNever!](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FY4ZeDWufGI) in my bedroom. I loved their music because it made me happy, and I realized, at the core, it was the lyrics that made me happy. When it came down to it, lyrics were just words, and I had words. With them, maybe I could make other people happy, too.)
* What are five words you would use to describe yourself?
* What are five words a close friend or family member would use to describe you? (The answer may surprise you!)
* Is there a specific event or person in your life that inspired you to pursue a degree or to work in that field?
* Do you participate in any relevant extracurricular activities? How did that start? How do you feel about it now?

These are only starting points. There are thousands of other brainstorming techniques online. [Infographic “13 Steps to the Perfect Personal Statement”](https://blogs.cornell.edu/hecec/files/2016/03/personal-statement-infographic-2k9jqeu-544x1024.jpg) by Cornell University suggests students to: “Devise a list of strengths and weaknesses. What do you want to be remembered for? From your brainstorm list, find an overarching theme of characteristics and experiences.” Additionally, they suggest to write in your own voice.

Furthermore, Rob Evans’ advice for planning a personal statement from [thestudentroom video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wy4bEL85mDU) is equally thought-provoking:

Think about what it is that’s genuinely led you towards applying for that course [program], writing down long lists of what you’ve done and starting to gradually trim it down… Think about other interests, wider hobbies, other responsibilities that you have, work you’ve been doing. Start writing a long list. Write a long statement and trim it down. It’s much, much easier to reread a statement and cut out the bits that you think aren’t relevant than it is to try and pad something that is only half the size.

However, in the process, do not forget to adhere to university expectations.

To reiterate: another important aspect to remember when writing is what each university asks of you as an applicant. Admissions officers receive hundreds of applications during each enrollment period, and thousands a year, so if it is clear that an applicant does not follow the university’s clear directions, admissions officers are not inclined to read further no matter how well-executed or engaging the letter is. Again, Senior Lecturer Mowlabus declared in [thestudentroom video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wy4bEL85mDU), “…showing that you understand what it is we’re offering is really important.”

So, return to the questions and to your answers to help tie yourself to the school or program. As you are writing the early drafts, do not worry over the length. First, focus on the content. Write until you have reached a place where you feel you have included everything you have been asked to. Then, sit on it for a while. Take at least a week away from it before revising.

***How do I revise?***

Revision comes after writing, but do not be fooled: revision often means re-writing.

In my case, I entirely rewrote my drafts twice before I felt confident enough in them to show others. I changed my anecdote/overarching theme, too. I redrafted again upon feedback, keeping the same anecdote/theme, and returned for further advice. I revised once more before submitting.

I cannot emphasize it enough: having other eyes on my piece was essential to its preparation and refinement.

My initial drafts for the one-page personal statements were two pages. On each (Graduate School A and B), the second page only contained one paragraph, but it was my entire conclusion. I spent quite a bit of time smooshing everything into one page and then smoothing it over. I would advise to do the same.

However, if you struggle to narrow down the draft to one page (if that is your requirement for all pieces, of course) then there are a few people you can seek help from. First, there is *always* the professor/mentor/advisor that you have in mind, because they will be able to help you cut out the bits of information that are redundant, irrelevant, or perhaps not as important as other aspects of yourself/your experience. Depending on their proofreading skills, they may also be able to assist you in editing the grammar as well.

Another option for drafting help is utilizing your on-campus resources. My current university, the University of Cincinnati, has its own walk-in writing center and career development department. Since the writing center staff would not have admissions experience, and perhaps not even familiarity with your field, they may be limited to editing your grammar and offering revision suggestions. As for the employees in the career development department, they would be able to assist you with both the grammar and content given their work history. Both would be available to help you succeed, and most colleges and universities offer these services at no extra cost to you.

Your chosen professor/mentor/advisor and the university-specific help are wonderful ways to revise your statement for grammar and content. And while your chosen professor/mentor/advisor knows you, they do not know you as well as your friends or family do. Rob Evans, one of the previously mentioned professionals in [thestudentroom video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wy4bEL85mDU), puts it best:

Get other people who know you well to read it. If you’re in school or college, they’ll no doubt go through the personal statement with a fine-tooth comb with you and tell you what to include and not to include. But get other people to read it: parents, family, [and] friends. People who know you well and make sure that what they’re looking at represents you. They may well think of things that you’ve just forgotten to mention. And if they read the statement and say, “Well who’s this?” And it doesn’t seem like a true reflection of you, then start again because it’s about you. It is a personal statement. There’s no right or wrong in how you do it. It’s about trying to get down a genuine articulation about what you’re about, where you’re going, and why you’re applying.

This distinction of having people close to you essentially authenticate your personal statement is especially important, because at the crux of it, you want the admissions officers to be as interested in you as you are in their program.

***How do I know when to submit?***

Aside from adhering to the university’s application period deadline, again: you will know through your other eyes.

I stress having other eyes on your personal statements because of Rob Evans’ comment earlier in [thestudentroom video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wy4bEL85mDU): “The best personal statements stand out because they seem genuine. They sound authentic. It sounds like somebody is really talking about what they’re actually interested in.”

I submitted my applications in late September and early October. My first deadline still has not arrived (it is currently November 28, 2017 and my earliest deadline falls on December 15, 2017). I gathered my materials, and after a week of not touching my personal statements, I re-read them again with these questions in mind:

* Does it include what the university asked you to include?
* Does it feel like your Chapter 12?
* Does it feel unique to you?
* Does it *sound* like you?
* Do your “other eyes” feel the same way?

If the answer is “yes” to all of the above, then you are ready to submit. For me, it was. But if the answer is “no” to any single one of them, investigate why until you can answer “yes” instead. If you have planned well, you will have the time for another draft or two.

***Conclusion***

Take a deep breath. At first, it seems overwhelming. Sometimes, it feels that way, too. But draft by draft, you will be one step closer to submitting. You will be all *worry* writing, you will feel a *rush* finally submitting with your other required application materials, and then you will be all *nerves* again as you wait and wait and wait. But if you are thorough, it will all be worth it.

If you are interested in a more intensive drafting experience, Essay Edge hosts an online workshop entitled [Graduate School Statements 101](https://www.essayedge.com/graduate/essayadvice/course/). The generous writers have crafted a free six-lesson course focused on preparation, themes, essay structures, style and tone, introductions and conclusions, as well as editing and revising.

As I stated at the beginning of this guide: few papers we write in college impact our lives nearly as much as a personal statement for graduate school does. Take the time. Do not sell yourself short.



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