13. Writing a Personal Statement

The Personal Statement for graduate school is one of the most important parts of the application. First, it gives you the opportunity to introduce yourself to the university. Second, the Personal Statement represents your personality and intellect in a way that no other admissions documents can. Finally, the Personal Statement gives you the opportunity to illustrate how and why you are qualified and committed to your education and chosen field.

Before You Start
Know what is expected of you in the Personal Statement. Read each question or prompt carefully to understand what the committee really wants. Make sure you know the requirements (word limit, format, etc.), and follow the directions carefully.

Pre-Writing
Consider the following ideas for helping you plan an effective Personal Statement:

1. Brainstorm your personal history, ideas about the questions themselves, and possible angles or themes that you can use to distinguish your personal history from other applicants’.
2. Think about major events and significant people in your life, and determine which ones are the most important, which ones best express who you are and what your goals are, and which ones apply to the question asked.
3. Take an analytical look at yourself and your life; ask family, friends, and colleagues for help if you are having difficulties.
4. Ask yourself some of these basic questions:
   - What’s special, unique, distinctive, or impressive about you?
   - How did you become interested in this school? What have you done to pursue your goals in this school? How have your life experiences shaped your knowledge of the school and of yourself?
   - What work experiences have you had during your high school years? How have they contributed to your personal and academic growth?
   - What are your career goals?
   - Have you overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships in your life?
   - What personal characteristics do you possess that would enhance your prospects for success in your field or profession?
   - In what ways are you a strong candidate for college?
   - If you only had five minutes to sit down in an interview with the admissions committee, how would you answer the question, “What is most important for us to know about you?”
Drafting

• Unite your essay and give it direction with a theme or thesis.
• When appropriate, find an angle or tell a story about yourself.
• Use concrete examples from your life experiences to support your thesis.
• Write about what interests and excites you. Most likely, it will interest the admissions committee as well.
• After you write a draft, revise as many times as necessary, getting outside advice and criticism whenever possible.
• Proofread your Personal Statement. Do not rely on your computer’s spell check! Read your paper aloud to check for errors.
• Opening paragraphs are the most important part of the Personal Statement.
  o The first paragraph can either grab the readers’ attention or lose it, so think carefully about what you will include and how you will word it.
  o If your whole Personal Statement is in the form of a story, the opening paragraph should introduce the most important elements of the story and the ones that will hold the readers’ attention from the start.
• Concluding paragraphs leave your readers with a final impression. End your Personal Statement with the most interesting and important points from your essay. You should also restate your thesis in order to remind your readers of the main point.
• Some important dos on your Personal Statement.
  o Write clearly and succinctly.
  o Maintain a positive and upbeat tone.
  o Project confidence and enthusiasm.
  o If a school wants to know why you are applying to it rather than another school, do some research in order to give an informed response.
  o Be honest.
• Some important don’ts on your Personal Statement.
  o Don’t write an autobiography or a resume in prose.
  o Don’t try to impress your reader with your vocabulary.
  o Don’t use generic statements, platitudes, or clichés.
  o Don’t discuss potentially controversial subjects.
  o Don’t make weak excuses for your GPA or test scores.
• Content is the most important part of the Personal Statement. However, good grammar, vocabulary, and usage are also vital. How you write is almost as important as what you say!

Much of the information used in this tutorial was gleaned from “How to Write a Personal Statement” from the OSVITA Educational Advising Center website and “Writing Your Statement of Purpose for Grad School” from accepted.com. For more information, you might want to consult Richard Stelzer’s How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School.