

ASPIREOFFICE

Writing a Personal Statement

A personal statement is a crucial component of most scholarship, fellowship, or graduate school applications. An outstanding personal statement can help you stand out against a huge pool of qualified candidates with similar credentials. The personal statement is your chance to highlight your best qualities, demonstrate your knowledge and passion, and tell admission committees exactly what makes you a perfect fit for the program.

An ideal personal statement is not only well written, but also tells a captivating story and demonstrates that you are intelligent, thoughtful, mature, and responsible. After reading your essay, the selection committee should know not only what type of person you are and what you have already accomplished, but also what type of student you will be and what you will contribute to the program.

The best personal statements begin with a “hook”: something that is interesting and unique and catches your reader’s attention. A “hook” can be many things, including a moment in time or a funny anecdote, but above all else it should be thought provoking and should set up your thesis statement. You will want to conclude your personal statement by referring back to your thesis statement, and to your “hook” if applicable.

The three main goals of a personal statement are: (1) Make the readers interested in you (tell a story that shows them something unique about yourself); (2) Convince the readers that you are passionate and knowledgeable about your field, as well as responsible, intelligent, and mature; and (3) Show the readers that you’ve done your homework on their program, and convince them you are a good fit (and they are a good fit for you)!

It’s important to write several drafts. Be sure to ask at least a few trusted people to read your personal statement and provide feedback. You should thoughtfully consider their suggestions in your next drafts. Your final draft should be proofread several times to ensure that your submission has no mistakes.

Some Guidelines for Writing Personal Statements

By Dr. Ryan Claycomb,
Assistant Dean of the Honors College and
Associate Professor of English

Tell the story of your past—but only as evidence for your future: A future-oriented statement doesn’t mean you drop the evidence that got you here, but that evidence should have a purpose: to support the central claim that you will succeed brilliantly in their program.

Paint a picture of a professional: Depict an adult version of yourself. Graduate programs and scholarship programs are not in the business of helping students grow up. They want grown-ups to arrive on campus and become professionals.

Customize your statement to your destination: Admissions or selection committees hate nothing more than to read personal statements that could be addressed to anyone. They want to know why you have selected this particular opportunity to pursue.

Writing matters—for some programs more than others: prose is subtly important for all writing samples, but different values for writing vary by discipline.

Pay attention to tone: Arrogance, jokiness, and pretension will undercut your aims, and may disqualify you altogether.

Finally, writing about a deeply personal event, if it explains your passion or ambition, can be a powerful way of connecting to your readers. However, be careful not to go overboard; too much personal drama may be off-putting or serve as a red flag.

The ASPIRE Office is available to help you edit your personal statement!
Please contact us at aspire@mail.wvu.edu

For more information, please visit
aspire.wvu.edu