

Definition of genre

The personal statement allows you to give an admissions or scholarship committee a more complete view of your qualifications than an application form, resume, or transcript can provide, by telling a narrative about your experiences, interests, qualifications, and/or expectations for the future. It also allows the committee to evaluate your writing skills. Prompts range from general (e.g. “provide a one-page statement of purpose”) to specific (e.g. “describe one project or assignment that contributed significantly to your educational experience”).

Questions to ask

- “The two whys”: Every personal statement is asking for answers to the two whys—Why are you applying for this particular program and why should the committee choose you? You want to show that you and the program you are applying to are a good fit. Everything in your statement should address these essential questions.
- What is “missing” from your application file? Think from the committee’s perspective. What information do they already have about you? If they have a transcript, there is no reason to waste words telling them about your high grades. If they have a list of your awards and activities, there is no need to simply list them here. You want everything in the personal statement to ADD information to your file.
- What experiences have you had that are essential to pursuing this career/field?
- What experiences have you had that make you unique?
- Have you overcome any obstacles in your educational career? Or, have you hit any speedbumps (failed courses, problems with the law, etc.) that you need to explain?

Actions to take

- Read the prompt. Different programs and fields have different expectations for personal statements. Read each prompt carefully, answer its questions specifically, and follow its guidelines accurately. If you apply for several programs, don’t just re-use your statement: tailor each essay to the individual prompt, and do research on the program if necessary. Once you have written your statement, consult with an authority in your field to make sure you are meeting style expectations.
- Consider your audience. Are your readers generalists or experts in your field? What are they looking for in an applicant? Will they understand the technical terminology of your particular field?

- Consider yourself. It can be difficult to not only write about oneself, but to promote oneself as well. If writing your personal statement leaves you wondering how you ever managed to get into college in the first place, try the following exercises to help you answer the key questions:
 - Make a list of your ten greatest accomplishments. Pat yourself on the back—you really *have* done a lot!—then hone in on one or two that are most relevant to your application. How might you turn these accomplishments into narrative anecdotes?
 - Make a list of the ten adjectives that best describe you. (Not eight or nine: ten.) Pat yourself on the back—you’re more interesting than you remembered!—then hone in on one or two that are most relevant to your application.

Now identify a theme. The key to a successful personal statement is focusing your accomplishments and adjectives into a strong theme, resulting in a coherent essay rather than a list.

- Avoid taking a “life history” approach. An engaging story will do a better job captivating your readers and giving them a glimpse of who you are.
- Avoid clichés and avoid stating the obvious. (E.g. “This scholarship would provide me with an excellent opportunity to realize my dream of....”).
- Write with confidence; use decisive, not hypothetical language. Know that you can be honest without “telling all.” (E.g. in your Fulbright application to study in Czechoslovakia, you probably don’t need to confess that at first you weren’t sure whether you wanted to be a chemist or a concert pianist, but now that you’ve had some college courses at Duke you’re pretty sure post-Enlightenment Czech history is your cup of tea.)
- Maintain a modicum of modesty. Overconfident pronouncements may ruffle a reader’s feathers (e.g. “I am extremely well qualified and would clearly be an asset to your program”).
- Consider taking risks. One way to set yourself apart from other applicants is to take risks in your writing—risks in style and risks in content. Balance the benefits of going out on a limb with how important the program/scholarship is to you and how strong you feel as a candidate.

Helpful links

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/>

Purdue’s Online Writing Lab provides additional questions to ask and steps to take; advice from admissions officers from several universities; and excerpts from successful application essays.

<http://chronicle.com/article/A-Purposeless-Statement-/46867/>

In this Chronicle for Higher Education article, an M.F.A. candidate in creative nonfiction investigates the purpose of “purpose statements.”

<http://www.essayedge.com/graduate/essayadvice/course/>

Essay Edge provides an “essay writing service” that is probably unethical (and expensive!) to use, but their website has some great advice, as well as examples of personal statements for a variety of professional schools and graduate fields.