Personal statements are a part of the application package to many professional and graduate school programs. Sometimes they respond to a specific question, but often the questions are open-ended and vary in length requirements ranging from as little as 250 words to more than two pages. They are also called letters of intent, personal essays, and statements of purpose or application essays.

WHY DO SCHOOLS REQUEST THEM?

Personal statements are intended as an opportunity for you to present yourself to the application committee. A strong personal statement will not make up for a weak application, but may be a deciding factor to a committee in the final selection process. It should reflect the skills requested by the program such as: communication, analytical, organizational or problem-solving skills. It is also an opportunity for you to show the committee that you have the ability and motivation to succeed in the field. The personal statement should go beyond what has already been revealed in your application. The most important thing to remember about writing personal statements is that they should reflect your uniqueness through highlighting your most pertinent experiences.

TIP: Pay attention to your audience (committee) throughout the statement. Remember that your audience is made up of professionals who are experts in their fields. Avoid making self-important and grandiose statements about the nature of the field. Don’t tell them what they already know!

HOW TO PREPARE

Start early and research

Read the instructions carefully for each school. You must tailor each application. Selection committees receive numerous applications. Applications that are tailored will speak to them much more strongly than applications that are generic.

- Research the institution to understand the culture and vision.
- Research the department to know their research strengths and their faculty’s area of expertise.
- For thesis-based programs, include information about possible professors you would like as supervisors and why you are interested in that person specifically.
- Explore their website and, if possible, visit the campus in person.
- Talk to the admissions officers directly either at their office or attend the Professional Schools Fair in the fall.
- Register for our Personal Statement workshop to help get you started. Check for dates and register online at the Career Learning Network: https://cln.utoronto.ca/home.htm

(Or Further Education/Resources and Links on the Career Centre website)

- Once you have completed the workshop or e-module, book an appointment with a Career Counselor to have it critiqued. We do not edit your work but will identify areas that are weak or need further clarification.

Know yourself

Your statement will address your strengths and fit for their program. If you need assistance identifying your skills, come see a Career Counsellor or check out the numerous resources available at the Career Centre. Talk to your family and friends as they can offer a unique perspective on your skills and abilities. If possible, discuss your options with a professor or teaching assistant — they will be able to speak to your strengths with respect to the discipline in which you wish to study.

Brainstorm

Begin by spending some time reflecting on your life and experiences. Don’t make any judgments or edit your thoughts at this point. Possible questions for you to consider are:

- What experiences or education made me want to pursue further studies?
- When did I become interested in this field?
- What appeals to me about the program — what is unique about it?
- What can I bring to this area of study — my unique perspective?
- What do I plan to do once I finish my studies — my long-term goals?

WRITE YOUR FIRST DRAFT

Make sure your first paragraph is engaging and has a specific thesis statement or a marketing pitch. Don’t just say what you think the committee wants to hear, but speak from the heart. Be confident and positive — it’s not always what you say but how you say it. They are not looking for your life history; focus on specific experiences and achievements that substantiate your marketing pitch.

Always keep in mind the audience who will be reading this document. Professional schools have a different focus than masters or PhD programs. When you finish the draft, set it aside for a few days and then get back to it with a fresh perspective.
EDIT

After taking a break, come back to your draft and consider these questions:

- Did I answer the question or questions as specified in the application?
- Does it reflect the real me?
- Does it include any controversial subjects, experiences, opinions, or politics?
- Does it rely on clichés or quotes to make my point?
- Have I chosen the right key experiences to highlight?
- Does it allow the reader to draw conclusions from the evidence that I have provided?
- Am I being repetitive?
- Does the document reflect strong interest in the program?
- Have I used the pronoun “I” too much?

If asked about undergraduate research projects:

- List projects in order of interest
- Use working titles
- Mention name of professor and/or supervisor;
- Explain relevancy of the research to the program and identify relevant skills.

Remember that a personal statement should:

- Demonstrate how you are a good fit for the program
- Be specific and persuasive. Document and support your conclusions with examples or draw conclusions as a result of individual experience. It should NOT be a catalogue of achievements. The statement is far more than a resume.
- Avoid lecturing the reader. For example, you should avoid making a statement such as “Communication skills are important in this field.” Graduate admissions committee members know this and are not there to learn about the field from the applicant. If you are asked about your understanding of the field, write about how your understanding of the field has shaped your career goals or challenged you.

WORDS AND PHRASES TO AVOID USING WITHOUT AN EXPLANATION:

- significant
- interesting
- challenging
- satisfying/satisfaction
- appreciate
- invaluable
- exciting/excited
- enjoyable/enjoy
- appealing to me
- appealing aspect
- it's important
- I can contribute
- meant a lot to me
- stimulating
- incredible

(Adapted from the Career Centre website of the University of California, Berkeley)

Ask several people to review your personal statement including your professors (especially if they belong to the field to which you are applying). In order to have your personal statement critiqued by a Career Counsellor, you must either complete the e module mentioned earlier (Personal Statement E Module under Further Education/Resources and Links on the Career Centre website) or attend one of our Personal Statement workshops offered a few times each semester. Then, book an appointment with a Career Counsellor. Please bring a printed copy of your document to your appointment.

BEFORE YOU SUBMIT YOUR FINAL COPY

Proofread for errors such as spelling or grammar mistakes. Make sure it is presented in a professional manner, is neat and is within the word or page limit.

If you need further assistance with grammar and writing skills contact the Robert Gillespie Academic Skills Centre (also check their online writing resources)

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES (Available at the Career Centre)

- Graduate Admissions Essays by Donald Asher
- Mastering the Personal Statement by John Richardson
- https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/grammar
- http://www.statementofpurpose.com/
- http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/
- Visit with program representatives at the Graduate & Professional Schools Fair (held in September of every academic year – check out www.cfn.utoronto.ca for the precise date)
- Attend workshops about the application process for Graduate schools, Professional schools (Medical school, Law school, Teaching, held in the fall and winter terms)
- Check out Further Education tip sheets (i.e. Professional Schools and Academic References). Available in print at the Career Centre and online at: https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/careers/tip-sheets

Please note that this information is subject to change. It is best to refer to the original sources for the most up to date information. (Updated April 2018)