



Personal Statement for Graduate School

Most graduate school applications require a personal statement, and many academic advisors say statements are as important as letters of recommendation, GRE scores, and transcripts. This handout outlines strategies designed to help prospective graduate students begin the writing process.

Read the prompt

Most graduate schools ask statement writers to compose an essay in response to a prompt. Read carefully. Some ask several questions, some just one. You also will want to check for any other instructions, such as word count and formatting. Here is [a prompt](#) from the History Department at the University of Arkansas:

“Applicants must submit . . . a statement of purpose of no more than 1000 words, which details your preparation for your intended field of study. Report any relevant language training, indicate with whom you wish to pursue your research project, and feature any experience you have with archival research or substantial academic writing (e.g. thesis).”

Notice the several areas the essay must cover and the department’s interest in the applicant’s past as preparation for graduate study. Here is a 500-word application essay [prompt](#) from the MBA program at Indiana University:

“Discuss your immediate post-MBA professional goals. How will your professional experience, when combined with a Kelley MBA degree, allow you to achieve these goals? Should the short-term goals you have identified not materialize, what alternate career paths might you consider?”

This essay writer must discuss goals while answering two questions, keep the essay focused on future plans, and work with only 500 words. Because prompts vary from program to program, writers won’t always be able to recycle statements when applying to several schools.

Know where you are applying

Do your homework. In both prompts above, the writers are asked to show how they fit into the culture: “indicate with whom you wish to pursue your research” and “how will your experience . . . combined with a Kelly MBA degree, allow you to achieve these goals?” You’ll need to be familiar with the programs and faculty to engage these kinds of questions.

Brainstorm, and then brainstorm and then . . .

List and list much more than you could possibly fit in your statement. If you have a 500-word limit, brainstorm 5,000 words of ideas. Create options for yourself and then begin to select. How can you answer the prompt most effectively?

Arrive at a central idea

Good statements, like good compositions of any kind, are centered on a theme. That main idea is going to guide your writing. Is it a trait, a behavior, a skill, a value, a focus, a commitment—what main idea will you develop through the statement, while answering the prompt?

Organization and style

Your statement should be organized around an opening and closing paragraph, and several body paragraphs that help you develop your theme and answer the prompt. Write unified paragraphs with clear topic sentences. Many personal statement writers combine narrative and essay genres, an effective technique. When you tell a story to make a point, explain its significance—the reason you shared the story. Use specific examples and details to illustrate your points. Provide your readers with memorable content; your application is in a competition. You don't know your audience and want them to admit and teach you, so your tone should be respectful. Word choices and style should be natural, but not informal. Avoid humor, no snark.

Drafting and drafting

Plan on writing multiple drafts. Most writers say the statement is a difficult document. The first person, which you will use throughout, is unfamiliar to many student writers. Others find the exercise uncomfortably egotistical, at first, but soon discover the difference between confidence and bragging. In the early stages, allow yourself to write well past the character limit, and don't be alarmed by organizational problems. By drafting, seeking feedback from trusted readers, and revising, you will find your way forward.

A few additional pointers

- Write a compelling opening that captures attention and establishes your theme and direction.
- After telling a story or recounting an experience, connect its significance to the statement.
- Help the readers understand why you want to enroll in their program.
- Demonstrate your commitment to the area of study and professional pursuit.
- Share the traits and experiences that establish you as qualified.
- Use direct and concise language. Avoid the ornate, figurative, and clichéd.

Other resources

If you need additional help, visit these sites:

- [Purdue University's OWL](#): Writing the Personal Statement
- Personal Statement help from admissions consultants at [Accepted.com](#)
- Graduate School – Statement at [Cal Berkeley](#)
- Tips and sample essays at [Statementofpurpose.com](#)