

# Writing Personal Statements

One of the most important documents you will be supplying to an institution or job is your Personal Statement, Statement of Purpose, or Graduate Admission Essay. Where your other submitted materials will demonstrate your ability, drive, and interest in your chosen field, the personal statement can be highly personalized and incorporate stories or experiences from outside academia, personal struggles, or an epiphany. This is your opportunity to highlight yourself—especially the qualities you think the institution(s) to which you’re applying will find most attractive or relevant.

## Finding Your Institution

One of the best ways you can narrow down what your application essay will be about is by determining where you want to go and why. Cementing what your interest is, *specifically*, will help you focus where you want to go and what you will talk about. If you are applying to graduate school, you should have a specific interest that you want to research and develop, like making nuclear microreactors or analyzing the representations of emotional expression in contemporary American literature. Having an idea of what you want to research will inform you about who you should work with.

### Tips on Finding The Right Place (and People!)

1. Look up graduate school rankings
2. Especially if your preferred course of study has a regional element, decide where you might want to live and study
3. Spend time learning about the faculty that could be potential advisors—read about them. Read their work, interviews with them, reviews of their classes and research.
4. Stuck? Talk to your major professor—who do they know? What programs? Do they have any connections?
5. Remember that letters of inquiry are most critical in the sciences. You may not need to find an advisor prior to entering the program in the humanities or even the social sciences, but you can still contact faculty or administrators working in programs that interest you. Read admission requirements to figure out if establishing an advisor in advance is critical.

## Answer the Prompt

After researching who you should work with, go to the college’s admissions page, and take a look at the prompt for your application essay. These can vary, and while all application prompts may be similar in what they are asking you to write about, the way you must express and/or

organize this information will differ between institutions. Some colleges might ask you to write a standard essay – asking you to answer the simple but difficult question “Please explain why you want to participate in our program” – while other universities may have prompted questions that ask you to talk about a specific instance in your academic career that made you want to go to graduate school. Pay attention to what the program wants you to write about. Use the prompt to your advantage, not to your disadvantage.

## Questions to Keep in Mind

Listed below are some common questions to think about when writing your essay. Use these answers to form a general outline to mold your paper around. While you can jump into the deep end and start writing, I would recommend taking your time and focusing more on planning before writing.

1. What interests you about the field of work/study for which you are applying and how did you learn about it?
2. What are your relevant work experiences?
3. What are your career goals?
4. What difficulties have you overcome?
5. Why does your field of interest matter to you?
6. What work have you done so far related to this field or that has led you to this interest?
7. What experiences in your life so far do you consider indicators of your future success?

## Techniques to Use

While understanding why you want to apply to an institution is important and answering the prompt can assist in writing a great application essay, what are some writing techniques that I can use to implement these ideas?

### Identifying Faculty:

One move that shows you are a committed, well-researched prospective student is by identifying what faculty you would like to work with. But it is not enough to name drop who you are interested in working with. Explain the reasons why you want to work with the professors you have talked about. How does their research intersect with your areas of interest? How can they benefit your development and what can you bring to their research lab/content area?

### The “For Example”

Another move to make when writing is setting up “for example” or “specifically” statements that allow you to expand and bring in the personal motivations or experiences that you have which make you a qualified and preferred candidate. “For example” and other set up phrases are great for introducing these personal details that will help your application essay shine.

### **Here and Beyond**

One thing that might be counter-intuitive to talk about is your future plans beyond your stay at the institution you are applying to. However, this is actually something that should likely be included. This shows to the candidate selector that you are a driven and organized person who is capable of thinking about the potential long-term and positive impacts you will have in your academic life and private life. It’s not all about the here and now, and not all about your academic contributions. Oftentimes, the most important contributions a person in academia can make is to the communities outside of the university system. How do you hope to benefit the world outside academia?

### **Conclusion**

Applying to graduate school is no easy feat! As you write your personal statements, try to remember why you’re applying in the first place—whether that’s a passion, a special interest, a burning curiosity, or a childhood experience that drives you. Don’t just think about which schools might accept you, but which of them might be the best fit for *you* and your needs. Above all, don’t forget to be authentic!