

Personal Statement Recommendations

The Do's

1. Unite your essay and give it direction with a theme or thesis. The thesis is the main point(s) you want to communicate. Keep the paragraphs following – show personality!
2. Before you begin writing, choose what you want to discuss and the order in which you want to discuss it – select what you would want them to know about you (3-4 key points) if you had your 15 minutes of fame with an interviewer - start with an outline and create a list of the points you want to make
3. Use **concrete examples** from your life experience to support your thesis and distinguish yourself from other applicants – this makes your essay more memorable
4. Write about what **interests you, excites you**. That's what the admissions staff wants to read.
5. Start your essay with an **attention-grabbing lead** -- an anecdote, quote, question, or engaging description of a scene.
6. End your essay with a **conclusion that refers back** to the lead and restates your thesis.
7. Revise your essay **at least** three times.
8. In addition to your editing, ask someone else to critique your statement for you – better yet, ask several people to review it
9. Proofread your personal statement by reading it out loud or reading it into a tape recorder and playing back the tape.
10. Write clearly, succinctly – don't get caught up in "big" words – be clear, direct – but also – create unique points, ideas, examples – make yourself stand out

The Don'ts

1. **Don't** include information that doesn't support your thesis.
2. **Don't** start your essay with "I was born in...", "My parents came from..." , "why I want to be..." – they know you "want to be" or to go there – that is why you are applying
3. **Don't** write an autobiography, itinerary, or résumé in prose.
4. **Don't** try to be a clown (but gentle humor is OK).
5. **Don't** be afraid to start over if the essay just isn't working or doesn't answer the essay question.
6. **Don't** try to impress your reader with your vocabulary.
7. **Don't** rely exclusively on your computer to check your spelling – edit and check your grammar
8. **Don't** provide a collection of generic statements and platitudes.
9. **Don't** give mealy-mouthed, weak excuses for your GPA or test scores
10. **Don't** make things up

Writing the Personal Statement

The personal statement, your opportunity to sell yourself in the application process, generally falls into one of two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement:

This allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write and is the type of statement often prepared for standard medical or law school application forms.

2. The response to very specific questions:

Often, business and graduate school applications ask specific questions, and your statement should respond specifically to the question being asked. Some business school applications favor multiple essays, typically asking for responses to three or more questions.

Content Suggestions

Personal Background: What makes you the individual you are – sets you apart? What are significant experiences, events or relationships that reveal something about you, your value system, and the challenges you face

Development of your interest: How did your interest in this program/career develop

Related experiences: Describe experiences that helped you explore your career interests – relate a specific event, story, experience to this – express the insight you gained from these – let your passion and personality come through

Future Goals: What are thy – ideals, objectives – what situations and career settings do you see yourself working in –

Obstacles and inconsistencies – Be open about obstacles you have encountered and overcome – (family, illness, tragedy, workload, stumbling blocks). If there are inconsistencies in your academic performance – this is the time to BRIEFLY explain these – be factual, positive and non-defensive or apologetic – do not make excuses

Questions to ask yourself before you write

- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- How have you learned about this field--through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?

- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school--and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

General advice

Answer the questions that are asked

- If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar.
- Don't be tempted to use the same statement for all applications. It is important to answer each question being asked, and if slightly different answers are needed, you should write separate statements. In every case, be sure your answer fits the question being asked.

Tell a story

- Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do is to bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you'll be putting yourself ahead of the pack. If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable.

Be specific

- Don't, for example, state that you would make an excellent doctor unless you can back it up with specific reasons. Your desire to become a lawyer, engineer, or whatever should be logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.

Find an angle

- If you're like most people, your life story lacks drama, so figuring out a way to make it interesting becomes the big challenge. Finding an angle or a "hook" is vital.

Concentrate on your opening paragraph

- The lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab the reader's attention or lose it. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.

Tell what you know

- The middle section of your essay might detail your interest and experience in your particular field, as well as some of your knowledge of the field. Too many people graduate with little or no knowledge of the nuts and bolts of the profession or field they hope to enter. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field and use the language professionals use

in conveying this information. Refer to experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other source of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it. Since you will have to select what you include in your statement, the choices you make are often an indication of your judgment.

Don't include some subjects

- There are certain things best left out of personal statements. For example, references to experiences or accomplishments in high school or earlier are generally not a good idea. Don't mention potentially controversial subjects (for example, controversial religious or political issues).

Do some research, if needed

- If a school wants to know why you're applying to it rather than another school, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. If the school setting would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention.

Write well and correctly

- Be meticulous. Type and proofread your essay very carefully. Many admissions officers say that good written skills and command of correct use of language are important to them as they read these statements. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Adhere to stated word limits.

Avoid clichés

- A medical school applicant who writes that he is good at science and wants to help other people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from often-repeated or tired statements.

Style

- Set a professional tone – no slang or gimmicky writing – focus on informing – this is not a novel
- Organize effectively – use this as a chance to highlight the 3-4 key things you would want someone to know about you – do not get caught early in long stories – get to the point –
- Be concise – use your words well – avoid redundancies and repetition of words like “why I want to be” “why I would be a good” “why I want to go to” – develop concise and strong ideas – begin and conclude on a positive note

ie.

Don't use

Instead Use

Consequently

so

Additional

more

Therefore	so
Pertaining to	about
In the near future	soon
Due to the fact that	because
Currently	now

- **Be Clear** – think about the person reading your essay (and thousands of others) – will they understand what you are trying to convey, the situations described – identify proper nouns – do not use acronyms –
- **Keep it simple** – use active not passive voice – use easy to read font
- **Be Honest** – do not exaggerate your experiences and achievements – show maturity and sincerity
- **Be Specific** – Choose specific nouns and action verbs – avoid general and abstract terms and descriptions
- **Be Personal** – Avoid “third person” talk, clichés, etc – tell them about you – let your personality and passion shine through

Ten Tips for Better Writing

Remember –

- Think in terms of a “5” paragraph statement – start with a “catch” paragraph – grab their attention with a quote, a story, a point of emphasis, and idea
- Make strong, good transitions, show your personality
- Give detail but without writing a novel – don’t use all your words telling one story – you want to share an experience – not tell the book
- Use the next 3-4 paragraphs to share two to four key points that you would want an interviewer to know about you – include at least 1-2 examples – relate a story, something that will help them remember these points
- Use a strong concluding point that leaves a challenge, a statement – you may refer back to the opening paragraph, a theme, etc.
- Avoid repeating words like “medical school”, “want to be a doctor”, etc – remember – the schools know you want to go to their program and receive their degree – you are applying – they know that

Still More Tips:

1. Express yourself in positive language. Say what is, not what is not – avoid “negative talk”.
2. Use transitions between paragraphs. Transitions tie one paragraph to the next.

A transition can be a word, like *later*, *furthermore*, *additionally*, or *moreover*; a phrase like *After this incident...;* or an entire sentence.

If you are writing about Topic A and now want to discuss Topic B, you can begin the new paragraph with a transition such as "Like (or unlike) Topic A, Topic B..."

3. Vary your sentence structure. It's boring to see subject, verb, object all the time. Mix simple, complex, and compound sentences.
4. Understand the words you write. You write to communicate, not to impress the admissions staff with your vocabulary. When you choose a word that means something other than what you intend, you neither communicate nor impress. You do convey the wrong message or convince the admissions officer that you are inarticulate.
5. Look up synonyms in a thesaurus when you use the same word repeatedly. After the DELETE key, the thesaurus is your best friend. As long as you follow Tip 4, using one will make your writing more interesting.
6. Be succinct. Compare:

During my sophomore and junior years, there was significant development of my maturity and markedly improved self-discipline towards school work.
During my sophomore and junior years, I matured and my self-discipline improved tremendously.

The first example takes many more words to give the same information. The admissions officers are swamped; they do not want to spend more time than necessary reading your essay. Say what you have to say in as few words as possible. Tips 7, 8, and 9 will help you to implement this suggestion.

7. Make every word count. Do not repeat yourself. Each sentence and every word should state something new.
8. Avoid qualifiers such as *rather, quite, somewhat, probably, possibly*, etc.

You might improve your writing somewhat if you sometimes try to follow this suggestion.

The example contains nonsense. Deleting unnecessary qualifiers will strengthen your writing 1000%. Equivocating reveals a lack of confidence. If you do not believe what you write, why should the admissions officer?

9. Use the active voice. Compare:

The application was sent by the student. (Passive voice)
The student sent the application. (Active voice)

They both communicate the same information. The active voice, however, is more concise; it specifies who is performing the action and what is the object. The passive voice is wordier and frequently less clear.

10. Read and reread *Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White. Containing basic rules of grammar, punctuation, composition, and style, this indispensable classic is available in paperback and is only eighty-five pages long.
-

Some advice from admissions representatives:

Lee Cunningham

Director of Admissions and Aid

The University of Chicago Graduate School of Business

The mistake people make most often is not to look at what the questions are asking. Some people prepare generic statements because they're applying to more than one school and it's a lot of work to do a personal essay for each school. On the other hand, generic statements detract from the applicant when we realize that we're one of six schools and the applicant is saying the same thing to each and every school despite the fact that there are critical differences between the kinds of schools they may be applying to. They don't take the time. They underestimate the kind of attentions that is paid to these essays. Take a look at what the essay asks and deal with those issues articulately and honestly.

At least 2, and sometimes 3, people read each essay. I read them to make the final decision. Our process works so that each person who reads the application does a written evaluation of what he or she has read and the written evaluations are not seen by the other reader.

Steven DeKrey

Director of Admissions and Financial Aid

J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management (Northwestern University)

We're looking for a well-written, detailed essay that responds directly to the question. The questions are about extracurricular activities, motivation, challenges, commitment to the school that kind of thing. We see a variety and that's fine. Our approach is very individualized. The way the applicant devises the answer, determines the length, develops the response, is all part of the answer. The level of effort applicants put into essays varies considerably, which sends messages to the admissions committee as well. Over-involved, elaborate essays send one message, while very brief and superficial essays send another message.

Trying to second-guess what we are looking for is a common mistake--which we can sense.

We can tell when applicants use answers to other schools' questions for our essays; we're sensitive to this. Poorly written essays are a bad reflection on the applicant.

Don't over-elaborate; we're reading a lot of these kinds of essays. Also, don't be too brief or superficial. We like to have major ideas presented well.

Michael D. Rappaport

Assistant Dean of Admissions

UCLA School of Law

Applicants should take the time to look at what the law school is asking them to write about. At UCLA, we say, "we know you have lots of extracurricular activities--we want to know how you differ, what makes you unique? What can you bring to the first year class that's going to make you distinctive from the other 99 people who are already there?" The fact that you were active in your fraternity or sorority is really not going to do it. What we're looking for is somebody who, in their personal statement, stands out as being so unusual, so diverse, that they're extremely attractive as a law student for the first-year class. Maybe what's going to make them distinctive is the fact they

spent six months living in a log cabin in Alaska. You try to give the law school some justification for admitting you. With a lot of people, there's nothing that's going to make them distinctive. If that's the case, they've got to recognize that, indeed, the essay is not going to make that much difference here at UCLA.

We're also asking if there's any reason their LSAT or grades are not predictive. You'd be amazed at the number of people who completely ignore this--they don't take advantage of the opportunity.

Most law schools operate fairly similarly. There's a certain group of applicants whose grades and LSAT scores are so high that the presumption is that the applicants are going to be admitted unless they do something terribly stupid to keep themselves out. I have seen applicants whose personal statement has done that, but it's extremely rare. At the other extreme is another group of applicants who, no matter what they write, are not going to get in.

The applicant has to realize, first of all, where he or she stands. If you have a straight-A grade point average and a perfect LSAT score, you don't have to spend a lot of time worrying about your personal statement. On the other hand, if you know you're in the borderline area, that's where the personal statement becomes very, very important.

The applicant should take the time to read the application to see what the schools are asking for. Sometimes the school will ask for a general description of why you want to go to law school, or why they should admit you, something of that nature. In such case you can be fairly sure that the school is just interested in the essay to see how well you write. So what you say isn't as important as how you say it. On the other hand, some schools are more specific--UCLA being a very good example of that.

Make sure the essay is grammatically and technically correct and well written. Avoid sloppy essays, coffee stained essays, or ones that are handwritten so you can't read them. You'd be amazed at what we get!

Beth O'Neil

Director of Admissions and Financial Aid

University of California at Berkeley School of Law (Boalt Hall)

We're trying to gauge the potential for a student's success in law school, and we determine that, principally, on the basis of what the student has done in the past. The personal statement carries the responsibility of presenting the student's life experiences.

Applicants make a mistake by doing a lot of speculation about what they're going to do in the future rather than telling us about what they've done in the past. It is our job to speculate, and we are experienced at that.

Applicants also tend to state and not evaluate. They give a recitation of their experience but no evaluation of what effect that particular experience had on them, no assessment of what certain experiences or honors meant.

They also fail to explain errors or weaknesses in their background. Even though we might wish to admit a student, sometimes we can't in view of a weakness that they haven't made any effort to explain. For example, perhaps they haven't told us that they were ill on the day that they took the LSAT or had an automobile accident on the way. Such things are legitimate reasons for poor

performance. I mean, we understand that life is tough sometimes. We need to know what happened, for example, to cause a sudden drop in the GPA.

Another mistake is that everyone tries to make himself or herself the perfect law school applicant who, of course, does not exist and is not nearly as interesting as a real human being.

Between 1 and 5 people read each application.

Dr. Daniel R. Alonso
Associate Dean for Admissions
Cornell University Medical College

We look for some originality because nine out of ten essays leave you with a big yawn. "I like science, I like to help people and that's why I want to be a doctor." The common, uninteresting, and unoriginal statement is one that recounts the applicant's academic pursuits and basically repeats what is elsewhere in the application. You look for something different, something that will pique your interest and provide some very unique insight that will make you pay some attention to this person who is among so many other qualified applicants. If you're screening 5,500 applications over a four- or six-month period, you want to see something that's really interesting.

I would simply say: Do it yourself, be careful, edit it, go through as many drafts as necessary. And more important than anything: be yourself. really show your personality. Tell us why you are unique, why we should admit you. The premise is that 9 out of 10 people who apply to medical school are very qualified. Don't under any circumstances insert handwritten work or an unfinished piece of writing. Do a professional job. I would consider it a mistake to attempt to cram in too much information, too many words. Use the space as judiciously as possible. Don't submit additional pages or use only 1/20th of the space provided.

John Herweg
Chairman, Committee on Admissions
Washington University School of Medicine

We are looking for a clear statement that indicates that the applicant can use the English language in a meaningful and effective fashion. We frankly look at spelling as well as typing (for errors both in grammar and composition). Most applicants use the statement to indicate their motivation for medicine, the duration of that motivation, extracurricular activities, and work experience. So those are some of the general things we are looking for in the Personal Comments section.

We also want applicants to personalize the statement, to tell us something about themselves that they think is worthy of sharing with us, something that makes them unique, different, and the type of medical student and future physician that we're all looking for. What they have done in working with individuals--whether it's serving as a checker or bagger at a grocery store or working with handicapped individuals or tutoring inner city kids--that shows they can relate to people and have they done it in an effective fashion? What the applicant should do in all respects is to depict why he or she is a unique individual and should be sought after. Of course, if they start every sentence on a whole page with "I," it gets to be a little bit too much.

And Finally –

TOP 10 MEDICAL SCHOOL PERSONAL STATEMENT WRITING TIPS

1. Don't Resort to Cliches.

Every year, medical school admissions officers read thousands of variations of this sentence: "I want to be a doctor so I can help people." It's undoubtedly true in most instances, yet it inevitably fails because it reveals nothing unique about the individual applicant. If you demonstrate a penchant for helping others by describing specific activities--community service, for example--it will become unnecessary to declare that desire, as it will already be clear. Every doctor helps people, so focus on the specific actions you have taken.

2. Don't Bore the Reader. Do Be Interesting.

Admissions officers have to read hundreds of essays, and they must often skim. Abstract rumination has no place in an application essay. Admissions officers aren't looking for a new way to view the world; they're looking for a new way to view you the applicant. The best way to grip your reader is to begin the essay with a captivating snapshot. Notice how the slightly jarring scene depicted in the "after" creates intrigue and keeps the reader's interest.

Before: I am a compilation of many years of experiences gained from overcoming the relentless struggles of life.

After: I was six years old, the eldest of six children in the Bronx, when my father was murdered.

3. Do Use Personal Detail. Show, Don't Tell!

Good essays are concrete and grounded in personal detail. They do not merely assert "I learned my lesson" or that "these lessons are useful both on and off the field." They show it through personal detail. "Show don't tell," means if you want to relate a personal quality, do so through your experiences and do not merely assert it.

Before: If it were not for a strong support system which instilled into me strong family values and morals, I would not be where I am today.

After: Although my grandmother and I didn't have a car or running water, we still lived far more comfortably than did the other families I knew. I learned an important lesson: My grandmother made the most of what little she had, and she was known and respected for her generosity. Even at that age, I recognized the value she placed on maximizing her resources and helping those around her.

The first example is vague and could have been written by anybody. But the second sentence evokes a vivid image of something that actually happened, placing the reader in the experience of the applicant.

4. Do Be Concise. Don't Be Wordy.

Wordiness not only takes up valuable space, but also confuses the important ideas you're trying to convey. Short sentences are more forceful because they are direct and to the point. Certain phrases, such as "the fact that," are usually unnecessary. Notice how the revised version focuses on active verbs rather than forms of "to be" and adverbs and adjectives.

Before: My recognition of the fact that we had finally completed the research project was a deeply satisfying moment that will forever linger in my memory.

After: Completing the research project at last gave me an enduring sense of fulfillment.

5. Do Address Your Weaknesses. Don't Dwell on Them.

At some point on your application, you will have an opportunity to explain deficiencies in your record, and you should take advantage of it. Be sure to explain them adequately: Staying up late the night before the MCAT is not a legitimate reason for a bad performance, while documented sickness could be. If you lack volunteer hospital experience, you might point out the number of hours you had to work to make college more affordable for your family. The best tactic is to spin the negatives into

positives by stressing your attempts to improve; for example, mention your poor first-quarter grades briefly, then describe what you did to bring them up.

6. Do Vary Your Sentences and Use Transitions.

The best essays contain a variety of sentence lengths mixed within any given paragraph. Also, remember that transition is not limited to words like *nevertheless*, *furthermore* or *consequently*. Good transition flows from the natural thought progression of your argument.

Before: I started playing piano when I was eight years old. I worked hard to learn difficult pieces. I began to love music.

After: I started playing the piano at the age of eight. As I learned to play more difficult pieces, my appreciation for music deepened.

7. Do Use Active Voice Verbs

Passive-voice expressions are verb phrases in which the subject receives the action expressed in the verb. Passive voice employs a form of the word to be, such as was or were. Overuse of the passive voice makes prose seem flat and uninteresting.

Before: The lessons that have prepared me for my career as a doctor were taught to me by my mother.

After: My mother taught me lessons that will prove invaluable in my career as a doctor.

8. Do Seek Multiple Opinions.

Ask your friends and family to keep these questions in mind:

- Does my essay have one central theme?
- Does my introduction engage the reader? Does my conclusion provide closure?
 - Do my introduction and conclusion avoid summary?
 - Do I use concrete experiences as supporting details?
 - Have I used active-voice verbs wherever possible?
- Is my sentence structure varied, or do I use all long or short sentences?
 - Are there any clichés such as "cutting edge" or "learned my lesson?"
 - Do I use transitions appropriately?
 - What about the essay is memorable?
 - What's the worst part of the essay?
 - What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear?
 - What parts of the essay do not support my main argument?
- Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This must be the case.
 - What does the essay reveal about my personality?

9. Don't Wander. Do Stay Focused.

- Many applicants try to turn the personal statement into a complete autobiography. Not surprisingly, they find it difficult to pack so much information into such a short essay, and their essays end up sounding more like a list of experiences than a coherent, well-organized thought. Make sure that every sentence in your essay exists solely to support one central theme.

10. Do Revise, Revise, Revise.

- The first step in improving any essay is to cut, cut, and cut some more.