

Purpose

Most applications for grad school or post-graduate programs (e.g. BEd or BSW) require a personal statement, which may also be called a letter of intent or a statement of purpose. The goal of this statement is to give the reader a better sense of who you are and whether or not you're suitable as a candidate for that program.

A personal statement combines highlights from your academic life—and sometimes your personal life—into one *unified, coherent* narrative. Your goal is to give your reader a sense of what you've already done and what you plan to do, making it clear how these two things are connected. The personal statement doesn't just repeat the information found in your transcripts, CV, or reference letters: it picks out the most important bits, explains their significance, and connects the dots. Although there isn't one definitive way to write a personal statement, below are some tips on what information to include in your personal statement and how you might organize it.

Content and Organization

If the university you are applying to provides instructions on what to include in your statement, follow those instructions closely. For instance, if you're given a list of questions to respond to, try to answer those questions in that same order within your statement. (Numbering your answers usually isn't required, but start a new paragraph whenever you move on to address the next question.) At the very least, you'll probably be given a word or page limit: stick to that limit. Your readers will have to review many applications, so don't make their job any harder with an overly long statement.

If you haven't been given any instructions or examples from the school that you are applying to, you could try emailing the admissions officer or graduate advisor for that program and asking for advice. For more advice on how to approach these statements, see below.

Opening

If you've been asked to write a letter of intent, you can format your document as an actual letter. Take the time to look up the name of the person or the title of the committee that will be reviewing your application, and address the letter accordingly.

- e.g. Dear Dr. Rosa: (if faculty member)
- e.g. Dear Ms. Cummings: (if staff member)
- e.g. Dear Selections Committee: (if a board)
- e.g. To Whom It May Concern: (if recipient is unknown)

If this isn't a letter, you can skip the opening salutation and instead start with the next sentence, which declares which school and which program you are applying to.

- e.g. Please accept my application for admission to the MA program in Social and Political Thought at York University.

Your next sentence should briefly introduce the highlights you will cover in the rest of your document.

- e.g. I believe that my undergraduate studies and relevant work experience make me a strong candidate for this program.

Previous Experience

If you want to proceed chronologically, the next section after your introduction could highlight your experience up to this point, including

- when you will graduate
- what your degree will be in, including honors, major and minor subjects
- influential undergraduate courses, including the titles of upper-level courses or those that relate to your future research interests
 - you may also wish to mention the relevant topics/theories/methods those courses have exposed you to
- honors thesis or major research project (especially if you are enclosing it as a writing sample), including
 - your topic and approach
 - notable features of your research project
 - did you perform an original empirical study? did you have to seek ethics approval? did you use original or rare materials from the archives? are you studying a current topic or applying an emerging theory?
 - length of the final document
 - names of your supervisors/committee members
- relevant extracurricular activities or work/volunteer experience
 - mention student conferences, student publications, or student clubs you have been involved with (e.g. History Society)
 - if you have TA or RA experience, briefly describe the research project or course you assisted with, and your responsibilities
 - focus on describing the knowledge or skills that you gained from this experience and how it contributed to your interests in the field or helped prepare you for advanced studies
 - don't mention non-academic hobbies or work/volunteer experience unless they are related to your future program or career
 - e.g. if you're asked to comment on your teamwork skills, you could mention your involvement in team sports or community theatre
- don't discuss your high school experience or early childhood, unless specifically invited to do so: the admissions committee wants to hear about your *most recent* activities

Current Interests

The next section of your statement can address your current interests and your plans for the near future.

- identify what you hope to study in that program
 - which areas/periods/genres/authors/research questions you plan to study
 - potential thesis projects
 - some applications may request a separate thesis proposal

(cont.)

- why this program in particular will help you or allow you to study this: in particular, mention
 - courses you hope to take that appeal to your research interests
 - check the department website or calendar for course listings
 - faculty you would like to work with
 - check department website for faculty bios or CVs that list their research interests and specializations
 - if the program requires you to have a supervisor, email potential supervisors in advance and run your ideas for thesis projects by them
 - mention if you have met or know faculty from that program in other capacities (e.g. as guest speakers in your undergraduate classes, as authors of influential texts you have read, as members of your thesis committee)
 - other aspects of the program that appeal to you
 - are there field placements or co-op opportunities? is the curriculum comprehensive, or specialized? will there be a chance to do TA or RA work, or to assist with student publications?
- you may also need to indicate whether you plan to apply for any funding
 - mention whether you have applied or plan to apply for Tri-Council funding (SSHRC, NSERC, CIHR), OGS, internal funding, other
 - if you have already been awarded a scholarship, bursary, or grant for your future studies, be sure to indicate the award title and its monetary amount
- if you don't yet have all the entrance requirements for the program, explain how you plan to meet them before the program starts (e.g. by taking summer or distance education courses)

Future Plans

Near the end of your statement, you should briefly mention what you hope to do after you finish your graduate or post-degree program, even if you're not quite certain yet.

- will you continue on to doctoral studies (a PhD)?
- are you interested in working for the government? public policy? research institutes? non-profits or NGOs? the private sector? other related professions?
- to see where the program could lead you
 - check out the school or department websites and other promotional materials: look for testimonials or alumni lists that include current occupations
 - search LinkedIn for alumni from that program: look at their career fields and job titles

Closing

At the end of your statement, recap the main features of your document and thank the reader for their time. If you're formatting this as a letter, don't forget to sign off at the end.

e.g. I am confident that this program will help me achieve my goal, and I believe that my academic achievements, research interests, and related work experience make me a good fit for this program. Thank you in advance for considering my application.

Sincerely,

Your Name

Other Tips

- Write in complete sentences and paragraphs. Do not present information in lists or in point form.
- Although you aren't writing an essay or research paper, you still need to organize your information logically. Each paragraph should focus on one main topic. For instance, you might spend the first paragraph discussing your undergraduate experience, a second paragraph discussing what you hope to study at that particular school and why, and a third paragraph describing your future plans after graduate school.
- Unlike other university assignments, it's okay to use first person pronouns in your personal statement (*I, me, my*)—in fact, it would sound odd if you didn't.
- How personal is too personal? These statements are often called personal statements because you're talking about yourself and you're using "I." However, schools do not expect you to share highly sensitive information about yourself in this letter: you are not expected to disclose information about your race, religion, or sexual orientation, or to describe emotional/traumatic experiences – unless you're explicitly invited to do so. For instance, social work programs may ask applicants to comment on their own experiences in the social work system; some law schools also have separate streams for Aboriginal students, who are required to state their band affiliations and whether or not they live on reserve.
- In addition to highlighting the strengths of your application, a personal statement can also be used to address weaknesses in your application. For instance, if your third-year GPA wasn't as high as in other years because you had to work 35 hours a week, you can address this in your statement. The key is to mention it briefly and in a positive way. (e.g. You managed a full course load along with an almost-full-time job, and though it was challenging, you learned valuable time-management skills that will help you meet the demands of graduate school.)
- Avoid general statements (e.g. "Ever since I was a child, I've wanted to ...").
- Don't misrepresent your qualifications: remember that admissions will be able to check your personal statement against other documents like your transcript. Tell the truth, and let the reader decide whether or not you're ready to enter the program.
- Don't exaggerate. Instead of impressing the reader, hyperbole often has the opposite effect.
 - avoid intensifiers like *absolutely, literally, completely, totally, very, extremely, great, best, most qualified*
- Proofread your assignment. Remember that this document also presents an opportunity for you to demonstrate your writing skills and your attention to detail. Ask your supervisor or referees to review your statement before you submit it (but ask early, and give them adequate turnaround time). You can also visit the Writing Centre for help. Book appointments online at <http://writingcentre.stu.ca>