

## What is a personal statement?

- An opportunity to market yourself to an admissions committee.
- A personal essay allowing the writer freedom of topics OR one requiring the writer to respond to a specific prompt.

## What are some characteristics of a strong personal statement?

- Reflective: A good essay does more than describe experiences. Show you have thought about your experiences and have gained insight or grown in some way as a result.
- Depth over breadth: Don't reiterate your résumé. Rather, select a few experiences which best illustrate the theme or point you wish to make in the essay.
- Answers the questions asked and follows all guidelines (character or page limits, font, etc.).
- Conforms to conventions of good grammar.
- Backs up claims: Don't just say you have a desirable characteristic or skill. Instead, provide examples that demonstrate how you honed the skill or characteristic.
- Avoids cliché: Saying you want to be a physician because you love science and want to help people is not an original statement.

Bad writing precedes good writing. This is an infallible rule, so don't waste time trying to avoid bad writing. (That just slows down the process.) Anything committed to paper can be changed. The idea is to start, and then go from there.

## How do I start?

Before drafting the personal statement, take a personal inventory. Doing so can help you generate content as well as potential themes for the essay.

- What sets you apart from other applicants?
- What sparked your interest in the field?
- What motivates you to pursue a career in the field?
- What have you done to learn about the field? (Shadowing, interviewing, work or internships, courses, research, etc.) What did those experiences teach you?
- Have you conducted research? If so, what did you learn from doing so?
- What undergraduate experiences (both academic and non-academic) were most important to you or are you most proud of? What did you learn from these experiences?
- Do you have any weaknesses or inconsistencies in your application you should address (such as GPA or test scores)?
- Have you overcome significant obstacles?

After gathering ideas, it's time to begin drafting your essay. A first draft is a chance to organize and flesh out your ideas, work on an introduction, and develop a theme. However, don't expect your first draft to be your last! **A well-polished essay is a result of many drafts.**

## Feedback and Revision

You are likely so close to the essay you may not have the best perspective to judge its strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, ask several people to read your draft and provide feedback. Consider asking your academic advisor, pre-professional advisor, professors or mentors, writing center staff, work supervisors, professionals in the field you are pursuing, or peers. If you are required to respond to a question or prompt, or have specific length requirements or other restrictions, be sure to let your reader know. Be receptive to the feedback you receive, and address issues raised. However, keep in mind this is **your** personal statement and ultimately you decide what revisions to make.

## Tips for Writing Your Personal Statement

### Do...

- Answer the questions asked and follow all guidelines.
- Be honest and submit your best work.
- Develop a theme or main point(s) in the essay. Each experience you include in the essay should back up this theme or main point.
- Be selective in choosing which experiences to include in the essay. Aim for depth over breadth.
- Conform to writing conventions and use proper grammar. No spelling errors or typos!
- Remember your audience. The admissions committee reads hundreds of essays. Make sure yours presents yourself as a deserving candidate beyond good grades and high test scores.
- Focus on some of the competencies programs want to see in applicants (attached).

### Don't...

- Write what you think the admissions committee wants to hear.
- Use the personal statement as a chance to list all your experiences and accomplishments.
- Describe experiences without reflecting upon their importance.
- Whine, complain, or place blame on others for your shortcomings.
- Attempt to be clever.
- Use clichés or flowery, empty language. The essay is an exercise in communication, not creative writing.
- Write about a “hot topic.” It’s best not to come across as preachy.

## Common Writing Pitfalls and Strategies for Revision

The excerpts below demonstrate common writing pitfalls and strategies for revision.

### Example 1

*Growing up as the child of a lawyer, the legal field has always been a part of my life. Academic success was always encouraged, and higher education has been pursued by all of my family members. This background has not obligated me to a life of academia or the legal field, but has rather given me an inside look into the field that many people do not have the opportunity to experience.*

**Writing Pitfall:** Lack of detail.

**Opportunity for Revision:** The writer should consider adding details about their insider perspective on the legal field. What have they learned as a result of their experiences? How will they use this knowledge to succeed in law school and as a lawyer?

### Example 2

*Obviously math and the sciences have always been of interest to me, but my interests in these fields lead (sic) me somewhere else than the typical medical school applicant – mechanical engineering. Although the title would lead you to believe that we deal with only mechanical or automotive systems, this field has some especially direct and real interactions with the human body. During my studies of statics and dynamics we have studied the impact on organs and bones from everyday movements to extreme instances such as car crashes and professional sports. This knowledge, critical thinking skills, and creativity gained through engineering can assist me in excelling in areas where others who have not had my experiences fall short. This experience also leads to some weaknesses where others have strengths, such as biology, but with a great work ethic I would be able to overcome this hurdle.*

**Writing Pitfall:** Raising red flags without adequately addressing them.

**Opportunity for Revision:** The last sentence would give a reader pause – is biology a weakness for the applicant? How so? If indeed the applicant’s biology grades or MCAT score is low, they should address this issue directly. Why is this a weakness for the applicant? In what ways have they overcome previous weaknesses with a “great work ethic?” If the applicant’s biology grades or MCAT score is not low, they should remove this sentence.

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## Example 3

*The summer following my sophomore year, I got accepted into a pilot study abroad program Purdue was offering for students. I was given the most amazing opportunity to travel to Swaziland, a country in Southern Africa, and work on an HIV/AIDS development project. This trip was, without question, the most significant moment in my life. I have never so clearly been able to see what it is that I want for myself. I spent a lot of time working with patients and making house calls through a program called Hospice at Home. Flying back home was a surreal experience. I was sad to be leaving a place that had so fundamentally changed my being and reestablished my focus, but at the same time I felt a serene sense of calm knowing that I was about to embark upon the journey of my life, pursuing a dream that I had finally come to realize.*

**Writing Pitfall:** “Telling” instead of “showing.”

**Opportunity for Revision:** The writer claims the experience in Swaziland was “the most significant moment” in their life and it “fundamentally changed” them. However, the writer doesn’t provide any information about why or how. Little information about the work the applicant did on the project is provided beyond “working with patients and making house calls.” The writer has an opportunity to convince the reader of the transformative nature of this experience by relating a story about a particular interaction with a patient or healthcare worker.

## Writing Exercise

Use the questions below to help you begin drafting your personal statement

1. What first drew you to this field?
2. Reflect upon your experiences with this field in college. How has your interest grown or changed? What classes, research, work, observation experience, student organization involvement, study abroad, etc. helped bring your interest into focus?
3. Stories help bring a personal statement to life, and having a few on hand may be beneficial. Write two stories, each one-paragraph long and with vivid details, which show something about you; perhaps a defining moment in your decision to pursue the field, a time when you overcame a challenge, or a time when you learned something new about yourself.
4. Review the Core Competencies for Pre-Professional Students (on the next page). Select one that is your strength. What activities did you participate in that helped you become strong in this area? Coursework? Work experience? Research? Leadership in a student organization? Write a paragraph in which you describe how you developed that competency through a specific activity or activities.

## Additional Resources

[Purdue Online Writing Lab \(OWL\) on Personal Statements](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job_search_writing/preparing_an_application/writing_the_personal_statement/index.html)

[https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job\\_search\\_writing/preparing\\_an\\_application/writing\\_the\\_personal\\_statement/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job_search_writing/preparing_an_application/writing_the_personal_statement/index.html)

[Writing Personal Statements Online](https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingpersonalstatementsonline/) <https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingpersonalstatementsonline/>

[7 Tips to Write Your Essay](https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/article/7-tips-write-your-essay/) <https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/article/7-tips-write-your-essay/>

[American Dental Education Association](https://www.adea.org/For-Sorting/dental-education-pathwaysaadsasApplicantsPages/Personal-statement-24335) <https://www.adea.org/For-Sorting/dental-education-pathwaysaadsasApplicantsPages/Personal-statement-24335>

[6 Ways to Jump Start Your Personal Statement](https://explorehealthcareers.org/six-ways-get-jump-personal-statement/) <https://explorehealthcareers.org/six-ways-get-jump-personal-statement/>

[New England Law Personal Statement Tips](https://www.nesl.edu/news/detail/9-important-personal-statement-tips-all-law-school-applicants-should-know) <https://www.nesl.edu/news/detail/9-important-personal-statement-tips-all-law-school-applicants-should-know>

## Core Competencies for Pre-Professional Students

Professional schools have identified core skill sets (competencies) they expect entering students to have. These competencies should be highlighted throughout your application in the activities you choose, your letters of recommendation, and your application essay (personal statement).

### Pre-Professional Competencies

Capacity for Improvement: Set goals for continuous improvement and for learning new concepts and skills; engage in reflective practice for improvement; solicit and respond appropriately to feedback.

Cultural Competence: Demonstrate knowledge of socio-cultural factors that affect interactions and behaviors; show appreciation and respect for the multiple dimensions of diversity; recognize and act on the obligation to inform one's own judgment; engage diverse and competing perspectives as a resource for learning, citizenship, and work; recognize and appropriately address bias in yourself and others; interact effectively with people from diverse backgrounds.

Ethical Responsibility to Self and Others: Behave in an honest and ethical manner; cultivate personal and academic integrity; adhere to ethical principles and follow rules and procedures; resist peer pressure to engage in unethical behavior and encourage others to behave in honest and ethical ways; develop and demonstrate ethical and moral reasoning.

Oral Communication: Effectively convey information to others using spoken words and sentences; listen effectively; recognize potential communication barriers and adjust approach or clarify information as needed.

Reliability and Dependability: Consistently fulfill obligations in a timely and satisfactory manner; take responsibility for personal actions and performance.

Resilience and Adaptability: Demonstrate tolerance of stressful or changing environments or situations and adapt effectively to them; be persistent, even under difficult situations; recover from setbacks.

Service Orientation: Demonstrate a desire to help others and sensitivity to others' needs and feelings; demonstrate a desire to alleviate others' distress; recognize and act on your responsibility to society; locally, nationally, and globally.

Social Skills: Demonstrate an awareness of others' needs, goals, feelings, and the ways that social and behavioral cues affect peoples' interactions and behaviors; adjust behaviors appropriately in response to these cues; treat others with respect.

Teamwork: Work collaboratively with others to achieve shared goals; share information and knowledge with others and provide feedback; put team goals ahead of individual goals.

### Science Competencies

Human Behavior: Apply knowledge of the self, others, and social systems to solve problems related to the psychological, socio-cultural, and biological factors that influence health and well-being.

Living Systems: Apply knowledge and skill in the natural sciences to solve problems related to molecular and macro systems including biomolecules, molecules, cells, and organs.

### Thinking and Reasoning Competencies

Critical Thinking: Use logic and reasoning to identify the strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions, conclusions, or approaches to problems.

Quantitative Reasoning: Apply quantitative reasoning and appropriate mathematics to describe or explain phenomena in the natural world.

Scientific Inquiry: Apply knowledge of the scientific process to integrate and synthesize information, solve problems, and formulate research questions and hypotheses; easily use and understand the language of the sciences and use it to participate in the discourse of science and explain how scientific knowledge is discovered and validated.

Written Communication: Effectively convey information to others using written words and sentences.

From the [Association of American Medical Colleges Core Competencies](https://students-residents.aamc.org/real-stories-demonstrating-premed-competencies/premed-competencies-entering-medical-students) <https://students-residents.aamc.org/real-stories-demonstrating-premed-competencies/premed-competencies-entering-medical-students>

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