Preparing Effective Personal Statements for College Admissions

Helpful Tips

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THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

A personal statement for college and university applications can be a great addition to the admissions file. In some cases, a strong personal statement can even draw attention away from any negative aspects of the application. Asking your student to write about themselves can be tough, but once they get a grasp on how to write a good personal statement, they’ll have no problem at all.

The first thing to do is consider a few general points. Ask your student to consider the following general questions: 1.) **What kind of school are you applying to?** And 2.) **What kind of program are you applying to within the school, if any?** As with any writing project, it’s important to for the student to consider their audience. If they’re looking at a conservative college and applying to their business school, for example, the student will probably want to give their personal statement a more professional, direct tone. If the student is applying to the art program at a liberal school, they’ll likely have more room to be creative and write something that might be a little more casual in tone. If the student is not sure who their audience is, then it’s always safe to take a middle-of-the-road approach. Instruct the student to be professional, but let some of their personality through as well.

Some applications might be specific about what addressed in the personal statement, but many will be very general about the content. Think about it this way – colleges are asking for personal statements because they want the applicant to tell them why they should be chosen above other students. This is no time to be shy or timid – the personal statement is a way to really shine. It’s the one piece of the application that allows for the applicant’s personality to come across, and for the student to communicate their passion for education, for the subject they wish to study, their enthusiasm about life, and their long-term goals. In the content of the personal statement, it’s also important to talk about the school itself, if only in a few sentences. It’s important to show the admissions staff that they’re excited about the institution, and to drop a few details about the school that tells the admissions committees that they’ve done their research and they’re serious about wanting to go there. Even if the personal statement is for a “safety” school, don’t let that come through. No school wants to accept someone who doesn’t look like they really want to attend – they’d rather give that slot to someone who really wants it.
A GOOD STATEMENT IS . . .

-Thoughtful and honest
A strong personal statement is **reflective**; that is, it demonstrates that the applicant has thought about and gained a clear perspective on their experiences and what they want for their future. It does not simply tell a reader what they think he/she wants to know. Instead, it gives the reader a vivid and compelling picture of the student--in essence, telling the reader what he or she should know about you.

-Strives for depth, not breadth
Remember when your mom told you that it's quality, not quantity, that counts? Well, the same adage applies to the college personal statement. A good statement is not simply a list of accomplishments. A reader will be much more interested in how the student's experience demonstrates the theme of the statement, not the number of accomplishments they can list. What is NOT interesting: a statement that devotes one paragraph each to a variety of different topics. This type of approach denies the ability to give depth to the statement.

-Follows the conventions of good writing
A good statement uses appropriate grammar and syntax, uses precise and vivid language, and does not contain any spelling errors.

-Conforms to guidelines
If the statement instructions tell you that the statement should be two pages long, on white 8.5x11 inch paper, then the statement should be two pages long, on white 8.5x11 inch paper. Less is not more, and more is not better, either.

-Answers the question!
A good statement is the result of a writer who has examined the question and written a statement that explicitly addresses that question.

-Benefits from several drafts and feedback from others
Revision allows writing to grow. Revising is not editing; revising is the act of "re-seeing" and of looking for those parts of the statement that would benefit from more explication, more (or less) vivid language, or even deleting parts that simply don't work to move the primary theme forward.
Similarly, feedback from others can help identify those parts of the statement that work well--and those that don't. Encourage your students to seek feedback on their personal statements from others beside yourself.

-Contains a catchy introduction that will keep the reader interested
It is important to recognize that admissions committees will read hundreds, maybe even thousands, of personal statements during the application review period. That means that a statement with a catchy introduction, one that gets right to the point and uses precise language and vivid imagery, is going to stand out more than a statement that is predictable and conventional in its opener.

-Transforms blemishes into positives
It's okay to have flaws! The personal statement is the student's chance to show how they have transformed blemishes. The reader does not want to hear complaints about poor grades or circumstances, but rather wants to know how the student has overcome them.

-Demonstrates your knowledge of the major/college
Applicants are not expected to know everything about the college or university to which they are applying. However, readers will want to know that the applicant has done their homework. For example, if the student writes a statement that states their interest in becoming an engineer, but the college does not have an engineering program, then the student hasn't done their homework.

-Exudes confidence
A good statement doesn't beg or brag. Colleges and universities want to admit the best students, and the best students are those who can demonstrate their ability to pursue their goals regardless of where they are admitted. Think of this as quiet confidence--the kind that reveals itself through the description of lifelong interests, sustained commitment, and/or perseverance in the face of adversity.

Keep these characteristics of a good statement in mind as you instruct your students. And be sure to help them avoid the typical college essay blunders.
COMMON MISTAKES

The mistake students make most often is not to look at what the questions are asking. Some prepare generic statements because they're applying to more than one school and it's a lot of work to do a personal statement for each school. On the other hand, generic statements tend to detract from the applicant when it's realized 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.

Other mistakes include:

- Grammar and punctuation.
- Misspelling the university name or program name.
- Too much information or using too many (big) words.
- Submitting handwritten or unfinished statements.
- Failing to show personality, uniqueness, diversity or individuality.
- Including gimmicky quotations, vague language, clichés, cuteness, and overly fancy vocabulary.
- Overuse of humor.
- Exceeding word or page limits.

STRUCTURE & LENGTH

The admissions application guidelines should dictate how long they prefer the piece to be but some do not. If the latter is the case, try to keep it from 500-800 words, or even better, five solid paragraphs. This gives room for the introduction, conclusion and three supporting paragraphs of varying topics to back up the statement’s theme or conflict resolution story threaded expertly and subtly throughout.

A typical two-page personal statement will consist of the following:

- An introductory paragraph that provides the statement’s controlling theme.
- 2-4 body paragraphs that develop the statement’s theme through examples and detailed experiences and build upon each other. The final body paragraph will contain the most poignant information.
• A conclusion that widens the lens and wraps up the statement without summarizing or repeating what has already been written.

FIVE EXAMPLE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS ESSAY PROMPTS

1. The personal statement is carefully considered in the admission selection process. This is the opportunity to provide more about yourself and your goals or interest in a particular field of study, your readiness for college, preparedness for the major, as well as your activities, accomplishments, and work history. Explain any personal experience, responsibilities and/or challenges that have impacted you or your academic achievements and/or your choice of career. Please be as detailed as possible. Please write your statement on a separate piece of paper (limit response to 2 sides of paper) and attach to the application. (University of Illinois Chicago)

2. Recall an occasion when you took a risk that you now know was the right thing to do. (University of Pennsylvania)

3. What has been your most profound or surprising intellectual experience? (Duke University)

4. What characteristics of Penn, and yourself, make the University a particularly good match for you? Briefly describe how you envision your first year in college. How will your presence be known on campus? (University of Pennsylvania)

5. Pose a question of your own, the answer to which you believe will display your best qualities as a writer, thinker, visionary, social critic, sage, sensible woman or man, citizen of the world, or future citizen of the University of Chicago. (University of Chicago)
QUESTIONS TO STIMULATE THE WRITING PROCESS

- 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 ACT or SAT 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 the program—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?
Example

Personal Statements
EXAMPLE #1

Give Goth a Chance
(from http://collegeapps.about.com/od/essays/a/college-personal-essay-goth.htm)

When I sat down to write this essay, I tried, as my high school English teacher always instructed, to imagine the audience for my writing. The more I thought about it, the more I pitied the college admissions screeners who would be reading a thousand essays on diversity. Along with the expected takes on race and ethnicity, how many of those essays would present their authors as outcasts, loners, kids who didn’t fit in at his or her school? How could I present myself as someone unique and interesting—strange, even—without falling prey to the cliché of the self-pitying social misfit?

Let me be direct: in some ways, I am the antithesis of what one might picture as a student who contributes to campus diversity. I am white, middle-class, and heterosexual; I have no physical handicaps or mental challenges apart from a tendency towards sarcasm. But when I receive college brochures picturing smiling, clean-cut teens dressed in the latest from Abercrombie & Fitch and lounging on a blanket in the sun, I think, those people are not like me.

Simply put, I am a Goth. I wear black, lots of it. I have piercings and ear gauges and tattoos. My hair, naturally the same sandy blonde that the rest of my family shares, is dyed jet, sometimes highlighted in streaks of purple or scarlet. I rarely smile and I don’t do sun. If I were inserted into those brochure photographs of typical college students, I would look like a vampire stalking her wholesome prey.

Again, I am imagining my reading audience, and I can almost see my readers’ eyes roll. So you’re a little weird, kid. How does that contribute to campus diversity? Well, I think I contribute plenty. Diversity goes beyond the physical; race or ethnicity might be the first things one thinks of, but really, it is a question of what makes someone the person that he or she is.
Diversity might be considered in terms of economic or geographical background, life experiences, religion, sexual orientation, and even personal interests and general outlook. In this respect, my Goth identity contributes a perspective that is far different from the mainstream. Being Goth isn’t just about physical appearance; it’s a way of life that, like any other, includes not only individual tastes in music, literature, and popular culture, but also particular beliefs about philosophy, spirituality, and a range of other human issues.

To give just one specific example, I am planning to major in Environmental Studies, and while it might seem odd to picture a ghoulishly-dressed girl who adores the natural world, it was my Goth outlook that led me to this academic interest. I read voraciously, and am drawn to subject matter that is somewhat dark; the more I read about humanity’s impact on the planet and the near-apocalyptic dangers posed by global climate change, pollution, overpopulation, the manipulation of the food supply and other environmental threats, the more interested I became, and the more determined that I should become involved. I, along with other members of my school’s Environmental Club, started a campus recycling program, and lobbied our superintendent to install in all classrooms power strips that are used to easily shut down equipment such as printers and computers at the end of the day, thereby conserving energy and generating significant savings for our school. I was drawn to this dark subject matter of environmental crisis, not to wallow in it or savor the Schadenfreude, but to change it and make the world a better place.

I know Goths look a little funny, as we wear our ebony trench coats in seventy-degree weather. I know we seem a little odd as we gather in shady nooks to discuss the latest episode of True Blood. I know professors may sigh as we swell the enrollments of poetry and art classes. Yes, we’re different. And we—I—have a lot to contribute.
EXAMPLE #2
No Title
(from http://collegeapps.about.com/od/essays/a/supplemental-application-essay-oberlin.htm)

I visited 18 colleges over the past year, yet Oberlin is the one place that most spoke to my interests. Early in my college search I learned that I prefer a liberal arts college to a larger university. The collaboration between the faculty and undergraduate students, the sense of community, and the flexible, interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum are all important to me. Also, my high school experience was greatly enriched by the diversity of the student body, and I am impressed by Oberlin’s rich history and its current efforts connected to inclusiveness and equality. To say the least, I’d be proud to say I attended the first coeducational college in the country.

I plan to major in Environmental Studies at Oberlin. After my campus tour, I took some extra time to visit the Adam Joseph Lewis Center. It’s an amazing space and the students I chatted with spoke highly of their professors. I became truly interested in issues of sustainability during my volunteer work in the Hudson River Valley, and everything I’ve learned about Oberlin makes it seem the ideal place for me to continue exploring and building upon those interests. I am also impressed by Oberlin’s Creativity and Leadership Project. I’ve been a bit of an entrepreneur ever since second grade when I made a dollar producing and performing The Runaway Bunny for my extended family. I’m drawn to a program that supports the move from classroom learning to creative hands-on, real-world applications.

Finally, as the rest of my application clearly demonstrates, music is an important part of my life. I’ve been playing the trumpet since fourth grade, and I hope to continue performing and developing my skills throughout college. What better place than Oberlin to do so? With more
performances than days in the year and a large group of talented musicians in the Conservatory of Music, Oberlin is an ideal place for exploring my love of both music and the environment.