Writing a Personal Statement

For most applications, you will be asked to include a personal statement. Often, the program you’re applying for will ask for specific elements to be included in this document. If that is the case, make sure you are answering those specific questions in your statement.

The purpose of a personal statement is to:
- sell yourself as an applicant.
- emphasize your strengths.

Content

- What should be included?
The personal statement should include three major components: 1. why you are interested in the job or program you are applying for, 2. your strengths, and 3. how you would benefit the school/company. You could also discuss your short and long-term goals and explain how they relate to the company you are applying to.

An important note: most students overemphasize component 1. Describing how you became interested in medicine, nursing, etc. is valuable, but it must be balanced with the other components. The goal is to sell yourself as a candidate rather than just describe your motivations.

- What topics should not be covered?
We suggest the following rule: No stories without lessons; no lessons (or abstract virtues) without a concrete example. In other words, if you tell a story or anecdote, finish it by explaining how it makes you a better candidate: “Because of this experience, I am more willing to listen to patients.” If you name a quality that you have, provide an example to demonstrate it: “I am very knowledgeable in the field of internal medicine, especially since beginning my internship.

Organization

You need to present your best attributes clearly and simply; poor organization will confuse readers and make them stop reading.

- How should you arrange the topics you want to include?
Obviously, this question is subjective; there is no single formula to follow that will effectively communicate your ideas. We suggest printing your personal statement and marking every time you use one of the three components. If you have a long string of 1s, you should ask yourself, “How do these things demonstrate one of my strengths?”
• Should the personal statement be chronological? What are the benefits and drawbacks?
Many students organize their personal statements as a personal history—spending paragraphs separately on high school, college, experiences after their undergraduate degree, etc. This is also called a narrative style.

Benefits: it is easy or fun to read, since it’s similar to a story; it provides a narrative that makes you appear more human and sympathetic.

Drawbacks: this structure does not emphasize your strengths; because it’s widely used, it can be predictable and easy to overlook.

• Should you have a thesis statement? Where in the paper? What should be in it?
A thesis statement is the single strongest declaration of your argument. In a personal statement, your argument is essentially “Accept me because ____,” so the thesis statement is a brief list of your strengths. Traditionally, it appears at the end of the introductory paragraph. The thesis statement tells the reader what’s coming next and plainly states your argument early in the personal statement.

It is not necessary to have a thesis statement in the personal statement, but we recommend it. At the least, we suggest writing a thesis statement, even if you don’t use it. It can be very helpful to your writing process to phrase your argument in a single statement.

• How should you introduce and conclude?
As mentioned, the introduction should contain the thesis statement. Another way to think of this is a “forecast” statement, which explains what topics you will be covering in the body of the personal statement. Before that, it could include a brief story or example to illustrate something that you plan to emphasize. You could also briefly explain your interest in the field you’re applying to, even if you aren’t using a chronological format throughout.

In the conclusion, you could connect your strengths to the particular program you’re applying to. If possible, name a particular staff member, professor or researcher whose interests match yours. This demonstrates that you’ve researched the program thoroughly.

Many students begin to speak generally in the conclusion, saying “A good doctor is ____” and moving away from their qualifications. The problem here is that you’re moving away from your strengths at the end of the document, and it’s important to leave your readers with the points you want them to remember about you.