

PERSONAL STATEMENTS

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The personal statement is your chance to show you are unique and desirable. What makes you tick? What excites you? How did you get that way?

Colleges try to achieve well-rounded *classes*; most are not looking for well-rounded *individuals*. They attempt to balance their classes in personalities and interests. A highly varied class creates a dynamic community.

To compete, ***you need to package yourself in a unique way***. Highlight your character and skills. Do not be afraid to sound unusual. In the immortal words of Edward Fiske, "You may just be the left-handed tuba player they are looking for."

While telling your story, keep it real. It is easy to spot fabrications.

1. HOW ARE THEY USED?

Classic Review. First, applications are scored on test performance plus GPAs. Acceptable applications are then separated into upper, middle, and lower thirds based on these scores - most schools want students from each third. Applications within each third are evaluated against each other. Activities and employment are considered next. Essays are considered last. The essay is **the tie-breaker** between you and others that have similar attributes in your third.

Holistic Review. At some schools (UC Berkeley, UCLA, Princeton...), each student application is read start to finish by one admissions officer. He evaluates test scores, GPA, activities, and the Essay together. The essay has a much greater bearing in this type of review.

2. REMEMBER YOUR AUDIENCE: ADMISSIONS OFFICERS ARE DEDICATED BUT ALSO CAN BE TIRED, BORED, AND CRANKY.

Admissions officers can be pushed to the edge of sanity with an impossible workload. Imagine reading 3,000 to 5,000 essays in two months. Much of the reading is done at home after hours. As deadlines draw near,

admissions officers may work all night. **You must try to be original and worth reading at 2:00AM.**

3. WHAT ARE COLLEGES LOOKING FOR?

With intelligence as a given, the single most valued attribute is **willingness to work hard**. Most schools are looking for **"do-ers"**, people who make things happen.

Essays also must reflect **heart**. Admissions officers are trying to get to know the real you -- your true passions, dreams, and quests in your own sincere voice.

Each of us has many possible stories. Choose one that will allow you to demonstrate desirable attributes. Again, never try to make something up or write what you think they wish to read. Authenticity is key.

If you have the "slacker" profile (low grades plus high test scores), you need to use your personal statement to undo this image.

4. HIGHLIGHT SOMETHING UNIQUE ABOUT YOU.

Tell a story that demonstrates a desirable attribute or shows how you differ from

the other 25,000 applicants. Consider this introduction:

"I collect arrowheads not Airheads", I explain to my classmates. Sometimes my hobby is a source of confusion. Many are familiar with the Airhead candy available for the fee of 25 cents. Arrowheads, on the other hand, are more difficult to find, especially if one avoids gift shops. There is generally hiking involved. Mud, of course, comes into play. A 9,000-foot peak or two may intervene. These are just small inconveniences on the hunt. (Student admitted to Williams College)

Odd beginning? This student demonstrates dedication and willingness to undergo hardship to achieve her goals. Also, she sounds more than a little quirky, interesting, and, most importantly, **memorable** in a sea of essays.

5. **SHOW - DON'T JUST TELL**

In the above example, the student does not **say** she is dedicated, she **demonstrates** that she is dedicated. Try to put your reader into the action, feeling, or setting of your essay. Bring him into the moment. Close your eyes and picture an experience, then describe what you see and feel. Use **sensory detail**, but avoid a "flowery" style.

Poor example: *I believe that I can make the world a better place. Last summer I volunteered with my church group to distribute eyeglasses to villagers in Costa Rica. It was very moving and rewarding.*

Better example: *As part of my church group, I spent three weeks in Costa Rica distributing eyeglasses to the most grateful people I ever met. I will never forget the wonder of one woman when she looked in the mirror; it was the first time she had ever seen her own face. Her expressions of surprise and*

recognition were so naked and genuine that I was overwhelmed. After this experience, how can I take simple luxuries for granted?

6. **THE FIRST TWO LINES OF THE ESSAY ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT**

Admissions officers are in a hurry. Unlike your teachers who attempt to read your every word, admissions officers *may not take the time*. If the first two lines of the essay fail to engage, the reader may throw it over his shoulder and move on to the next one. Any essay that begins, "I was born in Iowa in 1990," is doomed, doomed, doomed.

Start with a **hook**, a provocative statement designed to grab attention. The best hooks provide the reader with a visual image. Here are three great beginnings from last year:

As I watched the orange Maserati purr across the screen in the Tom Cruz movie, I knew I had to become an engineer. It was the first time I realized that engineering could be art. (Student admitted to UC Berkeley)

Can ducks and chickens mate? This and other crazy questions loomed large in my five-year-old mind. Shortly after the feathers settled from my noisy experiment, my parents gave me my first science set. I don't know if the poultry or I was more thankful. I have been fascinated with biology ever since. (Student admitted to UCLA)

They had mud on their clothes. The five year olds had been helping their parents in the fields since dawn and now milled around the market place looking for customers. Their world was bounded by mud and markets. I would be one of them if my parents had not encouraged me to learn English. With an American education, I can return to Thailand to help children have

a better future. (Student admitted to UC Berkeley)

7. USE SHORT, EVOCATIVE TOPIC SENTENCES FOR EACH PARAGRAPH.

If the admissions officer likes the introduction, he will scan the essay's topic sentences to determine the direction of the essay. Good topic sentences make scanning easy for tired eyes. If the topic sentences offer a clear and logical progression of ideas, he **may** read the entire essay. Use at least three paragraph breaks per page - large blocks of writing are daunting. Also, put your best ideas up front. If you start slow and grow to a point, the admissions officer may miss your best ideas.

8. GO A MILE DEEP, NOT A MILE WIDE

Narrow your topic, and explore it completely. Do not try to tell everything about yourself in 500 words. This is not the place to rehash your entire resume. Choose one experience or theme to enhance the package of your grades and test scores.

9. ACTION VERBS ARE YOUR FRIENDS; ADJECTIVES ARE YOUR ENEMIES

Action words bring energy and momentum to writing - they involve the reader. Because adjectives slow reading and waste word count, they should be used as sparingly as exclamation points. After drafting your essay, go back and cross out the adjectives. Next, re-write using as many action verbs as possible.

Draft: *I did not like following the same, rutted trails that wound through the shady pine trees on my long hikes through the Sierra Nevada Mountains.*

Re-write: *At times, hiking takes me off the path, and I scramble over rocks, sidle between trees, and dash through creeks to find my way.*

10. A LIST OF DON'TS

- Don't brag about what a wonderful or brilliant person you are; present accomplishments as part of personal growth stories.
- Don't write about others (father, mentor, etc); write about yourself
- It's fine to write about a personal tragedy, but don't have a tone of "Oh poor me". Instead, use it to illustrate personal growth.
- Don't sound elitist or above the process
- Don't waste word count in complementing the college
- Don't go out of your way to use big words; be natural
- Don't write a classic 5 paragraph essay; write an organized narrative.
- Unless specifically directed, don't pull out some dusty quote and write about it. Something personal is always better.
- Don't write about experiences that indicate you are rich or privileged.

11. A LIST OF DOs

- Be humble; you may be brilliant, but you also have much to learn
- Be sincere
- Show energy and enthusiasm
- Be interesting
- Be expressive
- Be quirky or unique
- Be vulnerable and admit weakness; show personal change and understanding of life's lessons
- Show how you see the world and your place in it
- Research specific programs or professors and explain why you wish to work with them.
- Show how you will fit into the university community- what do you have to offer them?