

# Personal Statement



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The **personal statement** is often the only part of your application where you are able to tell your story in your own words. Personal statements are particularly valued by admissions committees, so the essay itself should be thoughtful and well-written. Be sure to emphasize anything important that the committee should know about you.

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## ORGANIZE YOUR THOUGHTS:

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Clear writing is the result of clear thinking. Read each question carefully and think critically about what you would like to say in your response.

- This is a short essay, so be highly selective. Consider which two or three points you wish to impress upon the reader as you answer the questions.
- Stick to those few points!
- This statement reflects your priorities, and the organization of your piece will reflect the organization of your thinking.
- Each paragraph should deal with only one main idea; each sentence should lead naturally to the next. The logical flow of ideas should be clear, with movement and progression from one sentence to the next.
- Write in an active voice, as if you're having a conversation with the graduate admissions committee. "I am very interested..." or, "At Hampshire College, my thesis research..."

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## CAUTIONS:

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- Respond to the specific questions/prompts for each school, as they often vary between institutions.
- Read the web pages for each program you apply to carefully. Sometimes further information about the essay (or even a different set of questions) are provided there, rather than with the general graduate application essay prompts.
- Be careful not to write your essay as if it were a retrospective, i.e., "I have dreamt of being a marine biologist since I was seven. Then in middle school I went on a whale watch and it was confirmed. Then I studied this. Then I studied that..." In this example, there are too

many details about the writer's developmental process, and it initially presents the writer as a seven-year-old. If you do choose to tell how your interests developed over time, make sure to write the account with maturity and support it with your later accomplishments.

- Follow the directions and answer the questions. If you are considering going over stated limits on the number of words or pages, call the school and ask how that would be seen; some schools are fine with essays that go over to a certain degree, but some will view that negatively. In terms of length, if no specific directions are given, the default is typically two pages, single spaced. If the limits are not stated, though, or you do plan to go over, the most prudent thing to do is to call the program and ask directly.
- You want to give the impression that you will fit in with the department/program to which you are applying. Hampshire students tend to be interdisciplinary in their approach to any study. However, if you are applying to a geography program, it needs to be clear why you are choosing geography and not urban studies; if applying to law school, why law? And which branch of legal studies do you feel called to?

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## WHAT TO INCLUDE

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- **Understand and explain yourself:**
  - Make it interesting, insightful, revealing; how is your story different?
  - Make it personal; possibly include information you rarely share with others.
  - Be analytical; assess your life and experiences more critically than usual.
  - Make it memorable; add drama (if appropriate) in the form of obstacles and challenges you have either faced or overcome.
- **Who you are:** More about your background and experiences than appears elsewhere in your application. What makes you tick? How are you different from other applicants in your field?
- **Exposure to the field:** accomplishments, experience: through paid or volunteer work, research, classes, seminars, workshops, etc.
- **Why this particular school or program:** The admissions committee wants to know that you did not apply randomly, but did your research and made an intelligent choice. Include information about any specific members of faculty that you may like to work with and why.
- **Your academic and career goals:** For most essays, you will be asked about these goals. Even if you are not 100% sure, give them an idea of your potential career paths and what you want to pursue in graduate school.

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## WHAT NOT TO INCLUDE AND WHERE TO EXERCISE CAUTION:

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- Activities and jobs from (or before) high school: In a graduate school essay, these will often sound juvenile.

- Editorial commentary: For example, “Lawyers should be...”
- Be aware and judicious when talking about areas of controversy, e.g., religion, politics, personal information.
- Complaints: Address a deficit with a positive spin. Center the importance of your growth, resilience and learning.

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## ESSAY WRITING TIPS

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- Be yourself, not just who you think the committee is looking for.
- Be careful not to be too general in your essay, make sure it is not generic/could be sent to any school out there. (Unless, of course, you are using a centralized application service and have no other choice but to write one general essay to send to multiple schools)
- Make sure that the information that you choose to include is interesting, relevant to your topic, and memorable.
- Rather than writing a simple list of accomplishments, you can reflect on said accomplishments. You will provide depth and self-awareness in your evaluation of experiences and the personal meaning of your accomplishments.
- As this is a personal statement, it is often appropriate—and useful—to include personal information as context for learning and growth. Make sure that the elements included are relevant to your plans for graduate study and your career.
- Write with a positive and upbeat tone; project confidence and enthusiasm. Reframe negativity as a positive statement. This is another opportunity to reflect on how far you’ve come and your ability to overcome future obstacles.
- Be clear about why you are interested and pursuing this particular school.
- Be honest! Are you being yourself? Are you revealing that self? Sometimes it can be helpful for the admissions committee to hear about your setbacks and what it took for you to rebound.

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## REFINE, SIMPLIFY, AND POLISH

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- When you have written a first draft, start the work of editing: refine, simplify and polish!
- Is any section, sentence, or word superfluous, ambiguous, apologetic, or awkward?
- Are you using active and strong verbs?
- Have you removed any apologies, complaints, or inflation of your accomplishments?
- Are you sure that each activity or interest mentioned supports one of the main ideas?
- Remember that your reader has a record of your activities and your transcript at hand; be sure to add qualitative information, and avoid being redundant.
- Write like an adult, a peer, and a potential contributor, someone they’d want in their academic community.

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**FEEDBACK AND PROOFREADING**

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Make sure to get feedback from a few trusted readers. Does the essay convey your strengths, passion, enthusiasm, uniqueness? How is your grammar? Do they notice any glaring errors? Concepts they wish you explained more?

**The final details:**

This statement will be the only part of the application that is in your own voice. It is important to make sure that it represents you well!

- Check and recheck your spelling, subject-verb agreement, tense, and overall syntax.
- Consider double spacing between paragraphs to avoid visual crowding.
- Proofread very carefully before you press send. We suggest that you let it rest for a day or two in order to proofread it once again when you are fresh. Reading your work out loud to yourself or to another person is a great way to catch errors and potentially awkward phrases.

**Remember: you are a serious student and both a thoughtful and interesting person. You have enjoyed a fabulous undergraduate education and have completed a DIV III project which helps you stand out. You will be an asset to your graduate program, and to your chosen profession. A beautifully prepared essay will confirm and present this to the application readers.**