Personal Statements

Personal Statements are one of the most difficult genres of writing. It’s hard to strike a balance between being humble and showing pride in your accomplishments and character. Here are some tips to follow so you can stand out from the crowd:

1. Avoid restating resume. Focus on what they can’t learn about you elsewhere.

   Many people try to turn their resume into narrative form going over what they learned from every important job or experience they’ve had. They’ve already seen your resume, but they haven’t seen the person outside of those bullet points. Use this as an opportunity to describe a specific triumph or eye-opening moment in your life that makes you truly unique and that shows you have honorable qualities to contribute to their program.

2. Show; Don’t tell. Use imagery and specific examples. Paragraphs that just say what you’ve done are similar to restating your resume.

   Instead of writing:
   “I volunteered at an animal shelter on weekends and summers for three years, and nothing was as rewarding as seeing a family connect with their new pet. This feeling led me to volunteer with a lobbying organization for the ethical treatment of animals.”

   Try:
   “As Jimmy picked up Fluffy, an old Siamese cat that everyone else had passed over, a goofy grin spread across his face when he heard her purring. My commitment to these animals—even the ones who seemed like they might not have a chance to find a family—had finally paid off. As we packed up the empty cages, the coordinator of Felines Forever told me he admired my dedication to this line of nonprofit work, and I was thrilled when he asked me to step into the position of Assistant Coordinator. I expanded this love for advocating for animals by spending the past three summers organizing events with two other nonprofit animal adoption agencies and working with the lobbying group, Fairness for Feathers, to petition Congress to investigate the mistreatment of chickens on poultry farms.”

   This paragraph a) paints a picture, b) discusses specific instances, c) names Jimmy, a cat breed, two organizations, and the job title of Assistant Coordinator, and d) uses more than one of the 5 senses (sight and sound).

3. Market yourself. It’s not about what the school can do for you. Research the school and program to determine what you can bring to the table and contribute to the academic community.

   Using this example above, you could describe your organization tactics as a volunteer and lobbyist and how that can be applied to their program.

   Your organization skills will work well for an administrative position in the campus chapter of the Association of Nonprofit Professionals.
Your experience as Assistant Coordinator demonstrates that you can mentor younger students in the campus outreach program to get high school students excited about volunteering.

Your lobbying work gave you grant writing experience and you won $1,000 from PETA to travel Washington D.C. to speak in front of the House Committee on Agriculture. You would love to get the funds to start a new project on campus to study how humane farming practices affect poultry consumer purchasing trends.

Now, not only can they see you succeeding in your schoolwork, but they can also see how you will contribute to the campus community. Attaching your name and future projects to their school would be a smart business decision.

4. **Don’t send in a generic personal statement.** Again, research will show your interest in the specific school and not just the area of study in general. Tailor your personal statement to each school.

   It is **vital** to mention the name of the school and the program you are applying to. In addition, it is **beneficial** to mention at least one of these: a club or organization on campus, a professor you would like to work with, a class you would like to take, or an ongoing research project you are interested in contributing to.

5. **Stay positive.** If you mention a failure or a flaw, show how you’ve grown.

   Don’t use self-deprecating humor. Don’t mention the negatives of your previous school or department. If you need to clarify a weakness in your application (e.g. a bad grade), demonstrate how you’ve improved and how you plan to continue to grow in that area.

   **Quick Tips:**
   - Avoid the word “passion.” It’s the word that is used most frequently in personal statements.
   - Avoid quotations, random lists, clichés, rhetorical questions, and absolute statements.
   - Triple-check spelling and grammar. Read it out loud. Read it backwards sentence by sentence from the bottom up.
   - Don’t say, “When I was young…”
   - Don’t lie or greatly exaggerate.
   - Write the essay in your own voice. Don’t let someone else write/rewrite it to sound better.

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Works Consulted:
UNC-Chapel Hill Writing Center ([http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/application-essays/](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/application-essays/)); Purdue University Online Writing Lab ([https://owl.english.purdue.edu/OWL/Resource/642/01/](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/OWL/Resource/642/01)); Dr. Rebecca Cantor’s Personal Statements Workshop (Azusa Pacific University 2014)