

Six tips for writing great personal statements

By Alexis Morgan (January 9, 2012)

Whether you're applying for an undergraduate school or trying to get into graduate programs, many applications require a letter of intent or personal statement. Personal statements are one of the most important parts of the application and sometimes the deciding factor for admission.

Personal statements give a better understanding of who you are, beyond the rigid constraints of the "fill-in-the-blank" application.

Like many around this time of the year, I am finishing my graduate school applications. Looking for advice and guidance, I decided to compare different schools' personal statement requirements and ask admissions offices for advice. Here's what I found:

1. Be yourself

The Columbia Graduate School for Journalism encourages students to write about family, education, talents or passions. They want to hear about significant places or events in your life; about books you have read, people you have met or work you've done that has shaped the person you have become.

2. Show diversity

Sean Carpenter, University of Southern California Student Services Associate and undergraduate student, reiterates the importance of differentiating yourself from other applicants.

"They want to see how you're different from all other applicants, especially through diversity. What makes you unique out of all the other applicants?" Carpenter said, "Tell things that has helped you grow as a person and built your character."

3. Do research and tailor each essay accordingly

"Do research to give concrete reasons why you're interested in particular program," Carpenter said. "Speak with a faculty member that you're interested in working with or doing research for and mention that in your statement. It would also be beneficial to say what classes you've taken that were relevant to the field of study."

4. Be concise and follow directions

Make sure you read the directions carefully. One of the biggest red flags for an admissions office are students who don't adhere to word limitations. Don't give them a reason to throw out your application.

Believe it or not, there is a way to say everything you want in a page or less. If you need some help, ask several faculty members to read over your essay and give you feedback.

5. Go beyond your resume, GPA and test scores

Many students worry about how their GPA and test scores will affect the admissions process. The personal statement is an opportunity to explain any strengths or weaknesses in your application — such as changes in major, low GPA or lack of experience. For instance, Reid was worried about not having a 4.0 GPA. Since Reid didn't have the perfect GPA, she explained what she did with her time to make up for that fact. Being on the Varsity rowing team and a Teach for America Corp member are great examples of how devoting her time to other things made an impact on her GPA.

6. Tell a story

"Nothing makes someone fall in love like a good story. It does not have to be the next Pulitzer winner," Reid said. "For college, one essay I wrote was about how I have often felt like my life was a movie and how Dirty Dancing (yes, the movie) changed my life. My sister who currently goes to Princeton even wrote about killing a fly!"

With this advice, your personal statement will be the highlight of your application. Good luck!

Source: <http://www.usatodayeducate.com/staging/index.php/toolbox/six-tips-for-writing-great-personal-statements>

Additional Sources: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01>

Personal Statement
School of Education
Master's of Education with an Emphasis in School Counseling

Broadening my horizons and gaining new experiences through education has been a passion of mine for most of my life. A deep respect for learning was instilled in me at a very early age by my mother, who is a teacher. Therefore, the educational environment was a place I greatly enjoyed and felt comfortable. However, it was not just learning in a classroom that I loved. I also valued the support and knowledge shared with me by family, teachers, and classmates. When I needed guidance, there was always someone willing to advise and to encourage me. These experiences were what led me to pursue a career in the field of education. I knew that I wanted to be able to impact the lives of others and be someone on whom others could rely. This realization was the impetus that spurred my journey towards a career in school counseling.

I obtained my Bachelor of Arts degree from Teacher's University in Secondary English Education. During my teaching internship experience, my seniors, though sometimes challenging, helped guide me to where I am now. They were in their final semester of high school and were all debating on where they wanted to go to college, what major they should choose, and what the college experience would ultimately be like. They were all so excited, yet wary of what their futures might hold. My students began approaching me with questions concerning college which led to intense and exciting conversations. It was through these discussions that I realized I wanted to be the one who helped guide these students towards their decisions regarding college. Therefore, I want to obtain my Master's degree in Education with an emphasis in School Counseling from Teacher's University.

Since beginning my career in Education, my passion for this field has only grown. My happiness is fueled by the wonderful students and colleagues I am able to work closely with each day. As I consider my future in Education, I desire to be in a position where I can make decisions that will benefit my institution, my colleagues, and my students. In order to do this, I know I will need to enhance my understanding and practice of administrative tasks. In education, it is important to understand what elements can affect an institution, such as the economy, global trends, and diversity. Teacher's University perfectly aligns with my educational and career goals because it is committed to enhancing a diverse society while utilizing research-based methods to further the counseling profession. I believe that by obtaining my Master's degree in Education with an emphasis in School Counseling, I will learn how to become a successful practitioner by gaining an understanding of how these factors influence the world of education and its population.

Finally, I wish to strengthen my skills as a leader, a professional, an educator, and as a person. After speaking with several of my fellow staff and education personnel, I believe that this program will be perfect for helping me to achieve my professional and personal goals. This degree would give me the ability to fulfill my dream of becoming a practitioner that can positively impact the lives of the students, parents, faculty, and staff. I am excited to begin this journey and see what the future holds for me in the field of education.