



Valparaiso University Writing Center *where talk is good.*

## *How to Write a Personal Statement for Grad or Professional School Applications*

### PLAN

Read each question carefully; underline key words like *explain, analyze, compare, 500 words* to make certain you respond as asked.

#### Analyze yourself before you write:

**Your Goal:** a polished statement that responds directly to the question or topic; a statement that presents specific facts or reasons; a statement that shows you are an interesting, thoughtful person who has clear explanations for career choices; a statement that reveals dimensions and information about you not available from other sources.

- What is distinctive about you?
- What might help them understand you or might set you apart from other applicants?
- What stimulated your interest in this field? When did you become interested? What has reinforced your interest?
- What have you learned from work experiences? Name ways work has contributed to your personal growth.
- What are your career goals?
- Can you document personal characteristics or special skills that will contribute to success in your field?
- Do any personal experiences relate to the profession?

- [PLAN](#)
- [DRAFT](#)
- [REVISE](#)
- [Links for further help.](#)

#### Find an angle:

Since your goal is a personal statement that stands out among others, try to find an interesting point-a hook-to make your statement arresting. Listing the same college courses or platitudes about the profession the committee has read a thousand times will only make your statement banal. As the Associate Dean for Admissions at Cornell University Medical School commented, "We look for originality because nine out of ten essays leave you with a big yawn. (Stelzer 81). So review your answers to your self-analysis questions to find a hook, theme, or focus for your statement.

### DRAFT

#### Open effectively: try one of these possibilities:

- A direct answer to the question
- Your principal goal or reason for applying
- Summary of how your interest grew in the profession
- Statement of personal philosophy; your response to a common belief
- your response to a current event or to a trend in the field
- A significant experience

#### Be selective about content:

The body of your statement should reveal what you know about the profession and refer to specific experiences that relate to the profession. Avoid sounding naive by being too idealistic; you may convey

ignorance about the true nature of the profession. Beware of platitudes:~I want to make a difference in the world."

### Use effective order:

#### Over-all organization:

- Inductive vs. deductive order for over-all organization
- Deduction makes statements and then provides support.
- Induction leads us to a conclusion by providing support first.
- Induction is harder to use effectively.

- **Order of facts, examples, reasons, or experiences:**

- Chronology-clear, but dull; beware of irrelevant detail; often buries best in middle, an unemphatic position

- Order of importance-helps you get to the point fast

- Topical-organizes around points you wish to cover

### Conclude effectively:

Tie your conclusion to the introduction. Avoid just summing up what you have already said clearly.

### EDIT RUTHLESSLY

Evaluate the *order and then the first paragraph*: If the essay seems ho-hum or begins too far back in your personal history, try dropping your first paragraph. Your second paragraph may be focused. Or try moving your final paragraph to the front; your conclusion might contain stronger statements than your original opening.

Strive to give your statement life by using a *style* propels readers forward. However, because you want to sound intelligent and sincere, you may unintentionally use a style that smacks of pseudo-sophistication. Long sentences, too many modified nouns and verbs (lots of adjectives and adverbs), multi-syllabic words where simpler ones will do create cumbersome sentences. They also take up valuable space you could devote to other points. Follow the steps below to streamline your style and improve tone.

- **Choose good verbs: use action verbs and avoid parts of the verb "to be" known as linking verbs (am, is are, etc.):**
- Use who/what-does-what sentences. This will ensure you use active, not passive voice. In other words, the subject of the sentence should be doing the action of the verb.

#### weak:

- The decision to enter medicine was made early when. . . (passive)
- The reason I have chosen law is that I . . .(lackluster and wordy)
- There are several reasons I want to get a masters in counseling. . . (slow)
- **improved--note the replacement of the linking verb with an action verb:**

I *want* to practice medicine because . . . (direct)

Practicing law *will allow* me to . . . (direct)

A masters in counseling will provide the credentials I need for counseling adolescents with disabilities and give me experience in several clinical settings. (direct)

•  
**Eliminate most prepositional phrases; use possessives instead.**

•  
**Cut most adjectives and adverbs; choose better nouns and verbs instead.**

•  
**Use the shortest, simplest, but most specific word to avoid pretentious tone.**

•  
**Use emphatic positions:**

Since the most emphatic positions are the beginnings and endings of sentences and paragraphs, place information of greatest importance in these positions. Use a short sentence when you want great emphasis.

- **Avoid too many compound sentences. Instead, write complex sentences which express the relationships you mean: cause and effect, time and sequence.**

For more help, try these links.

- [from Cornell Career Services](#)
- [from Indiana University](#)
- [from Hamilton College Writing Center](#)



**Additions and corrections for this page may be directed to [Joyce.Hicks@valpo.edu](mailto:Joyce.Hicks@valpo.edu)**

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Page author: Joyce Hicks