

# The Personal Statement

## Writing Process & Approach

### Brainstorming Exercise 1: Outline major plot points of your personal statement

Use the following questions to begin plotting out your own story. Write a minimum of two sentences but no more than four for each prompt.

1. What first drew you to this field or research interest? Don't worry too much about an elaborate origins story, but consider if you had relevant habits as a kid, an interesting class freshman year, a travel experience, or something else that began to push you in this direction. Were you always heading this way, or did something specific happen to make you move toward this field?
2. Think about your experience with this field or research interest in college. How did your interest deepen or change during this time? How did it grow, switch directions, come into focus, or combine with other interests? This time probably wasn't entirely rosy, so what unexpected research, work-related, or personal obstacles did you have to overcome? This answer is really the meat of your "argument," and might say the most about you, so take the most time with this section.
3. If you were awarded this opportunity, what do you imagine you would do immediately after the terms of the award? A few years after that? This question is hard to answer, but try to be as specific as possible. Don't say you'll save the world, but do say how this experience/award might impact your remaining studies, what kind of position you want to hold, what kinds of problems you'd like to work on.
4. How does this opportunity connect #1, #2, and #3? What will you get out of the opportunity (besides money and prestige) and will make #3 possible? Why does this opportunity do this better than others out there? What can you get out of this opportunity that you can't really get anywhere else?

### Brainstorming Exercise 2: Tell us two stories

The two anecdotes should somehow relate to prompt #1 or prompt #2 in the preceding section. Your paragraphs should not exceed five sentences.

Personal statements often come to life with anecdotes. You might not use many in your actual statement, but it will help to have a few on hand. For this exercise, write two short (paragraph-long each) stories that help explain any part of your overarching story. Try to choose subjects that convey something about you--your passion for the subject, your ability to overcome challenges, your determination. Grab our attention with vivid details.

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### Questions to ask yourself before you write:

- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, and/or persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?