

Personal Statements and Application Letters

The process of applying for jobs, internships, and graduate/professional programs often requires a personal statement or application letter. This type of writing asks writers to outline their strengths confidently and concisely, which can be challenging.

Though the requirements differ from application to application, the purpose of this type of writing is to represent your goals, experiences and qualifications in the best possible light, and to demonstrate your writing ability. Your personal statement or application letter introduces you to your potential employer or program director, so it is essential that you allow yourself enough time to craft a polished piece of writing.

1) PREPARE YOUR MATERIALS

Before you sit down to write, do some preparation in order to avoid frustration during the actual writing process. Obtain copies of documents such as transcripts, resumes and the application form itself; keeping them in front of you will make your job of writing much easier. Make a list of important information, in particular names and exact titles of former employers and supervisors, titles of jobs you have held, companies you have worked for, dates of appropriate work or volunteer experiences, the duties involved etc. In this way, you will be able to refer to these materials while writing in order to include as much specific detail as possible.

2) WRITE A FIRST DRAFT

After you have collected and reviewed these materials, it is time to start writing. The following is a list of concerns that writers should keep in mind when writing a personal statement/application letter.

Answer the Question: A major problem for all writers can be the issue of actually answering the question being asked. For example, an application might want you to discuss the reason you are applying to a particular program or company. If you spend your entire essay or letter detailing your qualifications with no mention of what attracted you to the company or department, your statement will probably not be successful. To avoid this problem, read the question or assignment carefully both as you prepare and again just prior to writing. Keep the question in front of you as you write, and refer to it often.

Consider The “I” Problem: This is a personal statement; using the first person pronoun “I” is acceptable. Writers often feel rather self-conscious about using first person excessively, either because they are modest or because they have learned to avoid first and second person (“you”) in any type of formal writing. Yet in this type of writing using first person is essential because it makes your prose more lively. Using third person can result in a vague and overly wordy essay. While starting every sentence with “I” is not advisable, remember that you and your experiences are the subject of the essay.

Avoid Unnecessary Duplication: Sometimes a writer has a tendency to repeat information in his or her personal statement that is already included in other parts of the application packet (resume, transcript, application form, etc.). For example, it is not necessary to mention your exact GPA or specific grades and course titles in your personal statement or application letter. It is more efficient and more effective to simply mention academic progress briefly (“I was on the Dean’s List” or “I have taken

numerous courses in the field of nutrition”) and then move on to discuss appropriate work or volunteer experiences in more detail.

Make Your Statement Distinctive: Many writers want to make their personal statements unique or distinctive in some way as a means of distinguishing their application from the many others received by the company or program. One way to do this is to include at least one detailed example or anecdote that is specific to your own experience—perhaps a description of an important family member or personal moment that influenced your decision to pursue a particular career or degree. This strategy makes your statement distinctive and memorable.

Keep It Brief: Usually, personal statements are limited to 250–500 words or one typed page, so write concisely while still being detailed. Making sure that each paragraph is tightly focused on a single idea (one paragraph on the strengths of the program, one on your research experience, one on your extracurricular activities, etc.) helps keep the essay from becoming too long. Also, spending a little time working on word choice by utilizing a dictionary and a thesaurus and by including adjectives should result in less repetition and more precise writing.

Personal Statement Format

As mentioned before, the requirements for personal statements differ, but generally a personal statement includes certain information and can follow this format (see following model).

Introduction

Many personal statements begin with a catchy opening, often the distinctive personal example mentioned earlier, as a way of gaining the reader’s attention. From there you can connect the example to the actual program/position for which you are applying. Mention the specific name of the program or company, as well as the title of the position or degree you are seeking, in the first paragraph.

Detailed Supporting Paragraphs

Subsequent paragraphs should address any specific questions from the application, which might deal with the strengths of the program/position, your own qualifications, your compatibility with the program/position, your long-term goals or some combination thereof. Each paragraph should be focused and should have a topic sentence that informs the reader of the paragraph’s emphasis. You need to remember, however, that the examples from your experience must be relevant and should support your argument about your qualifications.

Conclusion

Tie together the various issues that you have raised in the essay, and reiterate your interest in this specific program or position. You might also mention how this job or degree is a step towards a long-term goal in a closing paragraph. An application letter contains many of the same elements as a personal statement, but it is presented in a business letter format and can sometimes be even shorter and more specific than a personal statement. An application letter may not contain the catchy opening of the personal statement but instead includes detailed information about the program or position and how you found out about it. Your application letter usually refers to your resume at some point. Another difference between a personal statement and an application letter is in the conclusion, which in an application letter asks for an interview.

3) REVISING THE PERSONAL STATEMENT/APPLICATION LETTER

Because this piece of writing is designed to either get you an interview or a place in a graduate school program, it is vital that you allow yourself enough time to revise your piece of writing thoroughly. This revision needs to occur on both the content level (did you address the question? is there enough detail?) and the sentence level (is the writing clear? are the mechanics and punctuation correct?). While tools such as spell-checks and grammar-checks are helpful during revision, they should not be used exclusively; you should read over your draft yourself and/or have others do so.

SAMPLE

As a child I often accompanied my father to his small coin shop and spent hours watching him work. When I was older, I sometimes set up displays, waited on customers, and even balanced the books. This experience instilled in me the desire to own and manage my own business someday, yet I understand that the business world today is more complex. This complexity requires more education, and with that in mind, I am applying to the Master's of Business Administration program at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB).

In addition to my helping out in my father's business, I have had numerous other work experiences that further enhance my qualifications for this program. My resume enumerates the various positions I have held at Kerasotes Theaters, Chili's restaurants, and Indiana University's new Student Recreational Sports Center (SRSC), and what all of these positions have in common is an emphasis on serving the public effectively. Further, as an assistant manager at the Showplace 11 and a staff coordinator at the SRSC, I have gained valuable expertise in managing employees and creating work schedules. Both of these positions have allowed me to develop my sales and people skills, which are extremely important in an increasingly service-driven marketplace.

Not all of my work experience has been as a paid employee. Part of my volunteering experience at Middleway House, the local battered women's shelter, involved extensive work on computers, including word processing, organizing databases and creating spreadsheets. Also, I recently participated in an internship program for academic credit with the Eli Lilly corporation in the personnel division. As a management intern, I was able to watch the workings of a major corporation up close and would like the opportunity to combine my experiences with the theoretical background available in the MBA program at IUB, with its emphasis on computers, marketing and human resources.

My successful internship is one element of my overall academic success as an undergraduate here at IUB, yet I have also made time for a variety of extracurricular activities, including working for my sorority and competing in intramural basketball. My positive experiences here have resulted in my desire to stay in Bloomington to continue my academic endeavors; furthermore, continuing my education here would allow me to make important business contacts, with the career goal of opening my own computer consulting firm in the Midwest.

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http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/personal_statement.shtml