

# WRITING THE PERSONAL STATEMENT: SOME TIPS

by

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*“Writing is hard work  
and bad for the health.”*

—E. B. White

Fretting over your personal statement? Fussing about ways to proceed? Then take a break and read some helpful hints from Berkeley, UCI, UCLA and other great schools. These tips derive from meetings over the years with key admissions personnel, as well as from presentations at the National Collegiate Honors Council conference.



I hope you don't think of your essay as something you can do well at the last minute. It takes thought. And time. Teachers who offer workshops in the personal statement advise you to allow several weeks (some say *months*) to prepare it. So let's get started!

When you begin, first consider your purpose—admission or scholarship. Then orient your statement accordingly.

So many bland essays cross their desks that readers on university committees can go glassy-eyed just reading the first paragraph. So make yours irresistible! Begin with an intriguing quotation or attention-getting (but not bizarre) statement. Or relate an anecdote illuminating your reason for pursuing the school or course of study you've chosen. If standing on a mountaintop one cool dawn and releasing a golden eagle back into the wild

inspired your decision to become a veterinarian, then make that flight come alive. Write in pictures when you can.



Let your readers see who you are, because they really do want to know. Do you love to fence or play the lute? Tell them. Do you strum your guitar and sing your own songs to the inmates at Elysian Elder Care? Let your readers know. Did you just finish a screenplay about the life of Ayaan Hirsi Ali? That makes you exceptional. Show your readers what makes *you* stand out from all the others with stratospheric GPAs, cool jobs, obstacles overcome, and eons of community service.

As you might guess, *every* successful student is “dedicated to education.” You don't need to tell your readers that you are too; your grades and involvement in honors manifest your commitment. But you must show them who you are: what you dream and do that distinguishes you from everyone else.



Do you conduct chemistry experiments in your garage? Are you driven to master string theory? Did you teach yourself Japanese . . . just because? Did you decide on college when galvanized by an insight while completing some military or business task? Then

describe it. Whatever best reveals *you*, let them know.

“We want to know their *passion*,” says Joan Lippman, Associate Dean of Admission at Stanford University. So tell them. *Why* do you want an education—at the school you selected? What do you plan to do with your degree? What do you intend to contribute to that school? to our world?

***“What do you intend to contribute to the world? Tell them . . .”***

Has a life-changing epiphany about an idea or your future given you new direction? While you were jogging to your second job, did images from a documentary on Mali fill your mind and convince you to ramp up the fight against AIDS? At your animal shelter job did you sense that doing canine research could yield ideas about curtailing gang violence? While cleaning the beaches do you obsess over poli sci and ecology because you want to become the governor who restores California's coastline? Then let your readers know that. Tell them your dreams. And tell them how an education at *their* university can further your goals.



Do not be shy about your achievements. You don't want to sound like you are boasting, but you do need to highlight your accomplish-

ments. Use personal narrative, explanations, and testimony from others to illustrate your points. And be specific: *details* help your readers envision what you're talking about. Don't just say, "During my summer on the island I helped the villagers." Say: "I determined from my survey that we needed a system to deliver potable water. After we built it, I went from hut to hut collecting data which showed that in two months cholera cases had declined by 64%. The villagers smiled and told me the project worked because I had *chispa*—spark, an energetic spirit."



It's a good idea to recount a significant honors experience. Did you have an *aha!* moment in an honors seminar? Have you discovered in your Honors Speech class that you have a flair for leadership? Did you turn the job of Honors Council member into a major contribution to your fel-

***"Let them know you've been an honors student."***

low students? If so, describe what you did, and state what you learned from doing it.

Angela Skrivanich, Transfer Specialist at UC Berkeley, urges you to tell about an *intellectual* experience you value—some book, concept, experiment or teacher that set you to pondering. Mentioning an honors high point, she notes, reminds the committee that you have been an *honors* student, which is a significant predictor of academic

success. That's one reason Betty Glick, Associate Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education at UCLA, gives special consideration to applications by graduates of qualified honors programs.

So do others, including the Humanities Academic Counselor at UCI, Raschel Greenberg. A former UCI-HTCC liaison who holds the HTCC consortium in high esteem, she advises you to state that you were a presenter at the March scholarship conference (assuming you were, of course!), because people are favorably impressed by that achievement. By the way, she adds, remember to write out the name: Honors Transfer Council of California.



Take care with your writing. Do not exceed the word limit, not even by one. But do use fresh phrasing—your *own* words, please. Don't put off your readers with stale thoughts and cliché expressions. Apt, fresh metaphors or similes, when they *clarify* your points, add more pizzazz than do peppers to pizza. So fire up that imagination of yours! Aim to write so compellingly that your readers *delight* in your first paragraph, and are entranced all the way to the end.



At some point you'll want to ask a bright, critical friend to evaluate your essay for you. Frequently. And since

even the best of us goof up, scrutinize his or her critiques. Because if you spell weirdly or ravage grammar, if you write vaguely or fail to heed instructions, then all is lost. Even if you're the best qualified applicant, careless errors will land your statement in the reject pile. So: follow *every* instruction *precisely*. Proofread with the zeal of a zealot. And ask your reader friend to be unsparing. . .

As often as you need to, set your essay aside for a few days, then come back to it. Try re-reading it as if you were on the committee. If that means you revise it ten or twenty times, don't feel like the lone writer—your competition is rewriting, late into the night, right along with you!

After you've gone to bed satisfied that you've given it your all, the next morning inspect your essay one last time, paying attention to the tiniest of details—including how neat it looks. (Appearance may seem trivial, but it matters.) Then send off your creation, pleased, we hope, in knowing that you really have done your very best.



To end on a cheery note, once you have finished tooting your own horn, why not treat yourself and that long-suffering friend of yours to a tasty, well-deserved celebratory brunch!



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