

HELPFUL HINTS FOR COMPLETING APPLICATIONS FOR FELLOWSHIPS, SCHOLARSHIPS AND GRADUATE SCHOOL

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DEFINING A PERSONAL STATEMENT

WHAT IS A PERSONAL STATEMENT?

A personal statement is:

- **A picture.** Your personal essay should produce a picture of you as a person, a student, and a potential scholarship, fellowship or graduate school recipient.
- **An invitation.** Your personal essay should "invite" the reader to get to know you personally. It makes you less of a stranger to the reader.
- ***Your story.*** **Your story is your brand.** Everyone has a story to tell, but not everyone tells it in a way that captivates the reader. Your goal is to become "memorable" to the reader. ***This is your opportunity to shine.*** Be honest, authentic and self-reflective in relating your story.

Your personal statement is the heart of your application.

A personal statement is *not*:

- **An academic paper with you as the subject.** The papers you write for class are typically designed to interpret data, reflect research, or analyze events/readings - all at some distance. In a personal statement, your goal is to close the distance between you and the reader. You must engage the reader on a more personal level and aim to have them remember you after they finish reading.
- **A résumé in narrative form.** An essay that reads like your résumé reveals very little about you. It is a wasted opportunity. Chances are the reader has already received your résumé and has reviewed your goals and accomplishments.
- **A journal entry.** While you may wish to draw on your experiences and observations in writing your essay, it should not read like a diary. Share what is relevant, using these experiences only if they provide a helpful context for your story. Include only what you are comfortable sharing. Remember, you may very well be asked to discuss what you have shared in an interview.
- **A plea for a scholarship/fellowship.** Your personal statement is not an invitation to "make your case" for being awarded a scholarship, fellowship or admission to graduate school. This may work against you with readers.

Most of all, a personal statement is **authentic**. It is the selection committee's first impression of you. It very often determines whether you are invited to interview. Do not make the mistake of trying to guess what the readers are looking for in your essay. Do not write what you think they want to hear. Answer the questions that are asked in the Personal Statement application. ***Remember - the readers want to get to know you.***

WRITING A WINNING PERSONAL STATEMENT

Writing an effective personal statement is difficult and rewarding at the same time. Be ready to commit to a process of self-reflection, effort, writing and rewriting to produce an outstanding personal statement. A compelling personal statement enables you to stand out in a field with other high-achieving students. It is your opportunity to overcome any "gaps" or inadequacies in your application. It can be the determining factor in the selection committee's decision to award you a scholarship/fellowship or graduate school admission rather than to hear your case.

Here are some guidelines:

- **Understand your motivation for applying and include in your essay.** Reflect on why you want this scholarship, fellowship or graduate school admission. Will it help you become a better person? A more effective leader? Will it enhance your personal, academic, and career experience?
- **Understand the goals of your personal statement.** The primary goal is to answer the questions asked in the personal statement outline and to secure an interview before the selection committee. An outstanding personal statement will not win the scholarship, fellowship, or graduate school admission for you, it will most likely guarantee you an interview. A poorly written essay will likely deny you the opportunity to interview.
- **Think strategically about yourself and your candidacy.** Ask yourself: "What are the most important characteristics, values, goals, ambitions, life experiences, and service activities that define who I am?" Decide which of these you wish to emphasize in your essay. Do not try to cover every aspect. Call of your self-brand development strategies to strengthen your essay and make it "memorable" in the eyes of the selection committee members.
- **Decide on a story line for your personal statement.** Discuss your idea for an essay with your editor/mentor and develop an informal outline. Arrive at your central theme that includes the general guidelines stated in the application. Relate experiences that are *relevant* to your central theme and that have been formative in your development. Bring out dimensions about yourself that are not obvious to the reader from your list of accomplishments and activities. Tell your story in an interesting, compelling, *authentic, and memorable* way. Remember your self-brand!
- **Read other winning personal statements.** This is one of the best ways to get a "feel" for a well-written personal essay.
- **Find an editor/mentor to work with you.** Keep in mind that an effective personal statement requires several drafts and editing. Choose someone knowledgeable about your field of study, essay writing and self-branding to serve as your editor. Collaborate with him/her through the whole process of writing - from the initial draft to the final completed statement. Remember that your editor should review your drafts for **content and structure** (grammar, spelling).
- **Explain "understandable" gaps or weaknesses.** If you have had any unfortunate circumstances that may negatively affect your eligibility for the scholarship, fellowship, or graduate school admission, this is your opportunity to explain it in a measured way. Don't be self-serving in your approach.

WRITING A WINNING PERSONAL STATEMENT DO'S AND DON'T'S

DO'S:

- After reading the application requirements for a personal statement, develop an outline for your narrative.
- Answer the questions asked in your personal statement. An effective personal statement combines what you want to say with what the personal statement in the application is asking of you. Stay on target by answering the application questions in your essay. Regardless of how well written your essay may be, it can work against you if you are not answering the questions that application poses.
- Write a compelling opening sentence for your opening paragraph and do the same for the first sentence of each paragraph.
- Be specific when referring to qualities, skills, accomplishments, and achievements that are relevant to your application.
- Adhere to the required word limit and any other directives for application submission. Statements that are too short or too long and don't fall within the guidelines can jeopardize your chances.
- Check and recheck the final draft of your personal statement for correct spelling and grammar. *Do not rely on SPELLCHECK or other computer programs for spelling and grammar. Use your editor for correct spelling and grammar.*
- Make sure your application packet, including your personal statement, is completed in full and legibly written for submission either online or, in rare cases, hard copy.

For online submissions:

- Choose a professional business font such as Calibri, Garamond, Bodoni and others. Do not use the outdated Times Roman font. Avoid using color in fonts. Stick to black.
- Font size should be consistent throughout the application. Twelve (12) font is usually the preference unless otherwise stated in the application guidelines.
- Make sure grammar and spelling are correct. Have your editor proofread one last time.
- Do not be redundant. If you underline a title or subtitle, do not bold it. If you prefer to bold titles and subtitles, do not underline.

- Make sure any file you submit is titled with your full name. Do not send a file named "Application" or "Essay". Title your resume file as well.
- Pay close attention to the online deadline for submission. Avoid sending your online application at the last minute.

For hard copy submissions

- There should be no erasures, cross-outs, and/or use of whiteout. The final draft should be printed on good quality paper that is clean and unwrinkled. Neatness makes a positive statement about you to the reviewers. Avoid different colored fonts. Always use black.
- Adhere to above-mentioned guidelines that apply to your application including all requested documentation accompanying the application and submission by the deadline. **If online applications are submitted five minutes after the deadline or hard copy applications are submitted half a day after the deadline, they will be rejected.**
- Strictly adhere to the deadline date. There are no exceptions! Requesting additional time can make a statement to reviewers about your organizational skills and/or motivation.
- Write simply and cleanly. Your personal statement should be well organized, neat, with a visually pleasing appearance and easy to read. Avoid colors in font. Always use black.
- Rely on nouns and active verbs rather than adjectives, adverbs, and passive verbs to carry the story.
- **EDIT, EDIT, EDIT. THEN EDIT AGAIN!**

DON'TS:

- Do not work on your personal statement without using an "editor".
- Do not choose an editor who cannot devote the time or who does not have the skill to help you complete your personal statement from beginning to end.
- Do not wait until the last day or week to write your personal statement.
- Do not write too much or too little.
- Do not write a "cheerleading" statement. A personal statement should focus on your specific strengths and achievements with examples of what you have done rather than vague references to yourself such as "I am enthusiastic" or "I am a hard worker." Qualify statements about yourself such as these by backing them up with specific examples of those strengths or achievements.

Stay away from qualifiers or imprecise words such as very, quite, rather, somewhat, often, interesting, etc.

- Do not write negative comments or criticisms about yourself or your institution. Although being honest is important, reviewers take negative comments very seriously. This could affect the overall ranking of your statement as part of your application.
- Do not rely on spell check for grammar and spelling. Work with your editor on every aspect of the content and structure of your personal statement.
- Do not lie, exaggerate, or overstate your accomplishments.
- Do not insert overused or popular quotations - it is like name-dropping. If you want to emphasize a point, use a quotation from literature, science, or philosophy to do so.
- Do not use flowery language, jargon, slang, profanity or emoticons.
- Use a measured approach if discussing the following topics in your essay- religion, family, adversity, injustices of life. Being authentic is an advantage but it is not necessary to communicate very personal or confidential information about yourself unless it has relevance to the theme of your essay.

EFFECTIVE LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Letters of Recommendation play a critical role in any scholarship, fellowship or graduate selection process. An outstanding letter of recommendation will advance your application. A poor letter of recommendation places you at a disadvantage in the competition. Students believe that the quality of letters is out of their hands and lies solely with the writer. *This is not so*. There are steps you can and *should* take to ensure that your letter of recommendation promotes your candidacy.

What *helps* in securing an outstanding letter of recommendation?

- **WRITERS WHO KNOW YOU VERY WELL.**
Letters that provide some context for how the writer knows you and for what period are very effective (e.g., two or more classes, working on a project, campus club, work, etc.).
- **WRITERS WHO CAN DEVOTE THE TIME TO WRITE A STRONG LETTER FOR YOU.**
Ask your writer: "Do you have the time, and do you feel you know me well enough to write a strong letter of recommendation on my behalf?" If the writer cannot do either, find another recommender.

- **LETTERS THAT OUTLINE YOUR STRENGTHS AND FOCUS ON YOUR SKILLS**
Writers who can describe your accomplishments in very specific terms and who can expound upon the skills that prove you a strong candidate for scholarships/fellowships or graduate school admission.
- **LETTERS THAT PROVIDE SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS**
including dates, times, locations of activities/titles of events and/or projects, awards, publications, research.
- **PERCENTAGES IN THE BODY OF THE LETTER WHENEVER POSSIBLE**
(e.g., "top 10% of students in my 20 years of teaching").
- **LETTERS THAT ARE THE ORIGINAL HARD OR ONLINE COPY AND ARE ONE PAGE AND A HALF IN LENGTH**
Remember, whether it is an online letter submission or a rare hard copy written letter, presentation counts. Poorly written letters in content and in format, too short (one paragraph) or too long (two pages) can jeopardize your candidacy. Even though you did not author the letter, you are still responsible for insuring the content and neatness.
- **ALWAYS ASK EARLY!** Request letters *at least* six weeks before the deadline date and continue to follow up with your recommender during the time leading up to the deadline. Requesting a letter in less than 3 weeks is inconsiderate and may result in the recommender not meeting the submission deadline.
- **ALWAYS HAVE AN ALTERNATIVE RECOMMENDER.** Sometimes recommenders agree to submit a letter for you, but they may not be able to follow through for some unforeseen circumstance. Sometimes, a recommender's letter is well written or strong enough to support your candidacy. To avoid pitfall that could jeopardize your application in the last stages of submission, choose an alternate recommender that you can rely on to submit a letter for you at the "last minute." Keep such a person on "stand by".
- **SEND A THANK YOU.** Be sure to write your recommenders (including your alternate) a thank you note and keep them updated on the status of your application.

EFFECTIVE LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

What hurts in securing a letter of recommendation?

- **INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPHS ABOUT THE INSTITUTION**
The letter should focus on you - not the history or ranking of the college.

- **LETTERS THAT ARE NOTHING BUT A SUMMARY OF YOUR APPLICATION**
- **LETTERS THAT USE ADJECTIVES LIKE "ENTHUSIASTIC" ARE NOT NECESSARILY EFFECTIVE.**
The focus should be on your ability, competence, and potential in specific terms - not cheerleading skills.
- **LETTERS THAT PROVIDE YOUR GRADE IN THE COURSE ONLY**
Readers can get this from a transcript review.
- **NEGATIVE COMMENTS OR CRITICISM ABOUT YOU OR THE INSTITUTION.**
Although being honest is important, selection committee members take criticism very seriously. If the writer insists on including criticism or negative comments about you or the institution you attend, find another qualified person to write a letter for you.
- **WRITERS WHO DO NOT REALLY KNOW YOU**
Your writer should know you well enough to support their statements about you.
- **LETTERS THAT ARE TOO SHORT OR TOO LONG (RECOMMENDED LENGTH 1 1/2 PAGES)**

TIPS FOR APPROACHING YOUR WRITER

You play a significant role in securing an effective letter of recommendation.

- Develop a list of your strengths, skills, activities, and accomplishments that are relevant to the application.
- Offer this list to your recommender writer when making your request.
- Have a copy of your personal statement on hand as well.
- Do not hand this list to your writer; rather, offer it as a suggestion during your initial discussion.

Remember: The key is your approach.

Be polite, pleasant, and professional in making your request

Once you have all the requirement materials for your application, ask your editor to proof read the entire application one more time.

Keep your sights on the goal.

Whether it is a scholarship or fellowship, an internship, graduate school, or a full time job, the goal is *to secure the interview*.

There is only one way to make that happen.

- An outstanding personal statement
- Effective letters of recommendation
- A winning résumé
- Capture the reader's interest.
- Visually pleasing application
- Edit. Edit. Edit!
- Proofread. Proofread. Proofread

Finally, ask yourself–

Do you wonder what selection committee members think about you once they finish reading your application?

Make yourself a candidate that they will remember!

For more information about self-branding strategies for all of the above, visit our *Resumes, Finding an Internship or Job* page.