Writing Personal Statements

Personal statements are tough to write, and one reason for this is that we always label them as “essays.” You might think of them more as a story— that is, the story of how you came to this decision of pursuing a scholarship, a graduate degree, or whatever it may be. Depending on the prompt, you may also need to address your story of how you imagine your future on this career path. The committees may read many applications a day, so it’s important to find ways to connect with them through your writing. Spending time crafting your professional-yet-personal statement into a piece of writing that reflects who you are and what you have to offer will display your sincerity and potential to the committee.

Idea of a ‘theme’
Look for similarities in the meaningful steps that have led you to this point. Perhaps when you were younger, you thought you wanted to be a Veterinarian, in high school you wanted to be a Historian, and now you are applying for a Masters degree to become a teacher. One common element of all these jobs is “helping others.” Another possible “theme” from this example could be “promoting change.” Maybe imagining yourself as a Veterinarian, you pictured helping dog owners change habits in disciplining their dog, and now, when you think about teaching, you imagine helping elementary students learn new techniques so they no longer struggle with their math homework. Whether you are looking back on your life, or thinking ahead, look for common threads between your experiences and your values. Writing about these patterns shows the committee that you took the time to reflect and critique your experiences so far. Finding a theme will also help you with your introduction and conclusion. Using the example above, this person might write something like, “In all of the jobs I’ve imagined myself pursuing, encouraging change for the better has always been important to me. As a teacher, I imagine I will…”

Of course, there are probably many would-be teachers who value “helping others,” so it is important to be specific. Be specific.

What are things the committee is likely to hear a lot of? Many engineers enjoy problem solving; many zoologists enjoy working with animals. How can you write your story in a way that is specific to you and your experiences? For example, rather than the future-zoologist writing, “I’ve always enjoyed working with animals,” they might spend a few sentences recounting the time in high school when a horse in a local parade fell, and how they stayed by the horse’s side and kept the animal calm.

Depending on how many words or pages you are allowed to write, you may need to summarize some experiences while elaborating on others. But, even when you are summarizing, aim to be as specific to your individual experience as possible.

The “why” of things
Once you decide what experiences you want to write about, you will need to help the committee put these experiences into context. Why was this job experience important to you? What did it mean when you spent that day shadowing a doctor? Placing meaning with your experiences might seem obvious to you in your description of the experience itself, but remember, the people reading this may not know anything about you other than your resume and this statement. One way to ensure they view your experiences with the same meanings you do is to write directly about their importance.

Final Tips
- Ask someone who does not know you to read your statement quickly and tell you their main impressions. Do these line up with what you hoped someone would see?
- Don’t use your personal statement to complain, or point out weaknesses in your application, unless the prompt is specifically asking you to do so.
- While you may need to write about hardships for the statement you are working on, in many scenarios, you will need to spend more space on who you hope to be in the future, rather than where you’ve been.
- Read your statement out loud one last time before you submit it. This will help you catch typos or unclear sentences that you may have missed before.