

Tips for Writing the Personal Statement

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Structure Matters!

The organization of your essay is as important as the style and content of your essay.

Answer the question

Make sure you address the prompt directly. You may have an interesting life story to tell but if your story doesn't provide a direct response to the prompt you are not following directions.

Stay linear

Your statement should follow a clear developmental path. The reader should not be confused about which component of the statement you are addressing. Additionally, if your discussion involves a timeline it should always be clear to the reader what time frame you are discussing – going back and forth between time periods makes you look disorganized.

Bridge Transitions

Paragraphs should be connected by transitional ideas. The last sentence of a paragraph should clearly connect to the content/ideas of the first sentence of the following paragraph.

Each paragraph should support the core components of the prompt

All paragraphs should contain information essential to addressing the prompt.

Style Counts!

How you present yourself to the university is as important as what you present.

No clichés

“Better late than never?” “Easier said than done?” It is time to “face the music” on clichés! The use of clichés has the reader question your originality.

Control your urge to “quote”

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” – only if you are directly discussing Dickens and his work should you use this quote. Rarely does incorporating quotes into your personal statement strengthen your presentation – a poorly selected or randomly applied quote is often a sign of weak writing skills.

Simple is better

"Although I did a plethora of activities in college, my assiduous efforts enabled me to succeed." UGH! How about: "Although I juggled many activities in college, I succeeded through persistent work."

No typos or grammatical errors

Careless errors convey to the reader that: you rushed in writing your statement, you didn't take the effort seriously, and/or you did not have anyone proofread your essay. Even a single error will stand out to the reader. Don't rely on your spell and grammar checker alone! You can have a grammatically correct sentence that has a "mistake" in meaning. For example your spelling and grammar check would not find anything wrong with this statement:

I'd like to attend a college where I can expose myself to many diverse people.

Avoid generalities

"I learned the value of hard work."

"I've always been good at languages."

"This experience showed me the importance of teamwork."

No gimmicks

While you might be tempted to write your entire statement in haiku or as a dialogue between your id and super ego – resist! This is not the time for creative gimmicks.

Content is Crucial!

Your personal statement should be...PERSONAL!

You have about five minutes of "read time" to present who you are. Make sure your statement has individual details that connect the reader to the writer. While it may be significant that you are the "first person in my family to go to college" this statement does not make you memorable.

Don't repeat information within or between essays

Be careful about repeating information within the same essay and between essays. Your two prompts should be seen as distinct arenas to share information you could not include in other areas of the application.

Make sure your statements are relevant

Students often include irrelevant details in their narrative: "After a meeting with my guidance counselor I took the bus home. On the twenty minute drive I thought about what we had talked about. When I got home I made myself something to eat and as I sat at the kitchen table eating I made a plan for my future."

Save politics and preaching for another time and place

Avoid mentioning subjects that are potentially controversial; you never know who is reading your statement! Strong political views don't have a place in personal statements.

Don't mention money or prestige

While it may be a motivating factor, don't mention pursuing your major because it will result in a lucrative career. Additionally, there is no need to tell the reader how prestigious or well regarded the department is of the school you are applying to.

Be proud of yourself but check your ego

A healthy self esteem is admirable while a raging ego is not. Unless you were your high school's valedictorian you probably don't want to state that you were the "smartest kid in your high school."

Don't contradict yourself

If you wrote in one paragraph that "seeing the film Amelie was the pivotal moment when I knew I wanted to study the French language" then you should not be stating in the next paragraph that you arrived at Berkeley City College "not knowing what I wanted to do with my life."

Show don't tell

If you are "good at working with people" you must give a specific example that demonstrates this. If you "learned important skills" at your volunteering experience what were these learned skills?

Avoid biography

This is not the place to tell your life story. Strive for depth, not breadth. Be more future-oriented rather than focused on the past.

Have at least TWO people read your essay – one who knows you well and another person who knows good writing!