

# PERSONAL STATEMENT GUIDE

## Frequently Asked Questions About Personal Statements

### Q. How long is a personal statement?

A. Sometimes, the graduate program will provide specific instructions regarding the length of your statement. Often, however, there will be little or no direction provided, simply a request for a statement.

A general rule of thumb you might follow is to **submit a 2-3 page statement, double-spaced, with 1-inch margins, in 12-pt. Times New Roman font.** While there are no set rules about length or format, this is typically considered appropriate and sufficient.

### Q. What should I write about?

A. **A personal statement is your opportunity to tell the Admissions committee about YOU.** In general, the personal statement should include an interesting story about you, your reasons for wanting to attend graduate school in this field of study, why you want to attend that particular institution, your future career goals and any relevant research or work experience. **Read pages 2 & 3 of this guide for more idea.**

Unless directed otherwise in the statement instructions, your essay should NOT discuss weaknesses or deficiencies. The statement is your time to shine; **problems may be addressed separately, in a brief addendum.** The addendum, if necessary, is a separate page where you may briefly explain any information in your application that may reflect poorly on you, such as poor grades or a low admission test score. Be sure to avoid long, tedious excuses and keep the addendum short, to the point, and as positive as possible.

### Q. Can I submit the same statement to each of the programs where I apply?

A. **In a word, "No."** While your statement will certainly have much in common from one program to another, each version should be slightly different. Pay careful attention to the writing prompt and any length instructions provided on the application.

Whereas one program may ask you to describe your relevant coursework, another program might prefer to find that information on your transcript. In addition to differences such as these, your statement should specify why you want to attend that specific institution. These reasons might be for certain classes or specialties that are offered, for the change to work with an admired faculty, or some other motivating factor. Obviously, this will require you to submit a different essay to each program.

### Q. Who at Rollins can help me with my personal statement?

A. Your advisor, a career counselor, or those who wrote recommendation letters for you may be very helpful in critiquing your writing. The **Center for Career & Life Planning** can provide guidance in many areas and, after reviewing your statement, will offer suggestions for improvement in content, organization and writing style. You may also want to seek **the advice and counsel of people in your chosen field**; as they may have specific knowledge about programs in that area. For assistance with grammar, spelling, sentence structure and other elements of the writing process, you can ask for a [tutor from TJ's to proofread your work](#). Do not be surprised, however, if you get differing opinions and recommendations for your essay. In the end, only you can decide the best way of presenting yourself.

- [View Sample Essays Online](#)
- [Brainstorm Ideas for Topics](#)

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## Personal Statement Do's & Don'ts

### DO

- Keep your audience in mind
- **Be accurate and be yourself**
- Let the reader know who you are, what motivates you, what characteristics come together to make you unique
- **Use the active voice and avoid passive verbs**; using "I" is to be expected in a statement that is about YOU
- Make connections between your experience and the resulting value or meaning to you
- **Use specific examples** to illustrate connections you have made, conclusions you have reached, and insights you have gained from your experiences
- Point out specific features of the school that attract you
- **Include academic distinctions** (publications, study abroad, internships) related to your goals
- Include information that puts your achievements into perspective (such as working full-time during your undergraduate education)
- **Include any special skills** that may make you a preferred candidate for acceptance into the program (e.g., research, computer, laboratory, foreign language skills)
- **Put creativity and imagination into your opening** remarks to capture the attention of the reader
- Make your point early and be sure to focus on the positive
- **Follow the school's instructions TO THE LETTER**
- Keep your statement concise - two pages or less (and within the word-count limit)
- **Consider the personal statement a persuasive essay**
- Use your conclusion to pull everything together and make a final attempt to sell yourself to the graduate program
- When it is absolutely necessary to explain shortfalls or deficiencies, consider using an addendum rather than including this in your personal statement
- **Enlist others to proofread** your essay for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage, and style
- Use a highly readable font with conventional spacing and margins

### DO NOT

- **Write your autobiography** or simply reiterate information from your application or your resume
- Fall into the trap of "I've always wanted to be..."
- Compose a list of your achievements and personal qualities
- **Generalize, lecture, whine, or present yourself as an expert** in the field of study
- Pretend to be the "ideal" applicant
- Include anything that you cannot substantiate or anything that is untrue
- **Talk about money as a motivating factor** in your plans for the future
- Discuss your minority status or disadvantaged background unless you have a compelling and unique story that relates directly to it
- **Remind the school of its ranking** among the various programs of its type
- Waste your personal statement opportunity with a silly introduction or conclusion
- **Use a gimmicky style or format**
- Submit supplemental materials unless the school requests them
- **Get the name of the school wrong**
- Use clichés and common information. Almost all applicants are intelligent, hardworking, and have a strong desire to pursue an advanced degree.
- **Include high school accomplishments**, as they are almost always irrelevant at this point in your professional development.
- **Risk writing about a controversial topic.** Consider your audience. If you feel passionate about a topic, it is certainly your right to express your feelings about it. Just be aware that your audience may not share your strong opinions.
- **Address problems or weaknesses** in your personal statement. Keep the personal statement positive, even if the subject is overcoming adversity.
- Disclose aspects of yourself (personal, medical, religious, etc.) which you are uncomfortable sharing.
- **Use sensationalistic stories** that are unrelated to your program of interest.

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## Ideas For Personal Statement

### Before you begin writing:

- Research the school, the graduate program, the faculty, and possible areas of focus within the graduate field of study and/or associated career field.
- Have a very clear understanding of why you want to go to graduate school, and why each school is a good fit with your background and interests.
- Think about what makes you unique. An experience or person in your life may have molded you or contributed to your desire to attend graduate school. Do you have a hobby or artistic ability about which you are passionate?
- Determine how you can express what distinguishes you from other applicants and how your goals or research interests match the program and its faculty.
- Be aware of your long-range goals, how an advanced degree will help you achieve those goals,
- and how you might use your degree in the future.
- Be ready to articulate the most compelling reasons for the school or program to accept your application.
- Consider referring to elements of the program that are a good fit for you.

### Content

- Focus on your specific interests and goals as they pertain to academics
- Determine what questions are being asked and answer them fully, paying careful attention to those that have multiple parts
- Typically, graduate programs want to learn:
  - What your purpose is in choosing graduate studies
  - What your area of focus will be
  - How you will use your graduate studies in your career or future plans
  - How your academic and extracurricular experiences combine to make you a unique candidate
  - What problems or inconsistencies appear in your records/grades/scores, as well as what you have done to address these issues or specific positive qualities that may temper this information
  - What additional commitments/responsibilities you have that may present challenges (such as a significant workload outside of school) and (as above) what your plans are to address the situation and/or what positive qualities may serve to balance or temper this
  - What made you choose the specific institution to which you are applying
  - Who you are!

### Style and Approach

The perfect style and approach to writing a personal statement is the one that best fits who you are as an individual. Beyond that, the style should be clear, well-organized, and specific with special attention given to transitions that facilitate the flow of the document.