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How to Write a Compelling Personal Statement

A typical university gets thousands of applications every year. All of them provide transcripts and other standard information, but one part of an application is unique: the personal statement. How do you make your personal statement stand out among the thousands of others that the admissions staff will read? It's simple--*tell your story in your voice.*

Be True to Your Voice

Many students think that their personal statement has to sound "academic," so they end up using vocabulary they don't really command and sentence structures that don't quite work. Avoid this trap. Instead, use the vocabulary and sentence structures that come naturally to you, and your personal statement will reflect your true personality.

What Format Should You Use?

The best approach to writing a personal statement is a **narrative essay**; tell a story about yourself. A narrative has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and it conveys a **thematic message**, so you need to tell your readers not only what happened, but also why it's significant. You might choose to focus on a single event in your life that tells your readers something important about you, or you may talk about how you have changed over time.

What Story Should You Tell?

The right story to tell is the one that will show your personality to your readers. Any story is a good story if it reveals your character, your passions, and your dreams. Below are a few classic approaches, but you don't have to limit yourself to them.

- **Why I want to be a ...**
In this type of narrative, your goal is to tell a story that explains why you have chosen the major and career you are pursuing. You might talk about a childhood experience, a lifelong interest, or an exceptional teacher who inspired your passion for the field.
- **Coming to the U.S. and learning a new language and culture**
If you are an immigrant or the child of immigrants, you may choose to write about your experience of dealing with two languages and cultures. Most colleges value cultural diversity, so a good essay shows that you are at home in two cultures and have gained an understanding of them both.

- **What a college education means to me as a first-generation college student**

If you are the first member of your family to go to college, you might want to tell your readers what that means to you and your family.

- **What I learned in the workforce**

If you spent some time working after high school and before beginning your studies at EdCC, you might want to tell your readers about the lessons you learned from your experiences in the workforce. Often, students who have spent time working a full-time job have gained experience and maturity, and they know the value of work.

Know Your Audience

One of the most important considerations for any writing project is your audience—the readers you are writing to. For your personal statement, you should keep in mind that every institution is unique, and you should tailor your personal statement to the particular institution you want to get into.

How can you adapt your personal statement to the target audience?

First, consider the particular institution's values and approach to instruction. The Evergreen State College has very different values than Liberty University. Research universities approach instruction differently than small liberal arts colleges do. Keep those factors in mind as you write.

Next, consider the specific group of people who will read your work. A committee of four or more people will read your personal statement. This committee often reads 50 or more personal statements every day, so you need to make yours memorable.

They value education, so what they want to hear is your desire to gain knowledge and enrich your life through education. They don't want to hear applicants say they want to get a high paying job and make lots of money. Academics tend to be passionate about ideas and learning; they want to read about your ideas and your commitment to learning.

The committee members are familiar with the institution's reputation, so you don't have to tell them what a great school it is. However, mentioning how interested you are in the research of a particular faculty member will impress them because it shows that you have taken the time to learn about the work the faculty is doing and that you want to be involved in cutting-edge research.

The Four Steps of the Writing Process

The writing process centers on these four basic steps: **researching, pre-writing, drafting, and editing.**

- In the **researching phase**, you gather information about the school you are applying to.
- During **pre-writing**, you get your ideas onto paper in rough form.
- When you **draft**, you take those rough ideas and turn them into a narrative essay.

- Finally, you **edit** by finding and fixing grammatical and stylistic flaws.

A Closer Look at the Four Basic Writing Steps

Step # 1: Research

You should research to learn about the culture of the institution, its faculty and their work, and the prerequisites for transfer students. You can find most of this information on the colleges' websites.

Here are some specific things you should examine:

- The institution's **Mission Statement**
- The **transfer requirements** for your major (make sure you have completed all of the prerequisites)
- The **degree requirements** for your major
- The **fields of study** and **courses** offered within your major
- The **faculty** in your major and their **research specialties**

Step #2: Pre-writing

Once you have completed your research, you're ready to brainstorm how you will approach your essay and what you will say. In this phase, you're just generating ideas, so don't worry about word choice, sentence structure, or style. Save those concerns for later.

Here are some tips to keep in mind as you pre-write:

- If the personal-essay prompt you're using includes **specific directions**, always follow them! Read through the directions and brainstorm or list responses to each of them.
- If you can't figure out what you want to say about yourself, fill out the table included in this handout. Think of interesting things about yourself for each of the four categories: "personal," "community," "academic," and "professional." In each column, list some relevant details that make you special. You won't be able to use all of them, but in the brainstorming process, the idea is to get your ideas down on paper. You can worry about which ones to use and how they fit together later.

Step #3: Drafting

Once you have your pre-writing done, you're ready to begin writing a **rough draft**. Your goal is to tell a story that reveals your character, grabs your readers' interest, and clearly communicates your message.

Here are some tips to keep in mind as you draft:

- This will be your first attempt at getting your ideas on the page in an organized way, so don't feel pressured to produce flawless writing at this point.
- If you get stuck in one area, move onto the next and go back to the trouble spot later.
- Give yourself time to put the draft aside for a few hours or days. Then go back and revise it or add to it.

- When you are finished with your rough draft, check to make sure that you have addressed all of the **required items** in the prompt. If you have, great, you have a finished draft, and you're ready to move on to the editing process. If not, add what you have omitted. Also, check your length. Most institutions give length guidelines, so make sure your draft meets them.

Step #4: Editing & Revising

Revising and Editing are the last steps in the process.

Here are some tips to keep in mind as you edit:

- Give yourself time to reread and revise multiple times
- Read your work *aloud*. Listen not only for “errors,” but also for stylistic fluency. Does your writing sound like your voice? Do the sentences and paragraphs flow smoothly?
- Proofread, proofread again, and then proofread once more. It's often a good idea to “let it cool” for a while between proofreading sessions. Sometimes when you proofread repeatedly in a single session, you will miss the same errors over and over because you will see what you expect to see rather than what is on the page. Putting your draft aside for a day or two will help you to see it with a fresh perspective.
- Have a friend or parent read it. Then revise and polish. Then proofread again. Be sure that the final draft is the best work you are capable of doing.
- Finally, check for format details. If the institution specifies font size and margins, make sure you meet the requirements. If they want your name and social security number on each page, make sure you have it. These are little details, but they are important, so get them right.

Brainstorming Worksheet

Personal-- The talents, interests and attributes that make you special	Community-- extracurricular activities, volunteer work, civic or church groups you are involved in, etc.	Academic-- achievements, awards and recognitions that you have received and the campus organizations and special programs that you are involved in	Professional-- your work experience

Tell the best story that illustrates your personality, your passions, and your dreams:

Explain why this story is important by explaining the thematic message of your story:

How does this story explain the following:

My personality:

My passions:

My dreams:

Why I have chosen my intended major:

Why I am a good candidate for the institution, considering its values and approach to instruction:

How well prepared I am to begin my studies:

My long-term goals for my career and my life: