

WRITING STRONG ESSAYS & PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Writing essays and personal statements represents a large part of the work that goes into creating a winning application. Here are a few tips that will help orient you to the purpose of these pieces of writing and get you started on composing essays and statements that will make your application shine.

Adapted from contributions by Tammy Hoyer (Senior Program Manager at the Undergraduate Research Center, University of California, Davis).

Why are essays and personal narratives so important? First, although essays and personal narratives are just one piece out of an entire application packet – along with your GPA, test scores, letters of recommendation, and the relevant experience and skills in your resume – *they are the one piece that gives you the opportunity to use your own voice and make a case for yourself.* It’s like a pseudo-interview where the selection committee gets the idea of who you are through your own words and presentation. A well-written essay or statement may prove to be the deciding factor that wins you a letter of acceptance!

Second, essays and personal narratives give you the opportunity to convey information that the selection committee will find compelling in making its decision about your application. Specifically, *this is your chance to describe why the opportunity you are applying for is important to you, how it fits into your aspirations, and how it will help you achieve academic ambitions and professional goals.* When a reader is done reading your essays and personal statements, they should be able to easily ascertain:

- ⇒ the origin of your interest in a field of study
- ⇒ the growth of that interest over a period of time (as illustrated by experience)
- ⇒ that the opportunity you are applying for is the next logical step in the sequence toward a specific goal.

Third, *essays and personal narratives give you the opportunity to address what might appear to be gaps or weaknesses in other aspects of your application.* Here is your opportunity to turn weaknesses into strengths. For example, if you nearly flunked out of school in your freshman year, highlight how you have turned your work and grades around since: “Although a lack of focus caused my grades to suffer during my freshman year, my transcript from more recent semesters reflects a significant improvement in my grades and demonstrates commitment to my work and a level of readiness for [the opportunity you are applying for].” If there was a significant life event that caused that lack of focus, explain it (but don’t offer excuses). Selection committees understand that some things in life are beyond our control. They just want to know what you did about it. How you handled a challenge and came back strong can speak very well for you.

And lastly, *these writing pieces serve as a writing sample.* They should be well organized, concise, and completely free of grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors.

So how do I craft a strong piece of writing? A strong piece of writing starts with developing the content, addresses the questions asked, and ends with polishing the spelling, grammar and formatting to perfection. Here are some guidelines and strategies that will help you with the process.

Start early, plan well, and give yourself the luxury of enough time. Putting together a strong application takes time and effort – and it’s time and effort that has to fit in around all your other schoolwork! Giving yourself enough time lowers the stress throughout the process and results in better, stronger final drafts. It allows you to tackle the writing in bits and pieces. It allows you the time you need to go through a series of drafts. And it allows the writing to develop naturally and grow into a final draft without your having to force the issue. Believe it or not, your brain thinks about these things even when you are not working on them directly! Make it easy for yourself and support your efforts to succeed by giving yourself enough time.

Tap into help and support. There are a lot of resources out there, many of whom would be very glad to help you and very happy to see you succeed!

- ✓ Use the writing support services provided at campus career or writing centers.
- ✓ Ask your professors, advisors and mentors to read your drafts and offer input.
- ✓ Ask your friends and family to proofread.

When you are writing:

- ✓ *Remember your audience.* The selection committee likely consists of faculty and professionals. Although it’s likely that you do not need to define basic terminology, also be careful not to make assumptions that they’ll know what you’re talking about when you are describing specific research or work in a specific field. To communicate your work and experiences well, find a balance!
- ✓ *Establish your voice.* Your tone in the essay should reflect what is special, unique, distinctive or impressive about you. Find a tone of voice that is confident without sounding arrogant. If you are addressing what might be otherwise perceived as weaknesses in your application, there is no need to make excuses or sound contrite or apologetic. Usually, a straightforward tone will serve you best. Just state what affected your performance and follow up with what you did to improve the situation.
- ✓ *Answer the question.* When you are posed with a specific question or topic, stay on point and answer the question or address the topic!

Use these prompts to generate relevant content:

1. *Why are you interested in the particular opportunity or institution to which you are applying?* You should have solid reasons why you are applying! The better you can express the reasons that the program fulfills your interests, or why the strengths you offer matches what they are looking for, the better your chances of putting a spotlight on a good match that catches the attention of the reviewers.
2. *What are your academic or research interests?* You might indicate an interest in a particular time period or author, or address one or two questions or problems in your chosen field. Remember that you will be working under or alongside professors in research. It is important that there is a good parallel in academic interests. At the early undergraduate level, this good parallel might be demonstrated simply by the curiosity, enthusiasm and motivation you demonstrate toward the broad disciplinary area in which the professor conducts research. Later on in your undergraduate and graduate career, it will be important to show a closer match between your interests or field of study and the particular sub-discipline or narrow area of research the professor is pursuing.
3. *How did you become interested in this field or research?* Writing about how you became interested in a field establishes the beginning point of your interest and lets you go on to show how you have taken positive steps in pursuing your interest. You might talk about how a teacher or professor, or a life experience, first sparked your interest.
4. *What kind of activities or experiences have you had that have contributed toward your interest in, preparation for, or understanding of this field or research area?* You can order your narrative here chronologically, or you could group experiences into categories such as internships, work experience, summer research experiences, community service, or life experiences. Make sure you describe what these experiences taught you either about yourself or about the subject matter that stimulated your interest in pursuing the field or research further.
5. *What are your aspirations?* Whether you are an undergrad applying to a summer research program or graduate program, or a grad student applying for a postdoc position, you need to be able to paint the picture of what you are interested in, what next and where you hope to go. What are your goals? Then, tie those goals and aspirations in to what this opportunity you are applying for has to offer. Make it clear how this opportunity is the logical next step in reaching your goals.

For more information visit www.pathwaystoscience.org or contact the Institute for Broadening Participation at contactus@ibparticipation.org.

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