

# WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT

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**Personal: adj.** Of, relating to, concerning, or affecting a person as a private individual (rather than as a member of a group or the public, or in a public or professional capacity); individual, private; one's own.

**Statement: n.** A written or oral communication setting forth facts, arguments, demands, or the like.

There are three conventions of the to keep in mind as you are beginning to draft your statement:

**1. Keep it personal.** As the definition above suggests, what makes something personal is that it is private to you as an individual. What the personal statement allows you to do, then, is to reveal private details publicly to the reviewing committee of readers.

You need not produce in prose the long list of your accomplishments also submitted with your application in the form of a CV or resume. You should, however, give the committee a picture of who you are as an individual, and reveal something they will not know about your interests just by reviewing your other application materials.

Moreover, show your personality! The committee members will want to see that you're a real genuine person with real interests and real enthusiasm. You should not, then, write a formally complex letter with complicated language you think will be impressive.

**2. Pay attention to the prompt.** While all personal statements hold similar conventions across opportunities, the individual school, institution, corporation, foundation, etc. will have their own desires for what they would like to see you demonstrate in the personal statement.

Application review committee members can and will notice when you are trying to pass off a general statement for multiple schools. This is not to say that you cannot produce a statement that you can easily adopt for multiple programs, but you want to speak to the appropriate audience.

Prompts will also indicate the key terms related to the specific experience they would like you to touch upon in your statement.

**3. Communicate your intentions purposefully.** As the definition for "statement" above indicates, this written work should be in service of communicating your experience to the review committee.

It is your interview on paper. You should have a clear focus that helps your audience to see who you are and that you are clear about your intentions for this experience.

The statement should have an overarching idea or argument. You are not just writing to say "I am awesome," but to say "I think I am an awesome fit for this particular experience and here is why."

## WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT, continued.

### **SHORT PERSONAL STATEMENT: PALEONTOLOGY**

From an early age I was fascinated with fossils. My respect for ancient life has always included an admitted partiality for the study of vertebrates. Upon taking my first college-level paleontology class I knew without a doubt that I had chosen the right path. The study of fossils has never felt like unwarranted labor, but an opportunity to learn about these creatures that lived so long before our time. Throughout my geology coursework my ears have always pricked up at the mention of the word fossil. My college education has been a means to entering the study of vertebrate paleontology.

Naturally when the time to choose a thesis project came, I made sure that I would do mine in the field of paleontology, working directly with fossil specimens. My project involves the taphonomy, stratigraphy, and identification of a middle-Ordovician coral bioherm as well as its bryozoan constituents. The research is now well under way, involving many aspects of a sound paleontological study: sampling, analysis, identification, and finalization into a report. Fossiliferous rock samples were acquired from the field, cut at proper orientations, polished, and peel section slides produced from them. My analysis of these slides led to identification of the specimens utilizing the established literature. Fossil specimen photography will soon follow. The abstract from this research project has been submitted in time for the Northeastern Section Meeting of the Geological Society of America in March. From this project I will take away an understanding of how to conduct a proper paleontological study and I will write a thesis.

My aspirations for study in vertebrate paleontology are primarily in understanding what fossil specimens can tell us about how ancient vertebrates lived, interacted with their environment, and evolved through time. More specifically, my research interests within the field include employing morphology in the phylogenetic analysis of major evolutionary bifurcations such as that involving theropods and birds, exploiting biogeography to better understand vertebrate expansion and speciation, and the use of functional morphology and biomechanics to understand vertebrate movement. My long-term goals are to educate others and spur interest in vertebrate paleontology while conducting research. The position of professor would encompass these goals as well as allow me to publish and maintain a successful presence in the field.

The program at the University of Chicago would prepare me extremely well for what I ultimately intend to do in life. The works of professors within the Division of Biological Sciences, the Department of Geophysical Sciences, as well as the Field Museum are impressive. I appreciated meeting Dr. Paul C. Sereno during his visit at Mythic University in December 2004, and I find his approach toward exploration and his application of cladistics in phylogenetic studies indispensable to the field of vertebrate paleontological study. From this correspondence I feel the research that I would conduct at the university would not only be interesting and rewarding, but give me experience in the field to then apply toward my ultimate goal of becoming an academic professor.

## WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT, continued.

*There are a few common ways to begin a personal statement, though you want to be careful to introduce your statement with care and avoid usual or cliché language. Remember, your goal is to demonstrate how unique you (and your interests and points of view) are.*

### **Personal Stories**

You may choose to illustrate your interests with a personal story. This approach allows you to offer a scene from your experience (that good old “show don’t tell” approach). Your audience will then be able to imagine you interacting with others or your area of interest and should be easily able to connect your personal anecdote with the experiences you might have in graduate school (or during a fellowship, or in an internship, etc).

### **Compelling Quotations**

Quotations set up as the epigraph of your statement root your statement in a larger conversation. You make use of the language of others to get at your own experience. If you are applying for graduate school, you might consider a quotation from a scholar you find inspiring, for example, or an innovator in the field you are interested in studying. These might indicate your personal inspirations in a slightly more academic sense than the personal story. Keep in mind that some quotations are overused and thus slightly cliché. You will not, for example, want to use Forrest Gump’s “Life is like a box of chocolates...” (lest you want to bore your audience to sleep).

### **Topical Context**

You may begin by talking through an event, either current or historical, that you find inspiring and that will provide context for the point of entry you’re taking with this experience you’re applying for. This alleviates the pressure of you having to relate personal details or coming up with a compelling personal narrative, when you are (perhaps) mostly intellectually interested in the topic due to current events or course work or readings.

### **A Few Points of Advice on Style**

- Be careful of being too clever. Creativity is a plus, but you want to make sure you’re not just being creative for the sake of hooking the audience and then your hook doesn’t ultimately tie into what you’re talking about in the rest of the statement. You should not phrase your personal statement for law school, for example, in the form of a brief. You might think it’s clever, but the committee will have seen this move before.
- Use vocabulary you would actually use when talking to someone. While you might introduce language of the field of discourse for the opportunity you are applying for, this shouldn’t be forced or heavy handed. Do not use language in your statement you would not use when talking to someone. Remember, this is your interview on paper. You want to sound like a real person, not a dictionary or an encyclopedia for your life.
- Proofread, proofread, proofread (and show your statement to others!) There will be nothing more distracting to your audience than errors in grammar or punctuation. You want your flow of ideas to be clear and steady so that the committee focuses on your ideas and you not your sentence errors.
- Make sure to adhere to a program’s specific guidelines. Some programs will offer you a larger word/character count than others, and some may not read your statement if it is longer than the length in their guidelines.