

Personal Statements.

for further education

www.careers.utoronto.ca



University of Toronto Career Centre



@UofTCareerCtr



Personal statements are part of the application package to many professional and graduate school programs. Sometimes they respond to a specific question but often the questions are open ended. Although they vary in length, 500 words are common. They are also known as letter of intent, personal essays, statement of purpose or application essays.

Why do schools request them?

Personal statements are intended as an opportunity for you to present yourself to the application committee. While the personal statement is not the most important part of a graduate school application, it may be a deciding factor to a committee looking at a borderline acceptance. It should reflect the relevant skills and characteristics requested by the program including. The personal statement should go beyond what has already been revealed in your application. The most important thing to remember about writing personal statements is that they should portray your uniqueness through highlighting and reflecting on your most pertinent experiences.

How to prepare

Start early and research

Read the instructions carefully for each program. You must tailor each application. Selection committees do not have patience — or time — for those who do not give them what they need.

- Research the institution to understand the culture and vision.
- Research the department to know their research strengths and their faculty's areas of expertise.
- For thesis-based programs, include information about possible professors you would like as supervisors.
- Explore their website and, if possible, visit the campus in person.
- Talk to the admissions officers and other professionals directly either at their office or attend education fairs and information sessions offered by the Career Centre in the fall.

Know yourself

You will have to talk about your strengths and fit for their program. If you need assistance identifying your skills, attend the You've Got Skills, Personal Statement and other workshops and check out the resources on the Career Centre website. Talk to your family and friends as they can offer a unique perspective on your skills and abilities. If possible, discuss your options with a professor or teacher assistant — they will be able to speak to your strengths with respect to the discipline in which you wish to study.

Brainstorm

Begin by spending some time reflecting on your life and experiences. Don't make any judgments or edit your thoughts at this point. Possible questions for you to consider are:

- What experiences or education made me want to pursue further studies?
- When did I become interested in this field?
- What appeals to me about the program — what is unique about it?
- What can I bring to this area of study — my unique perspective?
- What do I plan to do once I finish my studies — my long-term goals?



Open-ended, essay-style personal statements

Research the program, department, and academic institution

What is the program looking for in a candidate? (e.g., skills, academic and non-academic experience, fit, career goals etc...)

- What aspects of the program/department/academic institution appeal to you?
- Is your program research based or course based?

Analysis

- Read the instructions and/or question(s) carefully. Sometimes it may be a simple statement such as “Why are you interested in this program?” Other examples include: How does this program connect with your career goals? Tell us how your academic and non-academic experiences have influenced your decision to pursue graduate studies in this field? Tell us about your research interests.
- What do you think is behind this question/What do you think the admissions committee is looking for with this question? (e.g., skills, qualities, strengths, academic and non-academic experiences and achievements, research experiences, fit with program etc...)

Components of your answer

- Have you included why you are interested in this area of study?
 - Focus on experiences, courses, personal experiences of why you how you became interested in this area
 - Include aspects of the area of study that appeal to you (e.g., skills utilized, nature of work, impact on society etc...)
- Have you included information about your experiences that is relevant to your program of study and have you stated what you have gained from that experience? (e.g., relevant skills, suitability for graduate school; reaffirmation of interest in pursuing graduate studies) Examples of experiences can be drawn from:
 - Academic experiences (courses, papers, group projects, research experience, field work, work-study abroad, conference presentations, publications, lab experience, independent research projects)
 - Non-academic experiences (paid or unpaid professional experiences, extracurricular activities (e.g. peer tutoring, note-taking), volunteer work (e.g. hospital friendly visitor)
 - Personal experiences that have shaped your decision to pursue graduate studies.
- If it is research based, have you included information about research areas of interest, research project ideas, any previous research experience, potential faculty members that you would like to work with or have already connected with?
- If it is course based, and there are different program streams, have you indicated which streams you are most interested in and why?
- Have you described how the program will fit with your future career goals?
- Have you described what aspects of the program, department and/or institution appeal to you?
- Consider how you would like to organize the information that best fits your writing style?
 - Chronological order (e.g. experience at a young age, followed by high school experience, then university)
 - Organized by experiences or themes that don't follow any chronological order.
- Do the ideas you are presenting flow well together?



Question based personal statements

Research the program, department and academic institution

- What is the program looking for in a candidate? (e.g., skills, academic and non-academic experience, fit, career goals etc...)
- What aspects of the program/department/academic institution appeal to you?

Analyze the question

- Read the question(s) carefully. Examples include: Tell us about a time where you wish you had approached a situation differently? Provide an example of how you have used problem based learning in the past.
- What do you think is behind this question/ What do you think the admissions committee is looking for with this question? (e.g., skills, qualities, strengths)

Components of your answer

- Did you consider multiple examples before choosing the one you picked?
- Have you chosen the right example(s) that will speak to the points you have identified in your analysis?
- Why do you think the example you used is the most effective example for the question?
- If the question is asking about a negative event/situation (e.g., dealing with a failure), have you ensured that you have spent time discussing the positive aspects of that experience?
- If your response can be connected to the program, have you made the connection?
- Have you addressed the points the program is looking for in your response?
- If the questions overlap in content, have you repeated yourself within your responses? If yes, how can you change the content to prevent the repetition?
- Have you answered the question(s)?
- Are you within the character/word limit?



Write your first draft

Make sure your first paragraph is engaging. Don't just say what you think the committee wants to hear, but speak from the heart. Be confident and positive — it's not always what you say but how you say it. They are not looking for your life history — focus on specific experiences and achievements.

Always keep in mind the audience who will be reading this document. Professional schools have a different focus than masters or PhD program. When you finish the draft, set it aside.

Edit

After taking a break, come back to your draft and consider these questions:

- Did I answer the question or questions as specified in the application?
- Does it reflect the real me?
- Does it include any irrelevant personal biases?
- Does it have any clichés?
- Have I chosen the right key experiences to highlight?
- Am I being repetitive?
- Does the document reflect strong interest in the program?
- Have I used the pronoun “I” too much?

If asked about undergraduate research projects:

- List projects in order of interest;
- Use working titles;
- Name professor and supervisor;
- Explain relevancy of the research to the program and identify relevant skills.

If you can, ask several people to review your personal statement.

Prepare your final copy

Proof read for errors and make sure the institution's name is spelled correctly. Make sure it is presented in a professional manner, neat and is within the word or page limit.

Career Centre Resources Careers.utoronto.ca

Career Centre Services

Sign up at cln.utoronto.ca to attend a Personal Statement Lab

Come to the Career Centre in person or call 416-978-8000 for a one-on-one Personal Statement review.

Recommended electronic resources at the University of Toronto

The Writing Centre on Effective Admission Letters:
<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/admission-letters>

Sample statements from the Faculty of Law:
www.law.utoronto.ca/documents/JD/UofT_Law_Personal_Statements_Examples.pdf

Wischnitzer's Residency Manual—Personal statement instruction and samples for medical school applications:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511547188.033>

Recommended websites

Sample statements by discipline: www.studential.com/guide/write_personal_statement.htm

Sample statements and advice from admissions people: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/02/>

More sample statements: <http://www.accepted.com/grad/sampleessays.aspx>
Advice: http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/personal_statements.shtml

