Personal Statements

What are they?

Personal Statements are essays that are written using first person by applicants with the goal of being accepted to either graduate school, professional school, or a particular program. The requirements and prompts differ from program to program, and the length is generally 1-2 pages (Murphy, Nugent & Taylor). The audience typically consists of faculty and staff from the particular department or program.

What should be included?

If a prompt is given, the writer should provide an answer in their essay. Generally, you want to tell your story. The faculty who read the essays spends approximately 10-15 minutes on each one, so you want to capture them quickly and stand out among the rest (Lang). It is important to include relevant details that show who you are without stating it. Include background and abilities, strengths that are relevant, knowledge of the field, and immediate and/or long term goals in the area of interest. Every bit of detail should relate to the overall purpose—it should make you more credible, demonstrate your skills and abilities, and most importantly, show that you have what it takes to succeed in the program (CAPS).

Do!

• Include personal details or stories that are relevant to your purpose.
• Show that you know what you want to do and why.
• Be concise, try to keep it to one page.
• Focus on your strengths, and be yourself.
• Use first person “I”—don’t overly repeat.
• Show that you have knowledge of the field or school.
• Give them an idea of your future goals.
• Discuss your past achievements and how they relate to your professional goals.
• Stay focused.
• Give them a story! Show them who you are through examples. Instead of telling them your hardworking—reveal it in the details you provide.
• Discuss how the particular program can help you meet your goals.
• Start writing early!

Don’t...

• Be repetitive or ramble—you only have a page or two!
• Write in clichés. You want to stand out among the rest!
• Try too hard to be funny or witty.
• Reveal weakness—unless you are showing something positive!
• Use unnecessary big words.
• Tell them what they already know—there’s no need in repeating what is on your resume already, give them something they don’t have!
• Use slang or offensive language.
• Overshare—only include what is relevant to the purpose.
• Write a biography of another person. This is about you!
• Make them pity you. It can be tricky when discussing a death in the family. Keep in mind the most important rule—be relevant!
• Be critical of a person, ideal, theory, or school
• Wait until the last minute to write!
Tips for consultants...

If the writer is having trouble getting started, help them brainstorm or outline by asking them the questions their audience might ask. For example: How can we help you achieve your professional goals? What can our program offer you? What background do you have already? What makes you stand out above the rest? Etc.*Remind them that it is better to show their reader with examples of how they have displayed a character trait, rather than to just make a claim that they are hardworking, caring, etc. (Lang).

• When discussing personal statements and addressing the question “am I on the right track?”—share with them the list of do’s and don’ts. Be sure they are clear about their audience and purpose, and that they have an obvious focus and “theme.” In other words, do they have one idea/experience/image that is the focal point of the essay? (Flinchbaugh).

• As you read the writer’s personal statement, put yourself in the position of their audience. Does the essay stand out? Does it answer the prompt and include all necessary information? Is the style appropriate? Did it seem cliché or did it provide new insights? Are they being authentic? And so on...It’s okay to be honest with them. Don’t hesitate to share your impressions as a reader—oftentimes writers want an unbiased opinion and reaction to their essay.

• If you’re faced with the question of whether or not to include a certain detail and are wondering if they are “oversharing,” ask them the question: “how is this relevant to the purpose of this essay?” If they can provide an answer that it somehow makes them more credible, shows their valuable skills and abilities, and/or shows how they will succeed and benefit from the program—then it works! (CAPS). They should be able to give a clear explanation as to why they chose to include each detail, and how it relates to their purpose. Remember, you can ask them how it is relevant and if they think it belongs in their essay, but avoid telling them to take things out—it is ultimately their choice.

• Keep in mind that there are many different varieties of personal statements and each discipline might expect something a little different. Make sure the writer is aware of the conventions, styles and expectations associated with his or her field. A personal statement for law school is going to look a bit different from one for nursing.

• If you feel that the writer has done all of these things well and wants help with grammar, don’t hold back. Grammar is a very important aspect of personal statements. Schools are looking for a student’s ability to write grammatically correct, Standard English in these essays, and unfortunately, they may be looked over and tossed aside if their writing is lacking in this area. You’re not their editor, but you can help them find patterns of error and explain grammatical concepts they may be struggling with.

WORKS CITED
• Murphy, Maureen, Patricia Nugent, and Jennifer Taylor. “Graduate School Application Essays.”The Writing Center at Rensselaer. PDF file.