



VCU

Career Services

Student Success

Personal Statement Guide

You can use the outline feature to jump to sections

What is a personal statement?

A personal statement is your opportunity to set yourself apart from other applicants. It is often one piece of an application process for graduate school, scholarships, professional school/programs, and muchmore. It is the part of an application where you can share who you are and what is important to you, so insert your own style and take advantage of that! Highlight and detail relevant experiences that demonstrate your interest, motivation, and preparation for the opportunity you are applying for. Use your personal statement to provide depth into why you are pursuing a particular academic/career path.

Types of personal statements

1. General, comprehensive essay that allows you to write about a wide variety of topics and experiences related to the prompt. This approach is often used for admission to specific types of professional programs such as medical or law school.
2. Responding to very specific questions. Often graduate programs ask specific questions and your essay should respond directly to the question(s) being asked. You may also have multiple essays asking distinct questions.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is an important part of the writing process and can help in the planning/outlining process. Below is a list of questions/prompts that you can use to help create an outline, especially for a general statement.

- Why are you interested in your chosen academic/career path? Why not other similar areas?
- What are your short-term and long-term goals? How do they overlap with the opportunity you are applying for?
- What skills, characteristics, or traits do you possess that would contribute to your success?
- Why are you applying to this opportunity/program? (Do some research on it and be specific.)
- How have your academic, life, and/or professional experiences prepared you for this opportunity?
- How have your experiences and choices influenced your decision to pursue your path?

Writing your personal statement

1. Identify a theme that is specific to you and tailored to the application.
2. Start with a story. It will draw the reader in. There is no singular narrative path/style to write your story.
3. Take your experiences and develop them into more detailed anecdotes with reflections.
4. Write a rough draft. Get your ideas out of your head and into a document. Don't worry about length yet. This draft doesn't have to be ready to submit on the first try. You will have plenty of time to edit and refine..
 - a. Write different versions of specific parts of the essay or the whole essay. Try a variety of ways telling stories and reflections.
5. Revise, rewrite, repeat. Your final draft will never be "perfect," but you should be comfortable and satisfied with the result.

Personal Statement Do's

- Follow any instructions or formatting guidelines that are required.
- If there are no instructions or guidelines, use 10-12 pt font, one-inch margins, and standard fonts (e.g., Calibri, Times New Roman or Arial).
- Review for grammar and punctuation.
- Avoid using passive voice when writing (e.g., "I was able to volunteer during my spring semester" is passive, and "I volunteered during my spring semester" is active).
- Use first-person throughout the essay, but try not to use "I" too much.
- Provide specific examples.
- Write a new and different personal statement for each application. Every opportunity will be different and you should tailor your essay to it as much as possible.

Personal Statement Don'ts

- Don't use contractions. Personal statements are considered formal writing so you should avoid contractions (e.g., say "I have" instead of "I've").
- Don't have run-on sentences. Break up long sentences and use appropriate punctuation to keep the essay flowing.
- Don't include filler/empty words to use characters or fill a page (e.g., sort of, kind of, very, basically, absolutely)
- Don't include quotes from others unless it is a first-person account of a story (like something your coach or family member told you). It is typically a cliché overall, but especially if you start your essay with it.
- Don't rely too heavily on overused or vague language such as "lifelong dream" or "passion".
- Don't vary your verb tenses throughout the essay, especially when telling the same story.
- Don't use the same essay for different applications. Also do not "recycle" essays. If you are reapplying, you should write a new draft with any appropriate updates.

Editing Tips

- Read your essay out loud. Read it backwards (the last sentence first then work your way up the essay). These strategies will help you catch any awkward or clunky sentences.
- Have more than one person read your essay. You will get different perspectives and types of feedback that you can combine into an essay you are confident submitting.
- Take your time writing drafts. If you can always set the essay aside for some time and come back to it.

Elevating your personal statement

- Focus on your opening paragraph. Aim to grab the reader's attention and pull them into the rest of the essay. Sometimes it can help to write your opening paragraph last.
- Address and explain any perceived failure, flaws, or inconsistencies that you want to make sure are understood more clearly by the reader, sharing your insights to avoid assumptions (e.g. poor academic performance, legal issues, or gaps in education).
- Do your research. If you are submitting your essay to an individual school/program, do some research to find out what sets the school/program apart from others. Also consider specific faculty, curricular highlights, or program offerings that made you want to apply.
- Share unique experiences and reflections the best you can. The more distinct and tailored your experiences and reflections can be, the more personal the essay will be to you as an individual candidate, which should be your goal.

APPOINTMENT HOURS

Monday - Friday, 8 A.M. - 5 P.M.
Schedule on Handshake.
Log in at careers.vcu.edu.

OFFICE LOCATION

University Student Commons,
1st Floor, Rm. 143

CONTACT INFORMATION

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Appointments

If you are interested in making an appointment with one of our Career Advisors to review your resume or discuss any other career-related topics/questions, [see which advisor advises your industry of interest](#).

We recommend that first appointments with our office are with a career advisor. In addition, we offer several different appointment mediums to better meet your needs. Choose the medium that best fits your needs.

You can [schedule an appointment](#) by logging into Handshake and selecting the time that works best for you.

Events and Career Fairs

To see our upcoming events and career fairs you can check our [website](#) or log into [Handshake](#).

Questions

If you have any questions you can come into the office, call our front desk at (804) 828-1645, or email us at careers@vcu.edu.

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