

Writing a Personal Statement

A personal statement is an introduction of yourself to an audience, like a selection committee. This genre is unique in that it doesn't have a set style, voice or model that can be translated to each statement. This is because each statement is personalized, with the writer's distinctive story being shared with a specific audience. Below is a prompt with an example personal statement written in response:

Boise State University's M.S in Biology Grad School Application Prompt:

Include an application letter that is no more than 750 total words. If needed, request to be considered for a graduate assistantship in your letter. Describe your overall academic interests and goals. Why do you seek graduate training? What are your career goals? Why are you applying to this program? Include a description of your specific scientific interests. This is a great place to describe your motivation to further your training in science and research in your chosen field. Also, describe why your selected research lab(s) are a good fit with your interests. A summary of your previous research experience or jobs involving laboratory or fieldwork. Describe a challenge or obstacle you faced as a student, and how you overcame it.

Ever since I was a little girl, I have been fascinated with the world around me. I spent recess watching ants march in their line, going about tasks to keep them all alive. I would even try to help them along their way, like offering my foot as a bridge. This curiosity for surrounding life stayed with me into adulthood and motivated me to found a women's STEM club, stay resilient in the face of growing coursework, and pursue an internship at Zoo Boise. While all of these experiences have been invaluable, I intend to develop even more in Boise State's Master of Science in Biology program and the graduate assistant program.

As a graduate assistant, I would apply leadership skills I have continued to develop since my freshman year. Thanks to my biology professor, Dr. Murphy, I accepted my dream of becoming a scientist. Once, feeling rather discouraged about joining a male-dominated field, I came to her for advice. She had a brilliant idea: founding a STEM club for women! I was hesitant at first, but she pushed me to pursue it. By the end of the year, the club had ten members! Together, we did homework and helped each other with the tough sections. I received compliments on how I explained concepts in an entertaining and, therefore, engaging way. I still consider some of the members to be my closest friends, and we've encouraged each other to fight for a place in the fields we love.

My time in the BSU undergrad biology program allowed me to develop my skills further than I could in high school. I immensely enjoyed my classes, especially the zoology class on entomology. However, as my classes grew more difficult and field-focused, it became harder to balance between trips and homework. This did not always come without sacrifice, usually in the way of sleep. As my academic career progressed, I made a way to prioritize both my health and work. Along with some encouragement from the ladybugs on my desk, I graduated with honors.

One summer I interned at the Boise Zoo as part of their zookeeper team. My responsibilities included cleaning habitats, prepping food/feeding, observing animal behavior, developing enrichment activities, and maintaining animal records. I had the opportunity to practice presenting research for zoo guests and later a more in-depth presentation for staff. Having such different audiences gave me a better understanding of how to make information accessible to people with varying levels of background knowledge. The staff presentation was a long term project, in which I focused on the declining insect population, how that affected the animals I worked with, and ways to stop it. Knowing more on this subject gave me more motivation for where my life will be dedicated.

Pursuing a master's degree in grad school will make sure I can take care of my insect friends to the best of my ability as a research entomologist. It is common for the people around me to be surprised that I, a woman, love bugs as much as I do. I look forward to pushing against that stereotype and making sure the focus stays on keeping them around. With the help of this education, I hope to contribute to the wonderful body of knowledge on insects.

Source Attribution

Information in this sample letter is adapted from Purdue University Online Writing Lab. (n.d.) *Sample letters*.

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/professional_technical_writing/basic_business_letters/sample_letters.html

Quick Guide to Personal Statements

1. Take ownership of your experiences.

- Personal statements are specific to the writer, meaning they should use first-person language (e.g. "I" statements). Framing your experiences in first-person lets you take ownership for your lived experiences, personal goals, and story.
- Voice is how your personality comes through in the text; it shows in sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and tone. A personal statement is a perfect genre to experiment with writing in your own voice to show the audience who you are.

2. Tailor your personal statement to your audience and purpose.

- Your personal statement should be tailored to your specific audience and purpose. Keeping in mind your audience lets you decide what details are most important to include and how these details align you with your audience.
- Do some research on your audience to know what they're looking for, including their values and beliefs (i.e. mission statements, goals). Show you're a good fit by relating your stories and skills to these values.

3. Consider what type of structure best suits your purpose.

- Personal statements have no set formats; therefore, you decide how to structure your writing. Think about what type of personal statement best fits your audience's culture: Is it a professional law school who values formality, or an artistic program looking for creativity and artistic expression?
- Some writers decide to take a more professional academic approach, where their goals, achievements, and skills are set in response to program's prompts. Other programs reward a more creative, story-based approach where their goals, achievements, and skills are told through a meaningful narrative.

4. Focus on growth and future opportunity.

- Writers who incorporate a theme of growth show authenticity by acknowledging their hardships, but invite future opportunity by remaining hopeful. When mentioning a difficult situation, use the hardship you've endured as a way to share a positive outcome (e.g. a lesson learned or a new opportunity).
- Framing your story through a warm tone, where you explain your achievements through an excited and hopeful voice, shows how you learned. The goal isn't to downplay hardship, but to end on a positive note, showing how you're able to learn from and overcome adversity.

5. Show how you'll make the most of the program.

- Avoid writing a personal statement that argues for why you're most deserving of the scholarship, grant, or program than any other applicant. Instead, show why your experiences uniquely qualify you for the application by connecting your passions to the program and aligning yourself to the program's goals.
- Share who you want to be in the future, addressing what about your past makes you who you are, to argue for how you'll use the program to pursue your goals; moreover, how your goals will benefit the goals of the program (i.e. how it'll contribute to public research, the university, or broader community).

6. Set yourself apart from other applicants.

- A selection committee is looking to understand what makes you a unique individual based on your written experiences. Incorporating specific details in your experience makes for an application that is honest to who you and you alone are.
- Committees read many applications and there are common phrases they may encounter in their field, such as "I like kids" for pediatrics applicants or "I have always loved animals" for veterinarian students. The best way to stand out is to be yourself!

Key Questions To Ask Yourself

- Who do you want to be? How will this statement express your personal goals?
- Who are you? Make sure the reader has a personal story and or experience they can remember you by.
- What are your passions, morals, and traits? When people describe you, what do they say?
- Why is this program the right place for you? How can your life connect to the goals, missions, and values of the program (e.g. the university or organization you're applying to)?
- Why is this grant, scholarship, or program the right fit for you? How does it connect to your studies, future plans, and passions? (Show this through your stories and experiences.)