

WRITING THE PERSONAL STATEMENT: SOME TIPS

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Fretting over your personal statement? Here are a few tips I've garnered from chats with university admissions personnel, a conference at the National Collegiate Honors Council, and a talk by Raschel Greenberg, Academic Counselor at the UCI School of Humanities.



First of all, do *not* think of your essay as something you do at the last minute. It takes thought. Experts advise that you allow several weeks (some say *months*) to prepare it. Begin by considering your purpose—admission or scholarship—then adjust your essay accordingly.

So many personal statements cross their desks that many university committees don't get past the first bland paragraph. So make yours irresistible! Begin with a compelling quotation or an attention-getting (but not weird) statement. Or recount a fascinating anecdote that illuminates your reason for pursuing the school or course of study you've chosen.



Let your readers know who you are. Do you love to fence or play the lute? Tell them. Show them what makes *you* stand out from all those others with high GPAs, jobs and volunteer work.

Avoid tired generalities. *Every* successful student is “dedicated to education”; you don't need to tell your readers you are too—your grades and participation in honors or other academic pursuits already show that. Describe what you've *done* that distinguishes you from the pack.

Do you conduct chemistry experiments in your garage? Did you teach yourself sign language just because...? Have you come to college galvanized by a flash of insight that came upon you during your business or military career? Or did a life-

“What do you want to contribute to the world? Tell them . . .”

changing epiphany, about an idea or your profession, spark new enthusiasm here at GWC?

Your readers want to know what your *passion* is. *Why* do you want an education—at the school you selected? What do you plan to *do* with your degree?

What do you want to *contribute* to the world? Did you start raising dogs because their sociability intrigued you—and later realize you'd love being a vet or a canine research scientist? Do you obsess over the law or poli sci or ecology because you want to become a leader and save the world? Well, then let your readers know. Tell them about *you*. And tell them how an educa-

tion at *their* university can serve your goals.

Don't be shy about your achievements. You don't want to sound boastful, but you do need to highlight your accomplishments. Use personal narrative, explanations, and testimony from others to illustrate your points. And be specific: *details* help your readers envision what you're talking about. So write in pictures when you can.

Bear in mind, too, that a cool epigraph can instantly set you apart.

Also worthwhile, according to Angela Skrivanich, Transfer Specialist at UC Berkeley: describe a significant intellectual experience. For example, did you have an *aha!* moment in your lit class? Did you discover in your speech class that you have a flair for leadership? Did you turn the job of class Advocate into a major contribution to your fellow students? If so, then *describe* what you did (and what you learned from doing it).



Describe an *intellectual* experience you value: some book, concept or teacher that set you pondering. Telling about an honors high point would remind the committee that you've been an *honors* student—a significant factor to admissions personnel, according to Skrivanich. And UCI's

Raschel Greenberg, who holds the HTCC in high regard, advises you to mention that you presented research findings at the annual HTCC-UCI scholarship conference (assuming you did, of course!)—she’s always favorably impressed to learn about that. (Remember to spell out its full name: The Honors Transfer Council of California.)



Take care with your writing. Use fresh phrasing—your *own* words. Don’t bore your reader with stale thoughts and cliché expressions. Be imaginative. Apt, fresh metaphors or similes, if they clarify your points, add pizzazz. Make your readers *want* to read past that first paragraph—then help them be pleased that they did!

But do not exceed the word limit—not even by one.

Ask a bright, critical peer to critique your essay for you. Frequently. And check his or her work. Because even the brightest of friends. . . . And

“Let them know if you’ve taken honors classes.”

because competition is fierce. If you write vaguely, mangle grammar, misspell words, punctuate foolishly, or fail to follow instructions, you will have wasted your time. Yes, even if you’re the best qualified applicant, careless errors will land your statement in the REJECT pile. So follow *all* instructions *precisely*. Proofread with keen attentiveness—and ask your reader friend to be unsparing!

As often as you need to, leave your essay for a few days; then come back to it. Try reviewing it as if you were

a critical, sceptical college prof. If that means you rewrite it ten or twenty times, don’t feel like the lone rewriter—your competition is re-writing right along with you!

Once you’re satisfied that you’ve given it your all, set your essay aside. The next morning scrutinize it one last time, paying attention to the tiniest details—including how neat it looks. (Appearance may be superficial, but it matters!) Then send off your creation, confident you have done your best.



Finally—treat that long-suffering, generous friend of yours to a well-earned brunch!

N.B. For additional tips, contact the GWC Transfer Center at 714.895.8794.