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Preparing to Write Personal Statements for College Applications and Dos and Don’ts of Personal Statements

The Writing & Learning Studio Room 4301 Shoreline Community College rev: 12-13-16

**The questions below are common on college application materials. They will help you reflect upon your life and provide lots of possible content for your statement, so before you start writing your personal statement, take time to brainstorm on the questions below!**

**Step 1:** Read through all the questions below and mark the ones relevant to you.

1. What is your **major** or field of study? How and when did you originally become interested in this field, and what have you since learned that has further stimulated your interest?
2. What are your **career goals**?

3. What **personal characteristics** (e.g., integrity, compassion, persistence) do you possess that would

enhance your prospects for success in the field or profession? What event, example, or situation demonstrates that you have these characteristics?

4. What **skills** (e.g., leadership, communication, problem-solving) do you possess that would help you be

successful in the field or profession? What event, example, or situation demonstrates that you have these skills?

5. What’s special, **unique**, **distinctive**, or impressive about you or your life story?

6. Have you had to overcome any **unusual obstacles or hardships** in your life? If so, how does that

contribute to your potential for success in college?

7. How has your own **cultural history** enriched and/or challenged you? (Culture may be defined broadly,

drawn from ethnic background, customs, values, and ideas of a person’s family, community, and/or social environment.

8. Are there any **gaps or discrepancies** in your academic record that you should explain?

9. If **work experiences** have consumed significant periods of time during your college years, how has the

work contributed to your **personal growth**?

10. What are the specific reasons you wish to study at this university?

11. Why should the admissions committee be interested in you? Why might you be **a stronger candidate**

for this college—and more successful and effective in the profession or field—than other applicants?

**Step 2:** Return to the first relevant question you marked, write that question on a piece of paper and

do a brainstorm on it. Jot down all your thoughts, feelings, etc. Don’t edit yourself!

**Step 3:** Using a clean sheet of paper, return to the next relevant question, and write that question on the paper. Do a brainstorm. Follow this same process with each of the questions you marked.

Of course, if the college(s) asks other questions, you should brainstorm on those, too.

**Step 4:** You might not do all three steps in one sitting. But once you have completed your brainstorming,

it’s time to decide **which things you might want to include** in your statement. During your brainstorming, did any **theme** emerge? What **connections** do you see in your brainstorming lists? Can you think of a **main idea** for your statement?

**Step 5:** Now you can decide how to **organize** your ideas into an essay. What do you want to discuss

first? You can organize your ideas in different ways, depending upon your purpose: from most important to least important (or *vice versa*), from general to specific (or *vice versa*), or chronologically (time sequence). Think about your audience. What impression do you want to give them from the start to the end of your statement?

Dos and Don’ts of Personal Statements

Do: Don’t:

(1) Follow all directions; answer all (1) Don’t guess what’s required.

questions.

(2) Start early, get feedback, and revise. (2) Don’t procrastinate and don’t go from start

And revise again. to finish without input from others.

(3) Concentrate on one theme. (3) Don’t make it a resume or repeat things

already mentioned on your application.

(4) Make your focus relevant to (4) Don’t try to cover too many topics or

your field of study. appear unfocused. If it isn’t clearly

relevant to your application, don’t include it.

(5) Show your personality; be unique. (5) Don’t use clichés, lists, or a

chronological history.

(6) Be straightforward and (6) Don’t write about everyone but yourself.

confident; show your strengths. Mention others only to illustrate your

passion, achievements, or future goals.

(7) Use vivid details and examples. All claims (7) Don’t write general statements without

you make must be **supported by evidence.** specific support.

(8) Explain inconsistencies in your history. (8) Don’t make it a sob story.

(9) Leave your readers with a (9) Don’t make apologies or appear

positive impression of your ability to indecisive.

succeed in your studies or the program.

(10) Proofread your final writing **out loud,** (10) Don’t casually read it over one time.

Reading **slowly** and **carefully**—at least

two or three times.

(11) Create different statements (11) Don’t use the same statement for

for different schools. every school.

Online Resources for Personal Statements

❖ **University of Washington, Undergraduate Admissions (for Transfer Students)**

Personal statement information:

https://admit.washington.edu/Admission/Transfer/Statement

❖ **Online Writing Lab (OWL) from the Purdue University Writing Lab**

Includes brainstorming questions, general writing advice, samples of successful statements, and advice

from admissions representatives.

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/