

# Organization for Comprehensive Personal Statement

To write a personal statement, let's begin with a general, comprehensive approach. This means that rather than develop your statement for a specific purpose, you will consider how you would respond to the three main personal statement types in general.

## Shifting Structure in Personal Statements

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Personal statements follow a looser, more flexible structure than traditional five-paragraph essays you may have studied for the TOEFL test or in school. You don't need to have exactly 5 paragraphs developed in 3rd person with X number of cited sources. That is NOT what the admissions officers or hiring committees are looking for.

Timed writing tests like the TOEFL independent task evaluate whether you know the parts of an essay, can write grammatically with accurate word choice, and can effectively use essay structure. Admissions essays and cover letters generally are not evaluated for essay grammar, word choice, or structure with points for a score. Admissions officers read admissions essays to determine if you as a person are a good fit for their program and have the qualities they want their students to have like diligence or creativity. Hiring managers want to know if you are a good fit for their company. Having good development, grammar, and word choice is still important, but only because having those things will make it easier for admissions officers and hiring managers to understand your ideas and for them to know that you can communicate well.

The same is true for the essay structure. Admissions officers and hiring managers are not going to grade you like a teacher and give points on whether you had a concluding sentence at the end of a body paragraph or used X number of details in the introduction. They don't expect five-paragraph TOEFL-style essays. However, following the principles of good structure will help your ideas be more easily understood by the admissions officers and hiring managers reading them. Your essay will still have a beginning where you need to state your main idea, a middle where you develop your idea, and an end where you remind the reader of your main idea.

How you use different types of sentences like hooks, thesis statements, topic sentences, supporting sentences, concluding sentences, restated thesis statements etc. is your choice. If you are writing a personal statement for a writing teacher teaching you personal statements, they may grade you as part of school. But, otherwise, it is up to you as a writer to decide what type of sentences and organization are needed to express your ideas best. You are still expected to have a main idea and to develop it through support, but how you do that is your choice.

## The Hook

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A personal statement needs a hook, just like any other type of writing. In fact, a personal statement is almost more in need of getting the reader's attention early because you want to be memorable among the many statements the reviewers will see.

While this can be done in the usual ways you have learned for writing hooks, one of the most common types is the use of an anecdote. An anecdote is simply an interesting and relevant true story. A personal statement often uses a specific story to illustrate important attributes or to create an organization for highlighting experience.

## Anecdote Example

Essay Prompt: <https://edtechbooks.org/-AHdW>

One of my challenging experiences was when I was applying to come to the United States and the borders started to close because of COVID-19. That part of my life was terrible because I had made plans for when I was supposed to start studying. But then things changed for everyone, and we needed to adapt to it. I did not give up and kept on being patient. In fact, while I was waiting for my interview with the embassy, I took online courses. I decided to use my time wisely until the borders started opening again.

## The Thesis

Your personal statement should have a clear sentence that directly expresses your purpose. Your goal should be abundantly clear in this sentence and all other points in your personal statement need to support this main idea.

While the rest of the personal statement may loosely use what you have learned in your writing classes so far, the thesis statement will still need to be strong and effective. Because this is a *personal* statement, you can use 1st person.

## Effective Thesis Statement Review

An effective thesis statement...

- addresses the **prompt** if there is one\* (i.e., answers the question).
- is usually at the **end** of the 1st paragraph.
- controls the content of **all** of the body paragraphs.
- is a **complete** sentence.
- does **not announce** the topic (e.g., "I'm going to talk about why I am a great fit for your company.").
- should **not** simply be a **fact** (e.g., "Many people have goals.").
- should **not** be **too general** (e.g., "Education is good.").
- should **not** be **too specific** (e.g., "My pursuit of higher education was inspired by my 99-year-old grandmother from Madrid who always came to visit for the holidays with homemade cookies and told me that an education is the key to business success because she had not finished school but made her own business that struggled until she decided to save up and sacrifice her time to go back to school for higher education which led to her having her own successful bakery.").
- may **state** or **imply** main points (e.g., "Attending X college will help me achieve my goal of becoming a financial advisor" vs. "Attending X college will help me achieve my goal of becoming a financial advisor through X's internship program and X's student-focused approach.").

## Supporting Ideas

The remainder of your personal statement should focus on clearly establishing your qualifications and experience, demonstrating your character and personal qualities, and indicating your potential for growth. This may be done with a variety of examples or one extended description that highlights all of the necessary traits that set you apart.

You can use what you learned about anecdotes for the hook and apply it to the middle section of your personal statement. You might have many personal examples that are relevant true stories, or you might tell one longer personal example that is a relevant true story. You don't *have to* use anecdotes for the supporting details; you can use any other type of supporting detail if you think it will better support your main idea.

The examples that you give should clearly support the main idea you are trying to express to the reader. They should be unified, developed, and cohesive. If the example(s) that you use and how you write them is clear enough in its connection to the main idea, then you may leave the interpretation to the reader. The reader can then infer important ideas and connections. If the example(s) that you use and how you write them is not obviously connected or clear, you will need to add 1-2 sentences explaining how that experience connects to the main idea of the personal statement. This is like adding commentary or explanation after a quote you use in a regular school essay. It helps your reader to understand why you included the example. Why did the experience you described matter in regard to answering the prompt?

While it is good to focus on strengths, you may sometimes need to write about your weaknesses. This may be because it was specifically requested such as when a college asks you to write about how you overcame a weakness, or it may come up naturally even when not requested by a prompt. For example, if you are a recent high school or college graduate with little work experience for the job you are applying for, you may want to acknowledge that weakness in your cover letter. Then, you will have the opportunity to spin it to be a strength.

Spin is where you present information that would be perceived one way, so that it is instead perceived in a different way. Spin can be positive (I am new, but I am eager to learn.) or negative (He has 40 years of experience, but that means he's old and probably out of touch with current trends). Usually, you will use positive spin. Just like how an influencer wants to use the best lighting for their photos and videos to look good, you want to show yourself in the best light. Keep in mind that it is okay to spin weaknesses into strengths, but you should still be truthful. No metaphorical photoshopping allowed.

## Conclusion

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Finally, your comprehensive statement should have a concluding sentence that recommends you to the reader. This final sentence should be memorable and emphasize your purpose in sending this information.

The conclusion for personal statements may be difficult to write because it requires reflection and writing about abstract topics.

You should answer these questions in your conclusion:

- Why does this information I told you, the reader, matter?
- How does this show I am a good candidate for your college, business, or program?

## Writing a Comprehensive Personal Statement

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Here are some things to keep in mind as you write this general form of a personal statement.

1. The terms *general* and *comprehensive* here are about purpose, not content. This version is meant to be a starting point for you to use when you are called on to provide a personal statement. Therefore, the examples, reasons, and descriptions should be powerful, clear, and detailed. Once you have a comprehensive statement you are happy with, it will be easier to make adjustments to it for a specific situation.
2. Because it is a *personal* statement, remember to focus on yourself and present yourself honestly and fully. You do not need to adhere to the same rigid writing style as typical academic writing.
3. Your writing should be full of energy. You want to present the best version of yourself in the writing. If you think of this as a preliminary interview, you can imagine the combination of positivity and professionalism you would want to present. Especially if you are sharing an experience that had some negative aspects, remember to focus on the positive side and the lessons learned.
4. Make it stand out! Imagine sitting in an office for hours looking at short essay after short essay. You are trying to narrow down the search for a new employee. As a writer, you need to pop off of the page and share something that will stay with the reader.

## Exercises

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### Exercise 4.5: Most Relevant

**Part A:** A student is applying for a college program that doesn't have a specific essay prompt, but still requires a statement of purpose. He has already decided to highlight his problem-solving skills. Now he is deciding what anecdote would be most relevant to his main idea. Read the options he brainstormed and choose the one you find the most relevant.

**Prompt:** None

**Goal:** Show my problem-solving skills

1. Volunteering at a local food bank in high school
2. Carefully learning to make bread from my grandmother
3. Learning perseverance that basketball season that we didn't win until the very end of the season
4. Collaborating with my coworker to address an issue with our project at work
5. Showing initiative when I noticed a system at work was broken and I researched and proposed a way to solve it

**Part B:** Discuss your decision with a partner.

- Did you choose the same option or different options?
- Why did you choose the option that you did?
- How would you use it in an essay?

## Exercise 4.6: Storytelling

Personal stories are a useful tool for showing your points rather than listing them.

Look at the list of points below and write a short story (5 sentences or less) that illustrates your character, skills, or potential. Try to start your story with a strong hook to pull the reader into the story and clearly relate it to the desired qualifications.

1. Resolving conflict
2. Integrity
3. Leadership
4. Communication skills
5. Dealing with disappointment

## Exercise 4.7: Discussion

Discuss the following questions with a partner.

- How do you establish your qualifications? Why would your previous experience matter?
- How can you demonstrate your character or personal qualities? Can't you just say, "I'm hardworking?" or "I'm honest."?
- How can you show your potential for growth?

## Exercise 4.8: Explain to Add Cohesion

A student decided to develop a cover letter using the anecdote idea about maintaining a high GPA by turning in every assignment. She has already written about her experience striving hard to turn in every assignment even while working on campus and performing in the community orchestra. Her goal is to illustrate her diligence and consistency.

This is a cover letter, so there is no prompt. But, all jobs have the implied prompt of "Why should we hire you?"

Write 2-3 sentences that show why the experience of maintaining a high GPA by turning in every assignment demonstrates her diligence and consistency.

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## Exercise 4.9: Showing Weaknesses in a Positive Light

Think of an academic or professional weakness you have. You can also see the list of points below for ideas. Brainstorm ways to show that weakness in a positive light.

Spin your weakness into a strength. Write 1-2 sentences to show your positive character, skill, or potential.

1. Meeting deadlines
2. Teamwork
3. Critical thinking
4. Technical knowledge
5. Training

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