

Personal Statement/ Letter of Intent



What Is It? Sometimes called a personal statement, letter of intent, application essay or statement of purpose, it is a written document that allows you to market yourself by providing information not found elsewhere in your application. It is often required with your application to academic programs such as graduate or professional schools.

How Does It Differ From Other Application Documents? A personal statement is a unique document because as the name suggests, it is quite personal. It gives the reader the chance to get to know you and for you to sell yourself. A personal statement often has a narrative structure: you can use it to tell a story, interwoven with commentary about the skills and knowledge that you have gained throughout your experience. It is also an opportunity to explain struggles that you have faced that you want the reader to take into consideration when looking at your application.

Tips and Tricks:

- Follow the length and word count specified by the program of study. If unknown, try to keep your personal statement around 2-3 double spaced pages.
- Use specific examples to demonstrate your skills and explain how your skills have served you in past positions and programs
- If you have a gap in your academic or career timeline, or a major change in grades due to a life stressor (illness, poverty, loss, etc.) explain this and show how you remained resilient in the face of obstacles. Ensure that you make clear to the reader that you are now able to effectively deal with the stressor you faced, or a similar stressor if it should occur.
- Personalize it to each school! If you are applying to multiple schools make sure that you change your personal statement for each school to comment on why you are specifically interested in *their* program.
- Don't be vague. When writing about any given experience, you should be using the example to make a specific point.

Before You Begin Writing:

- Research the school and the program. Admissions websites often have information about what qualities they are looking for in their students, which can be helpful to use as a guide when writing your statement.
- Some programs ask very specific questions in their application process so ensure you fully understand what is asked of you. They may give exactly what they are looking for you to answer along with paragraph length. If you are struggling to understand the prompt reach out to the admissions office.
- Research courses offered that apply to your career goals.
- Determine your purpose in graduate work.

Writing Your Letter:

Plan It!

- Organize and brainstorm ideas for the personal statement. If you are asked to answer specific questions, these can serve as a guide in planning your document. Be sure to answer any questions fully and be clear and precise.
- Consider using a thematic or chronological pattern of organization, pulling relevant accomplishments from points in your life.
- Separate the letter into sections as you would in an argumentative essay. Each paragraph should have a topic/quality you are focusing on with a short explanation and how it relates to this program/your career.

Write It!

- It can be hard to get started so don't over think it- just write. You can go back and fix things after you have words on a page.
- Above all, provide information about you as a person; *you* are the subject of the statement.
- Remember that the opening paragraph of your statement is very important. Consider writing the intro and conclusion after completing the rest of the statement.
- Make it clear to the reader that not only will the program benefit you, but you will benefit the program. Whether it be through your experiences, attitude, knowledge or skills, be confident and show what a superb acquisition to the department you will be.
- Talk about experiences you have had, through paid work, volunteering, community involvement, or academia that have contributed to your personal growth and relate these to your decision to apply to your given program. What drives you to pursue this opportunity? What are your long term goals in this area?

Edit It!

- Fix any punctuation, grammar, or spelling mistakes, be clear and concise in the format. Reading your entire essay out loud is a good technique as it will allow you to catch mistakes more easily and point to places where the text may sound awkward.
- If a page or word length was specified by the department, ensure that you have stayed within it.
- Avoid using clichés and do not use gimmicks. Focus on the qualities and experiences that make you unique.
- Check to make sure you avoided overly informal language, contractions, and slang and that the first time you use an acronym, you have spelled out what it is.
- Make it Sparkle: Hone in on writing style concerns. Make sure your language is lively, concise, and effective.
- Ask others to review it; show your letter to people you trust such as faculty, family and friends, people who know you well and have excellent writing skills.
- Remember the letter serves as an example of your writing skills. It is your work and you need to be comfortable with what you submit!

Try This, Not That

Instead of: “I want to pursue a Masters of Sociology at your institution because I am incredibly passionate about sociology. I am motivated to gain knowledge and grow my skills and know that your institution will provide me a great education.”

Try: “I am confident that Dalhousie’s Master of Sociology program will provide me with the best education possible. As a student who is incredibly passionate about the study of social inequality, especially as it relates to crime, I am excited at the prospect of working within a department that considers social justice and inequality to be one of its main research expertise. Furthermore, I am aware that the Atlantic Institute of Criminology is housed within your department and I am thrilled that I may have the chance to consult with the Institute of Criminology on my research.”

Instead of writing one broad, general personal statement, make it specific to each school. Show that you have done your research on their institution, and name specific professors, research, or opportunities that excite you about each institution!

Instead of: “I was involved in 6 extra-curricular activities in University. I played varsity soccer, was on the debate team, was in a student society for both my major and my minor and I volunteered at both the campus foodbank and with a fundraising group for my local children’s hospital”

Try: “I have been involved in a wide breadth of activities during my time in University. The one that was the most rewarding was my time on the Dalhousie University debate team. On a personal level, my experience in debate competitions has helped me make friends all over the world, improved my confidence, and instilled in me a love of international travel. On an intellectual level, they exposed me to a wide variety of topics I would otherwise have never considered. I learned to think critically and examine an issue from multiple perspectives. I know that there is much more to being a lawyer than just arguing, but I believe that many of the skills I attained through debating will contribute to my success in law school and a legal career.”

Instead of trying to squeeze in all of your extra-curricular experiences, choose one or two meaningful experiences to focus on, and detail how it has provided you with skills and knowledge that will help you in the program you are applying to.

Instead of: “The reason that my grades in first year are bad is because I had health problems that were very hard on me. I was extremely sick so I couldn’t get out of bed to go to school or study.”

Try: “In second year I struggled with my health. This impacted many aspects of my life, including my grades. I am proud to say that these struggles do not define me; I reached out for help and received the care I needed, learned to manage my own health care, and came out a more resilient person in the long run. Since then my grades and my health have skyrocketed and I feel confident that I can handle anything life throws my way”

It is OK to have faced a personal struggle- most people have! If you choose to discuss it in your personal statement avoid taking only about how difficult it was. Instead, use it as a learning experience and demonstrate how you have grown by overcoming the obstacle you faced.

NEED MORE HELP?

Check Out These Great Resources on Campus:

Bissett Student Success Center- 902.494.3537

Dalhousie Writing Centre- 902.494.1963

