

# Personal Statements

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# What is a Personal Statement?

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- ▶ Sometimes called a “Statement of Purpose” or a “Reasons Statement”
  - ▶ Names and descriptions can guide you to appropriate emphasis
- ▶ Four basic jobs to do:
  - ▶ Characterize your qualifications
  - ▶ Indicate your fit with the organization
  - ▶ Demonstrate some knowledge of that organization
  - ▶ Present your goals or plans for the future



# How “personal” should it be?

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- ▶ Despite the name, it’s not usually “personal”
  - ▶ They don’t want to hear about your love life, high school, hobbies, or how you spend your time on the weekend.
  - ▶ Some websites recommend telling a story about your life (Purdue OWL). I find this approach cloying and juvenile.
  - ▶ I want to see professional substance rather than personal charm. When you lean on personal stories, I assume there’s not much substance there.



# How “personal” should it be?

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## ▶ Exceptions

- ▶ Fellowships that require some personal criteria as qualification, such as racial or religious identity, military service, history of poverty or disadvantage, etc.
  - ▶ But only talk about the right kind of personal!
- ▶ Truly extraordinary experiences
  - ▶ But not the wrong kind of extraordinary!
- ▶ When they ask for it



# Demonstration of communication skills

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- ▶ Flawless grammar
- ▶ Proper decorum and manners
- ▶ Clear expression of ideas
- ▶ Substance
- ▶ Style (but not forced or fake)



# Portrait of yourself as a professional

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- ▶ The more you can show that you're thinking of yourself as a professional some years down the road, the better.
- ▶ Much of this is not about writing; it's about having a realistic sense of the standards in the field, and of the progression through the field's various stages.



# Portrait of yourself as a professional

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For law school, you should have a substantive vision of yourself as a lawyer someday, and that should come through in your statement.

Help them imagine you as a lawyer. What do you want to spend your life working on, and why?

If your vision of being a lawyer seems drawn from primetime TV, it will be discrediting.



# Portrait of yourself as a professional

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- ▶ For an English department, what are your intellectual commitments? How did you develop them? You should have intellectual commitments!
- ▶ What do you want to *change*?
- ▶ If you just say you've always loved reading, it will make you seem superficial and unserious.





# Demonstration of complete honesty

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- ▶ No stretchers
- ▶ No embellished credentials
- ▶ Truthful expression of your actual ambitions and plans

(employers and admissions committees are on high alert for insincerity, and they have more experience at detecting it than you have at concealing it.)



# What is a personal statement NOT?

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- ▶ **A prose version of your CV or resume.**  
Don't summarize purely factual information already presented elsewhere.
- ▶ **Trite.** Avoid clichés. For instance, no personal statement should begin with the story of someone's death.
- ▶ **A trip down memory lane.** Nothing from high school or childhood, unless your childhood was really extraordinary (your grew up traveling with missionaries in Somalia).
- ▶ **An apology** for, or defense of, your perceived shortcomings.



# What is a personal statement NOT?

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- ▶ **An expression of grievances**, however brief or mild, or a characterization of the author as a victim.
- ▶ **Grandiose**. You don't have to rid the world of nuclear weapons or eradicate child poverty. Have realistic goals.
- ▶ **Flashy, gimmicky**. No fancy fonts or layout. No literary tricks. Real example: writing the statement as if it were penned by a friendly witch speaking on your behalf. (Wish I were joking.)
- ▶ **Unduly contentious or controversial**. Your law school will not be impressed that you took on abortion in 500 words or less. Be very careful with overtly political stances too.



# Better personal statements

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- ▶ Make many drafts. By the time you get it right, your first draft will look terrible. Once your first draft starts to make you actually cringe, you're getting closer to finished.
- ▶ Show it to a lot of different people. Judging whether your tone is off is like judging whether you have bad breath: you can't do yourself.
- ▶ Try to integrate the different relevant parts of your life into some unified whole.
- ▶ Remind yourself that your audience reads hundreds of statements. They know the *real* versions of originality, ambition, and sincerity very, very well.



# Ethical considerations

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- ▶ **Never stretch, embellish, or exaggerate**
  - ▶ Creating titles for yourself.
  - ▶ Using exaggerated language to describe more routine responsibilities: “directed,” “supervised,” “managed.”
  - ▶ Mischaracterizing accomplishments: presenting an internship as a job; representing a standard title as a special award.
  - ▶ Arranging your statement so the reader naturally draws the wrong conclusion: referring to “my book,” when you edited it but did not author it.



# Ethical considerations

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- ▶ The problem with all of these is the same: it rarely helps, and often hurts.
- ▶ What would really help are likely to be outrageous lies: pretending you won a Rhodes Scholarship.
  - ▶ But then you'd eventually get caught. And fired.
- ▶ Most people fudge the little stuff that won't help anyway.
  - ▶ Exaggerating titles; puffing up credentials. Why bother?
  - ▶ Readers are good at detecting this, and when they do, they see the applicant as unreliable.



# Resumes and CVs

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- ▶ A **resume** is a short portrait of relevant experience.
  - ▶ Most employers want a resume
  - ▶ Each resume is specially tailored to each position.
  - ▶ 1 page for college students
  - ▶ 2 pages only if more than 10 years of experience
- ▶ A **CV** is a comprehensive list of activities.
  - ▶ Academic employers and some European employers often want a CV
  - ▶ No length limit, but don't pad it out. Rare for graduate student to have more than four pages.
  - ▶ Minimal tailoring of CV: only for drastically different fields (academia vs business) but not for specific jobs.

