Writing a Personal Statement: Tips from the Writing Center

Consider Your Audience’s Needs

People who read your personal statement want to know if you’re a good fit for their program. In a competitive application process, readers look for applicants who have had the curricular, extracurricular, and/or work experiences that prepare them to succeed in a particular program.

A Personal Statement Is a Story

Obviously, you can’t and shouldn’t tell your entire life story. Carefully read and fully respond to the specific prompt. Many prompts ask you to tell a focused story that connects these dots:

- What has led you to apply to this particular program?
- What makes you qualified for this particular program? What preparation do you have that will guarantee that you'll succeed, or at least make the most of the program or opportunity?
- How will being a part of this program help you achieve your long-term goal(s)?

How to Set Yourself Apart from Other Applicants

- Show, don’t (just) tell. Generic claims about your love of learning, helping people, or exploring the world don’t give your readers any sense of who you are and what motivates you. If you make broad claims, support them with specifics from your background.
- Use specifics (e.g., brief anecdotes) that draw your readers in and allow them both to see what you’ve experienced and to understand how you’ve made sense of those experiences. Consider describing relevant “lightbulb” moments, defining experiences, or turning points.
- Show enthusiasm, even passion, through your descriptions of what you’ve done (but try not to say “I am passionate about…,” because that’s just telling, not showing).

How to Write About Yourself Without Appearing Arrogant

Carleton students worry about this—a lot. It is possible to talk about your accomplishments without seeming like a jerk or an egomaniac. Here are two sample sentences that illustrate how you can do this:

- “Last year, Professor X invited me to join her in presenting at the American Chemical Society’s national meeting in Indianapolis. It gave me a front-row seat to current findings with respect to [something scientific], and it was exciting to talk with other researchers working on the same problem.”
- “Last summer, thanks to a Summer Research Grant awarded by my college, I was able to work with immigrant women at a free clinic in Baltimore, which complicated my understanding of [something].”

Writing Center Resources

Online

Read advice from students who’ve applied and been successful. Visit apps.carleton.edu/campus/asc/writingresources/personal_statement/

Books

The Writing Center has a few books on “writing the winning personal statement,” which you’re invited to peruse. You don’t even need an appointment. Just come to the second floor of Scoville and ask a consultant to show you our books. Books can’t leave the Writing Center, but you can read all you want (or borrow them for a few minutes to scan or photocopy some pages).

Writing Consultants

Drop in or, even better, make an appointment (writingcenter.carleton.edu). You can ask a consultant for any kind of feedback, including whether you’re getting your points across to strangers, using an appropriate tone, organizing your ideas in a logical fashion, using effective language, and/or following generally accepted grammar and punctuation rules.