



Office of Scholars and Fellowships

Writing a Great Personal Statement

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It can be intimidating to write a personal statement. Whether you are applying for a national fellowship, graduate school, or another post-graduate position, you may find yourself with more questions than answers as you wade into this unique genre of writing.

Generally, a personal statement should articulate your motivations and substantive qualifications for the opportunity you are applying for. It is where you make the case for your fit for the fellowship or program. It is also where you can tell your 'story' – the story behind your work. The personal statement tends to be more academically and professionally focused than a personal blog post, but also more insightful and narrative than a cover letter.

Here are some tips to get you started.

(1) Identify your academic and professional goals

Clear academic and professional goals are at the heart of a great personal statement. Your goals determine why the opportunity you are applying for makes sense for you. Almost all fellowship selection criteria include some variation of “this opportunity relates to the applicant’s academic and professional goals.” For readers to understand why you are a good candidate for the opportunity you seek, they must understand what your goals are.

Feeling unsure about your goals? That is normal. A personal statement may be the first time you write down a clear future plan for yourself, let alone communicate that plan to outside readers. You should seek advising to help identify your academic and professional goals and ensure those goals align with the opportunity you are seeking.

As you write about your goals, it is important to resist the urge to name five potential life plans, which can be confusing and unhelpful to readers. Try not to subtly undermine yourself by using language like “if it is possible, I would maybe like to.” For the purposes of the personal statement: you will! So, use strong declarative language like “I will” and “I plan to.”

Be as specific as possible in describing your future path. This may require some homework. For instance, let’s say that you hope to work in the non-profit sector. Can you be specific about the mission of an organization you hope to work for or the type of work you would like to do? If you will need a graduate degree to achieve your professional goals, try to name what the degree is. You can give examples of organizations you could

see yourself working for or specific graduate programs that interest you. These examples can help clarify where you are headed.

One day, you may stray from the path you describe in your personal statement. That is OK. Chart a plausible path that is in true alignment with your past experiences and future ambitions. Ultimately, the personal statement is an exercise and a snapshot in time.

(2) Narrate how you developed your academic and professional goals

Once your goals are established, another key purpose of the personal statement is to develop a narrative about how you arrived to those goals. This should be the focused and curated version; not everything will fit. Only bring in personal, professional, and academic experiences that are directly relevant to your goals and the opportunity at hand.

A common error is to walk the reader through everything you did before you found your path: “I thought I wanted to be a veterinarian for my whole life and pursued A, B, and C things before I discovered I hated veterinary medicine. Now I want to be a diplomat!” Don’t use space to talk about paths you are no longer on. Instead, frame any past experience you bring in as relevant and transferrable to your current path: “My interest in diplomacy began with X experience. I have started building upon that interest by pursuing Y and Z things.”

When thinking about how you arrived to your goals, it can be helpful to create an experience bank to keep track of everything. In your experience bank, dump all work, research, academic coursework, extra-curriculars, leadership experiences, and personal connections to the opportunity. Go beyond what fits in your 1-page résumé. Include those personal items that may not appear in your professional documents – things from your background or motivations.

Using your experience bank, you can then start to try to draw connections between items. Did a class research project spark your interest in a particular social problem, which then led you to a volunteer engagement? Did a personal connection to a disease draw you toward scientific research that would help cure that disease? Connections between past experiences can form the basis of a great personal statement. As you write, remember to always keep focused on the opportunity you are applying for.

Ultimately, you may find that drafting a personal statement is a meaningful process. It can allow you to discover and identify connections that you may not have thought about previously.

(3) Make claims about yourself and develop them with evidence

The personal statement should be a persuasive document. Generally, you need to make an argument about yourself in relation to the opportunity you are applying for and support that argument. You wouldn’t want to make vague, unsubstantiated claims in academic writing, and the same goes for a personal statement.

Stay away from vague filler statements such as “I am excited” or “this will be a great opportunity.” These tend to be obvious and/or impossible to substantiate with any evidence from your unique experiences. If you are not sure whether you have a vague filler statement, ask yourself: could any applicant say this? If the answer is yes, you could probably use that space to say something more specific and rooted in your unique perspective.

Stick to claims about yourself that you can develop through evidence from your past. One way to do this is to set up paragraphs with strong topic sentences. For instance: “During college, I have proactively sought opportunities to develop my knowledge of Russian language and culture.” This is a claim that you could then develop over the course of the paragraph, bringing in evidence such as academic coursework, study abroad, or extra-curriculars.

(4) Get feedback and revise, revise, revise

Personal statement writing can be challenging. You should save enough time to go through multiple drafts. You should get feedback from advisors, mentors, and people familiar with the opportunity.

Because you will be seeking outside feedback, it is important to not get too attached to your writing. While it may be easy to see that an academic essay is unclear or has gone astray, we may become overly attached to a personal narrative, even if it needs changing. Remember that there are many ways to narrate your path. Be open to all of them!

UR students applying to national scholarship and fellowship opportunities are invited to send essay drafts to the Office of Scholars and Fellowships for feedback. Simply email the draft to fellowships@richmond.edu with sufficient time before the deadline.

Best of luck writing your personal statements!