

Baruch COLLEGE | WRITING CENTER

PERSONAL STATEMENTS WORKSHOP

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MATERIALS NEEDED

Whiteboard markers

LEARNING GOALS

At the close of the workshop, students will be able to:

- Support the claims in their personal statements with evidence
- Explain the difference between narrative and technical personal statements
- Determine genre using close-reading and context clues
- Write a first draft

OVERVIEW

In this workshop, three primary activities take place:

- Students brainstorm claims about their most relevant skills, interests, and traits and support them with evidence
- Students review sample introductions to extract genre expectations
- Students draft writing towards their personal statements

LESSON PLAN

Introduction

Ask students what rules or guidelines they've heard about successful personal statements.

How do they think a personal statement differs from a resume or cover letter? What should be included and what should be left out? *Possible responses may include:*

- Show your personality
- Be unique
- Explain your future goals
- Show why you're a good fit
- Tell a story
- Don't get *too* personal
- Don't repeat your resume
- Don't talk about experiences from high school or earlier
- Focus on your most relevant experience

Acknowledge that students may have heard contradictory advice. One of the challenges of personal statements is that there are **no universal rules**. These statements can be difficult to write because audience expectations vary, and those expectations are not always explicitly stated.

Address any specific contradictions or confusions that come up. For example:

- If they worry they are repeating their resumes, explain that personal statements are a unique genre.
 - A resume lists **what** you've done; a cover letter provides insight into **how** you accomplished specific tasks, and what skills might be transferrable to a new position.
 - A personal statement, on the other hand, **uses those skills and experiences to tell a persuasive story**.

State and record on the board: No matter your audience, **a good personal statement tells the story of how past experiences have both motivated and equipped you to pursue your current goals.**

- The statement should focus in particular on **skills and traits valued in your field**.
 - For example, a Masters in Social Work application might require that you demonstrate **empathy**, while a law school application might focus more on **logical thinking** or **commitment to social justice**.

The goal of today's workshop is to help students determine:

- 1) What kinds of **claims** their audience expects them to make: which motivations, personality traits, courses, or professional experiences they should prioritize in their applications
- 2) What **evidence** they can use to support their claims

To achieve this goal, we'll spend time brainstorming and drafting, looking at sample introductions, and discussing different genres of personal statement.

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Part One: Brainstorming Your Skills and Experience (10 min)

1. Tell students that they'll start by identifying the skills, traits and experiences most relevant to their current application.
2. Distribute **Handout 1: Prewriting for Personal Statements (Part One)**.
 - Explain that this handout is designed to help them identify the central claims they should foreground in their personal statement as well as those they should emphasize *elsewhere* in the application (i.e. in supplemental essays or only on their resumes).
 - Assure students that even if they don't have their prompts on hand, they can answer all of the questions.
 - The goal for this handout is to get down thoughts quickly, writing lists or bullet points rather than complete sentences.
 - Give students 5-7 minutes to respond to the questions.

Part Two: Personal Statement Genres (25 min)

1. Say: "You may have a long list of skills/experiences, but be unsure where to start."
 - Explain that the next step is to figure out **which are most relevant to the current application**: what claims they want to make in their personal statements.
 - Then, they'll think about how to support the claim that they have a specific trait, skill, or area of expertise.
2. Explain that, next, they'll look at the introductory paragraphs to several personal statements to analyze how other students have prioritized and supported their claims.
3. Distribute **Handout 2: "Sample Introductions."**
 - Note that the left-hand column contains a specific prompt, while the right-hand column has an introductory paragraph for a statement written in response to that prompt.
 - Ask these students to **read the handout in pairs or small groups**, answering the following questions for each introduction (*record on the board*):
 - What claims does the author make about themselves? Are these claims explicit or implicit?
 - What evidence does the author use to support their claims?
 - Why do you think each author took the approach they did?

1. J.D.	<p>Claims (explicit): has teaching experience/communication skills, first gen student</p> <p>Claims (implicit): planning skills (evidence: writing on the board); strong writing/communication skills (evidence: extended metaphor, statement itself); passion for giving back (evidence: connection between personal background and role as a teacher); ability to overcome obstacles (evidence: overcoming fear/anxiety of first day of teaching)</p> <p>Approach: responds to request to "get to know you outside of your academic record" by focusing on a work experience.</p>
2. M.A. Accountancy	<p>Claims (explicit): strong analytic skills (evidence: undergraduate major); passion for numbers (evidence: family/work background); concrete experience in the field (support: part-time job); specific career goals (evidence: working with small business owners)</p>

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	<p>Claims (implicit): hard-working (evidence: helping out with family business); ability to juggle multiple roles (evidence: attending school and working part time)</p> <p>Approach: shows “interest in and commitment to” study; specifically lists skills valued in their field (analytic skills); ties current and future goals to family background; shows continuity between undergraduate work and proposed graduate study</p>
3. M.A. Cybersecurity	<p>Claims (explicit): coding skills (evidence: coursework + additional study); dedication to the field (evidence: additional study); strong communication skills (evidence: writing itself)</p> <p>Approach: explain “motivation,” and especially how unrelated undergraduate major led them on a path towards this program; emphasize long-term career goals</p>
4. Fulbright	<p>Claims (explicit): specific plan for study (evidence: research/facts on Portuguese economy/listing specific collaborators); relevance of project/why it is important (evidence: research); passion for “entrepreneurial solutions to global problems” (unsupported except by detail of proposal, needs to be developed in later paragraphs)</p> <p>Claims (implicit): commitment to host country is demonstrated by in-depth knowledge of Portugal and its issues (rather than connected to personal story)</p> <p>Approach: detailed, research-based proposal to show the “Who What Where When Why”</p>

- As a group, **discuss the introductions one-by-one**, extracting the features of successful personal statements.
- Note the introductions’ very different approaches. Elicit or state that **these introductions lie on a spectrum between highly narrative (focused on personal experience or personality) and highly technical (focused on showing specific subject matter expertise)**.
 - Clarify that “technical” doesn’t just mean technology-related fields, but any fields or programs that require you to demonstrate subject-matter expertise.

Define and record on the board:

- **A narrative statement uses vivid language to describe an experience that shaped your personal identity.**
 - Similar to the personal statement they may have written for Common App schools and for Baruch
 - Often expected when an application asks many supplemental questions focusing on past work or academic experiences
 - Common in scholarship applications and required for most medical and law school applications

- Claims about personality traits, skills, etc. may be implicit rather than explicit, especially at the beginning of the essay
- **A technical statement shares experiences directly related to your discipline/program and describes the projects you hope to complete. The focus is on your professional identity.**
- May be called “**Statement of Purpose**” in some prompts
 - Required for most Ph.D. programs and research fellowships
 - Claims about a candidate’s qualifications are more explicit and are often highlighted in the introduction.
4. **Ask students to consider the prompts from Handout 2** in light of these guidelines. **Where does each prompt lie on the spectrum between narrative and technical?**
- **Elicit that some personal statements combine both styles.**
- Consider Prompt #2 for the M.A. in accountancy: while “describe your objectives” hints that you should write a technical statement, relating your commitment will require narrative elements.
 - When drafting, try to determine how “narrative” or “technical” your readers expect the statement to be.
5. Note that while similar degree programs usually require statements in the same genre, **programs may have different expectations** in terms of length and content.
- You can usually reuse the same basic essay, but you will need to tailor your statement to meet these requirements.
6. **Segue to Part Three.** Tell students that next, they’ll begin drafting their personal statements based on this discussion.

Part Three: Linking Past Experience to Future Goals (25 min)

1. **Return to the sample introductions**, reiterating that the statements begin in two different ways:
- A narrative statement often begins with an **opening anecdote** that reveals something about yourself and makes implicit claims
- In contrast, a technical statement often begins with a paragraph that **contextualizes your interests** (based on research, personal experience, or a combination) and **presents explicit claims** about why you are a good fit for the program
2. State that in a strong personal statement, **body paragraphs provide support to the explicit or implicit claims** made in your introduction. The number of body paragraphs will vary based on the length of your statement.
- **Narrative statements** provide support by continuing the narrative and drawing out its lessons, or linking it to other skills/experiences
- For example, the **law school applicant** would likely **reflect more on their background as a first-generation college graduate and the way it inspired them to spend time teaching before applying to law school**

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- **Technical statements** focus on specific, recent experiences that have prepared you for your program
 - For example, the **Fulbright applicant** might reflect on **past research experience related to Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives**, as well as **write more about their experience researching and communicating in Portuguese**.
- 3. Your **conclusion** will often focus on your goals for further study and your career.
 - In some cases, you should **demonstrate knowledge and interest** in the particular school/program to which you're applying (this is often called a "fit" paragraph).
- 4. **Distribute Handout 3: "Prewriting for Personal Statements (Part Two)."** Tell students that this next handout is designed to help them **draft their statements**.
 - **Give students 15-20 minutes to write.**
 - Explain that it's often helpful to write the easiest part of a draft first. Students may start with their intros, body paragraphs, or even their conclusions. The goal for today is to keep pen to paper and generate as many ideas as possible.
 - *Note to facilitator:* be available for questions as they arise. Give students time markers halfway through, and encourage everyone to keep writing.
- 5. **Share out responses and ask students to reflect on their work.**
 - Ask: Did you arrive at any helpful ideas or sentences? How might these help you in drafting your statement as a whole? What are your next steps?

Part Four: Wrap-Up (5 min)

1. Reiterate that **successful personal statements require multiple drafts and revisions**.
 - Their notes and drafts from today can serve as a starting point.
 - Encourage students to seek feedback on their drafts from professors, professionals in their field, and writing center consultants.
 - Remind students that many people have a hard time writing about their own life and experience, so getting an outside perspective can be very helpful.
2. Encourage students to look at the Writing Center website for additional resources on personal statements: under our "Resources for Students" tab, we link to several personal statement guides, as well as full-length sample personal statements.
3. **Distribute Handout 4: "Personal Statement Checklist."** Tell students that this checklist can serve as a guide as they revise and move towards a final draft. **Read out-loud.**
4. **Solicit questions.** Wrap Up.

PREWRITING FOR PERSONAL STATEMENTS (PART 1)

1. CONSIDER YOUR PROMPT

What skills and traits are generally valued in your field? Based on this prompt, what do you think your audience values?

2. IDENTIFY SKILLS, INTERESTS, AND GOALS RELEVANT TO THIS APPLICATION:

Personal skills and traits	Current interests that motivate you to apply	Long term goals this opportunity will help you achieve

3. IDENTIFY YOUR RELEVANT PAST EXPERIENCE:

What are the most important, uncommon, or interesting elements of your past? What makes you stand out from the average applicant? **Brainstorm personal experiences, academic experiences, and professional/extracurricular experiences:**

4. CONSIDER YOUR WHOLE APPLICATION

Does your application require any written components beyond your personal statement? Do you already know you want to focus on one of your skills/traits/experiences in a supplemental essay?

PERSONAL STATEMENT INTRODUCTIONS

	Prompt	Introduction
1: J.D.	2 pages: In order to get a better sense of our applicants, we require a “personal statement” on a topic of your choosing. Sharing this information provides another opportunity for us to get to know you beyond your academic record.	When I saw the sea of navy-clad eighth graders rushing in, my vision started to swim: within minutes, there were twenty-eight pairs of eyes looking at me. I stood in front of the whiteboard that I’d spent the morning preparing with vocab words, quotes for contemplation, and of course, my name: Ms. Jacobs. As a Seton Teaching Fellow, I was asking those students to look at me as a source of authority and knowledge. For a split second, I wanted to run out the door, but as my eyes came to focus on each student’s face, I thought back to all the teachers who helped me become the first college graduate in my family.
2: M.A. Accountancy	500 words: Describe your objectives in undertaking graduate study. Considerable importance is placed on the applicant’s interest in and commitment to advanced study and professional development.	I discovered my love for numbers while working at the cash register in my parents’ convenience store. From a young age, I’d seen my father pouring over his books. In high school, I took pleasure in reconciling receipts at the end of the day, knowing my carefulness would make my parents’ lives easier as tax season approached. Building on this passion, I am completing a BBA in Finance from Baruch College’s Zicklin School of Business while working part-time at an Audit Assistant. I now have the strong analytic skills needed to succeed in the MS in Accounting program at NYU Stern. After passing the CPA exam and completing my degree, I hope to support small business owners like my parents.
3. M.A. Cyber Security	500 words: You should submit a special purpose statement with your application that states your experience in cybersecurity and your motivation for applying to the program.	I apply to the M.S. in Cybersecurity at Fordham University to hone my computer skills and prepare myself for a career keeping corporate data safe. My major in Graphic Design introduced me to HTML and CSS. Since completing my B.A., I have studied Python and SQL through Code Academy to further my knowledge of coding. I believe my strong communication skills and dedication to the field make me a good fit for the program.
4. Fulbright	2 pages: This document outlines the Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How of what you are proposing for your Fulbright year. Develop a strong, feasible and compelling project. The proposal should indicate a clear commitment to the host country community.	While most countries have stalled their efforts to meet the carbon targets laid out in the Paris Agreement, Portugal currently ranks #4 on the global climate change policy index, and is on-track to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. As Portuguese citizens have come to see climate change as an urgent threat, government regulation has increased—as have Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives. As a business student interested in entrepreneurial solutions to global problems, I hope to study the role of CSR in Portugal’s response to global warming. I would be especially excited to conduct my research in collaboration with faculty at the Universidade de Lisboa during the year of the European Climate Change Adaptation conference.

PREWRITING FOR PERSONAL STATEMENTS (PART 2)

1. INTRODUCTION: PREVIEW THE OVERARCHING STORY OR THESIS

Draft an introduction that either introduces the main story you want to tell (narrative statement) or provides an overarching claim about your skills, interest, and experiences (technical statement):

2. BODY PARAGRAPHS: PROVIDE EVIDENCE

Drawing on the brainstorming work you did in Part 1, draft sentences that connect your claims to evidence. You might reflect on what you learned in a recent professional or extracurricular role, for example, or tell a story that shows you're a strong leader or great problem solver.

Once you have a few, try using them as topic sentences for new body paragraphs.

3. SHOW YOUR FIT IN YOUR CONCLUSION

Research the program's design, emphasis, and/or curriculum. Using this research, write a few sentences to demonstrate knowledge of and interest in specific aspects of the program. Then, write a conclusion that ties this back to the rest of your essay.

PERSONAL STATEMENT CHECKLIST

Before submitting your application, ask yourself:

Have I...



Communicated my motivation for applying?

Demonstrated skills and character traits valued in my field through the use of concrete, specific evidence?

Tailored the application to my chosen school or program, demonstrating my fit and interest (as required by the prompt), and checked that the name of the school/program appears correctly in my statement?

Gotten feedback from professionals in my field, my professors, and/or writing center consultants?

Made sure my statement is clearly organized, with strong transitions and/or topic sentences between paragraphs?

Edited to vary sentence length and improve clarity?

Edited for concision, removing unnecessary adverbs, redundant words, clichés, and passive voice?

Made sure my statement is carefully proofread and free of errors?