

# *Mastering the Personal Statement*

*You're more than your GPA!*

## *Congratulations*

You've picked a graduate school and a program of study. You notice that a personal statement is part of the application process and the deadline for submission is 3 months away. What do you do?

Choices

- a) Start right away so I can submit it as soon as possible and get it off my plate
- b) Wait until 2 weeks before it's due because I work best under a looming deadline.
- c) Start reflecting on my experiences and educational background so I'll have time to write several drafts.

Responses for each choice

- a) **Rethink this choice:** With this approach you risk the possibility of missing important information about your background and experiences,
- b) **Not your best choice:** You may work best under a deadline but what if you have multiple papers due at the same time plus an exam. Do you really want the extra stress?
- c) **Great choice** You will be giving yourself time to reflect on your experiences and background write a personal statement that really reflects your unique strengths and what you can contribute to the program

## *Personal Statements*

- This module will help you prepare to write your personal statement.
- We will highlight the purpose and components of a personal statement.
- You will have an opportunity to start to assess your educational, interests, and life experiences.

*Which of the following best describes the purpose of a personal statement.*

Choices

- a) The personal statement is sometimes called a statement of purpose, a research statement or a letter of intent. It is part of the post-graduate application process.
- b) The personal statement should emphasize how you fit with the program and answers the questions "why should you accept me."
- c) The personal statement outlines your education and experience similar to your resume

### Responses for each choice

- a) Those are other ways a school may refer to a personal statement that you might encounter through the application process. But, it is not the purpose.
- b) The purpose is to tell the school why they should accept you! Admission to grad programs are competitive. Use your personal statement to market yourself.
- c) The personal statement outlines your education and experience similar to your resume

### *Process of Writing Your Personal Statement*

A personal statement cannot be created in a rush. Below are the components you need to think about.

- Assess Yourself, Career Goals, Research Interests
- Research Programs/Institutions
- Write/refine your statement

### *Preparing your personal statement: Timeline*

It's never too early to start thinking about your personal statement!

Some students may be better organized or may find the writing process easy but for the majority of students it is best to start writing your drafts as early as possible.

Here are some timeline guidelines.

### *Example of a three-month timeline for creating your personal statement*

#### *Month 1*

- Start to reflect on your education, background and career goals.
- Discuss your ideas with a professor or a TA who knows your abilities.
- Talk to friends and family members who know and understand your background.
- Consider registering for a personal statement workshop through the Career Learning Network — offered several times each term.
- Check the Career Centre's library for personal statement examples.

#### *Month 2*

- Attend a personal statement workshop.
- Visit the Career Centre Library for additional resources.
- Create a T-chart (covered later in this module) outlining your match for the program of study that interests you.
- Write a first draft.

### *Month 3*

- After you have written a first or second draft, have your statement critiqued by a Career Counsellor.
- Make sure that you allow plenty of time and book early.
- Re-write a third or fourth draft until you are happy with the final product.
- Have it critiqued again before you submit your application.

Keeping the time line in mind, let's get started

### *Components*

- Self Assessment
- Research Programs Institute
- Write / refine your statement

### *Self-Assessment*

#### *Assess yourself - personally*

Assess yourself, career goals, research interests.

What do you bring to the table?

Think about the following questions:

- What are the unique events and experiences you've had that set you apart from other applicants?
- What barriers have you overcome in your life?
- What are your key skills/strengths and personal qualities?
- How did you acquire them?
- What will you contribute to the program and community?
- What experiences make you want to pursue further studies?

#### *Look at some examples*

What are the unique events and experiences you've had that set you apart from other applicants?

"I volunteered at the Health and Wellness Centre as a peer health educator. Plus, I have a part time job working at a drop in clinic in my neighborhood"

What are your key skills/strengths and personal qualities?

How did you acquire them?

"I assumed a leadership role in the Commerce Students' Association and was instrumental in getting speakers to attend our first networking event."

Now that you have some examples of what others have done, write a brief response to the next three questions.\*

1. What experiences have you had that make you want to pursue your chosen career path? Type a brief (250 characters max)
2. How have you been pursuing your interest in this field, i.e. education, experience, volunteer work? Type a brief (250 characters max)
3. What insights have you gained from these experiences? Type a brief (250 characters max)

\* If you are struggling to answer this question, consider making an appointment to see a Career Counsellor. Contact the Career Centre

DV 3094 or 905-828-5451

Use your responses when writing your own personal statement

### *Assess yourself - future career*

Admissions officers want to know that you have a specific career goal when assessing your statement. However, they are more interested in how you came to this realization rather than read about the job description. Consider the following questions when writing about your future career plans:

- How have your experiences — classes, research, work, volunteering, seminars, mentorship, etc. — helped shape your desire to be in the field?
- How would you like to put your education to work in the world?
- How will your career have a positive social impact?
- What would you like to accomplish in this field?

### *Look at an example*

How have your experiences — classes, research, work, volunteering, seminars, mentorship, etc. — helped shape your desire to be in the field?

How will your career have a positive social impact?

“My volunteer work at an NGO helped me to see the importance of marketing and how it can help raise awareness about an issue.”

Now that you have looked an example, write a brief response to the following question.

What is your intended career goal?

Type a brief response (250 characters max).

Use your responses when writing your own personal statement

### *Assess yourself – your academic research interests*

Think about how you might respond to any of the following questions

Describe the research you have been involved in.

- What research skills have you acquired?
- What are your research area interests?
- How will you contribute to knowledge in the field?
- How is research part of your overall career plan?

### *Let's look at an example*

What is your research area interests?

How is research part of your overall career plan?

“My research interests focus on three broad areas: sustainable development, knowledge-based economy, and a problem-solving approach to environmental issues. My long term career goal is to work as a sustainability consultant.”

Now that you have looked an example, write a brief response to the following question.

What research area do you hope to explore and why?\*

Type out a brief response (250 characters max).

\* If you are struggling to answer this question, consider making an appointment to see a Career Counsellor. Contact the Career Centre

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Use your responses when writing your own personal statement

Now that you have completed the self-assessment section, in your personal statement you should be able to indicate

- what educational, work, or volunteer experience you have that make you a good fit
- what insights you gained from these experiences
- what skills you gained from these experiences

### *Research programs and institutions*

- Research the institution to understand the culture and vision.
- Research the department to know its research strengths and their faculty's area of expertise.
- Explore the school's website as well as the department's website.
- Visit the school if you can.
- Talk to the admissions officers directly.
- Attend the Graduate & Professional Schools Fair hosted at UTM by the Career Centre each fall.

*Use your research in the application!*

*Look at the example:*

“I’m interested in the Masters of Biotechnology program at the University of Toronto because it combines my interest with science and technology. I’ll have to demonstrate how I’m interested in both in my personal statement. On the other hand, Queen’s has a faculty member who is working on a project that aligns with my recent research for my 4th year course. I’ll have to outline that research to demonstrate the fit.”

Remember

- Read the application guidelines carefully.
- You must tailor each application.
- For thesis-based programs, include information about possible professors you would like as supervisors and why you are interested in that person’s specialty.

*Writing / refining your personal statement*

*Great, you have completed your prep. work*

For most students getting started on their personal statement is daunting.

The T-Chart, shown below, can help match what you have to offer to the program requirements.

A copy for your use is available under the Resources tab in the upper right corner.

Using the Grad School T-chart

<b>Program Requirement</b>	<b>What I have to offer</b>
3.3 GPA in last 2 years	3.5 GPA
1 year related experience in counselling or related area	6 month – Distress Centre 1 year – career asst. experience 1 year – community living Mississauga
Strong research background	2nd year stats course, 3rd year research methods course, applied for ROP this year
Relevant course work	Psych courses: abnormal psych, developmental psych etc.

### *Types of personal statements*

Personal statements can be structured or unstructured. The approach to writing these statements is the same.

<b>Type of statement</b>	<b>Description</b>
General	This type of statement has no guidelines
One Question	This type of statement usually has one broad question. Often the question is open-ended and varies in length requirements ranging from 250 - 2,000 words.
Several Questions	This type of statement is usually made up of several shorter questions and is common in most programs including medical and law school applications.

### *Writing your statement*

Be prepared to write several drafts and write in your natural style. A good personal statement consists of three components.

- First Paragraph
- Body
- Conclusion

#### *First paragraph:*

- Must be engaging - anecdotes, thesis statement, marketing pitch, value proposition

#### **Examples:**

Thesis statement - based on the application question, "Outline your research interests"

"Having majored in literary studies (world literature) as an undergraduate, I would now like to concentrate American literature and particularly the work of William Faulkner and his representation of the decay in American society."

Anecdotal statement - based on your personal experiences

"When I was a child I spent hours reading fiction and writing my own stories. The power of the story to challenge my thoughts and those of my classmates

was evident. This early experience shaped my interest throughout my undergraduate studies and has resulted in this application to study American literature at the University of Toronto.”

*Body paragraphs:*

- What have you learned from your experiences that is relevant to this program?
- Depth vs breadth.

**Examples:**

- “My internship at ABC hospital provided me with a thorough understanding of the issues faced in health care today.”
- “My volunteer experience as a teacher’s aide helped me gain teaching experience in a classroom setting. It also taught me how to engage students in critical reading at a young age and to encourage their curiosity.”
- “My undergraduate courses in business and economics have given me an underlying respect for how business influences and structures our lives.”

*Conclusion:*

- Summarize.
- Restate your argument.

**Examples:**

- “The pursuit of a graduate degree is best approached in a supportive environment that provides the direction required to successfully meet all program requirements. In this regard, University of Toronto is an excellent fit.”
- “My experiences have provided me with unique, wide ranging talents. Equipped with a Masters of Information, I want to broaden, and enhance information interfaces. Information, even when ‘accessible’ becomes far more useful when packaged such that it is aesthetically pleasing. I believe that an education from the iSchool would allow me to become part of a change that enhances design, democratizes access and helps those in need.”

*So to sum up*

- Begin your statement with a sentence that captures the reader’s attention.
- The body of your statement should provide insight gained from your experiences and education.
- Conclude by restating your thesis statement.

*Best Practices*

Based on what you have learned in this module, what are the best practices for preparing personal statements?



*What are the best practices for writing personal statements*

Answer the question asked with the response best practice or not a best practice.

- a) Identify what sets you apart from others.
- b) Just listing activities
- c) Make excuses for poor grades etc
- d) Organize in a thematic or chronological format
- e) Tailor your statement to each school.
- f) Use everyday language
- g) Write what you think the committee wants to hear.

*Best Practices*

- Identify what sets you apart from others
- Answer the question asked.
- Organize in a thematic or chronological format
- Tailor your statement to each school.
- Use everyday language

*Summary*

“Hi guys, I'm Bilal. I hope you've enjoyed the module so far. I'm going to summarize the 3 most important points about personal statements.

First of all make sure you start your statement well in advance because you're probably going to end up writing several drafts.

Secondly answer the relevant questions for the program that you're applying for

Thirdly when it comes to writing a personal statement it is not a resume. You're not just listing off points, you are providing insight into your relevant experiences.

And lastly, and this is the most important point. Go see a career counsellor. I saw my Career Counsellor about four times before I wrote my final draft. And I ended up getting in.”

*You have completed the Personal Statement online module.*

*More assistance?*

See the tipsheets and T-Chart available from the Resources tab in upper right corner.\*

Contact the University of Toronto Mississauga, Career Centre at DV 3094 or call 905-828-5451.

\*If Resources tab does not work, links to the resources can be found on the Career Centre website - [Applying to Graduate School](#) page