# *Personal Statements and Application Materials*

# purpose

This document is designed to be a resource for writers at any stage in their process of composing and editing a personal statement or other piece of writing for an application. The following tips and suggestions are arranged linearly from the early planning stages to final editing and revision.

**1. What question is being asked and how will you answer it?**

● If the “question” is simply, “Write a personal statement,” is there a way you can rephrase it so that it actually is a question? E.g., “If you could describe one important personal experience, what would it be and why?” or, “What about you personally makes you an ideal candidate for this program?”

● If any answers spring to mind immediately, write them down. For each, write down two or three reasons why that answer is a good one. This will help you sort out your possible responses and decide which will be best for your application.

**2. Who is asking the question? What sort of answer is the questioner looking for?**

* Who is your audience? Each school is different. Within those schools, each academic department is different as well. Part of the strength of your essay will depend on how well you can use a tone and a voice that are appropriate for your essay’s destination.
* Is your audience more concerned with personal characteristics or with research accomplishments and academic achievements? A summer internship coordinator at a community resource center, for instance, might be more interested in what experience you may have helping at-risk youth. Conversely, the members of the admissions committee in a graduate physics department would probably be more concerned with your academic record, your publication history, and your knowledge of advanced research.
* What impression are you trying to make? It may be helpful to decide upon **three** impressions about yourself or your work that you will try to communicate. (For example, “interesting scholar,” “community minded,” and “hard worker”). Keeping these in mind will help you stay focused in case you get lost or confused during the composition process.

# 3. Composition - Getting Started

* Since application materials are so important to your future, allow yourself plenty of time for drafting and multiple stages of revision. Consider writing freely and expansively at the beginning. You may find that you discover your best material and achieve a productive state of flow by writing this way. You can then work on organization and trimming back to meet word count limitations later.
* Application essays are often skimmed or read quickly. For this reason, beginnings are especially important. Try to foreground an experience or detail about yourself that is both important and interesting.
* Stay away from general, vague, inarguable observations. The essay will benefit immensely if you avoid beginning with, for instance, “Nursing is a great profession,” and instead start with an interesting, relevant story or statement that is specific to you personally.
* Remember – though the application essay is point-driven, it is not an appropriate genre for the traditional five-paragraph structure (introduction/thesis, three supporting body paragraphs, conclusion) that you may be used to. Still, the claim/support structure may be helpful for you to keep in mind. If you make a claim about yourself, you must support that claim with details, examples or an anecdote.
* Qualities should be *illustrated*, not simply asserted. If you have taken a creative writing course you may have heard the phrase, “show, don’t tell.” The same applies for an application essay. Stating, “I have a passion for dentistry,” is very different from describing the time you filled three of your own cavities, for instance. Ideally, your reader will read your essay and conclude that you have a passion for dentistry due to the convincing nature of your real-life examples.
* Evidence real familiarity with the program or organization to which you are applying. In certain essays, it may be appropriate to quote and respond to language from the program’s website. In any case, your reader should be confident that you have taken the time to research the organization.

# 4. Editing and revising

* As you reread your essay, keep in mind that your goal is to communicate to your reader the following:
  + That you are an exceptional applicant
  + That you are applying both because you want to and because the organization, if it knew you, would want you to too
  + That you have made a series of conscious decisions that have led to your current application
  + And that the organization to which you are applying would be missing out if it did not accept you.
* Are any anecdotes you relate in your essay irrelevant or disconnected from your theme? If so, consider removing them. In application essays, concision is often a strength.
* Are any claims you make unsupported by the material you provide? If so, you should try to add anecdotal or other evidence to substantiate them.