Personal Statement Writing Workbook

a planning guide for introducing yourself to admissions committees in higher education



Hello!

Congrats on preparing to write a personal statement! Whether you're getting ready to apply to graduate school, for a scholarship, or to a fellowship program, I'm excited to help you get the words down on paper that will share your story and share why you are a stellar applicant.

As a senior undergraduate, I applied for a Fulbright Fellowship and felt completely lost. What was I supposed to say in a personal statement? Who would be reading it? Was I interesting enough? How do I get started?

Since then, I've gotten much more comfortable with writing personal statements, and I even enjoy writing them. I've learned some things over the years, and I want to share them with you.

My writing process might not be your writing process, but I hope I can share some ideas that will make your writing process even a little less stressful, if not enjoyable.

My hope is that, by the end of this workbook, you will be able to:

- understand the function of a personal statement,
- identify meaningful personal experiences,
- ◆ outline milestones in your experience,
- ♦ discuss periods of growth in your life,
- ♦ communicate why you are applying, and
- craft a personal statement.

We'll go through each of these topics, and you'll have the opportunity to reflect and write along the way to help you get started.

Happy writing!

Olivia Harper Wilkins NSF Graduate Research Fellow at Caltech Astrochemist, artist, and author Summer 2021

What is a personal statement?

A personal statement is an opportunity to make your application package a little more, well, personal. Most applications are laden with data, from your transcripts to a list of past awards and honors, but who you are and why you are the right person for an opportunity can't be adequately assessed by such data.

Personal statements are typically two pages, although some can be three pages while others are limited to one. It is important that you carefully read any and all guidelines for a personal statement before submitting it, but most statements accomplish the same things. So, what *is* a personal statement?

It is a story. The most impactful way to communicate is through storytelling. A personal statement is your opportunity to share who you are and how you became interested in your specialty. What experiences do you bring to your field? How did those experiences pique your interest? What excites you about your work? What have you learned during your journey?

It is your values. The people reviewing your application will want to know whether your values align with their program's. It can be helpful to look at the program's mission statement, but your personal statement shouldn't just list off those values. *Show* that you share those values through personal examples.

It is a justification. There will be a lot of applications that look quite similar to yours, so your personal statement is an opportunity to distinguish yourself. You are uniquely qualified to explain why you are an excellent candidate. What are your qualifications? What will the program get from having you?

It is your goals. Share your short-term and long-term goals. The reviewers know that you are applying to their program because you will get something out of it, so show that you've done the work to familiarize yourself with the program. Don't worry if you don't know what your long -term (or even short-term) goals are. What you write in your personal statement is not a contract; write truthfully from where you are now and understand that your goals might (and likely will) change.

What concerns do you have?

As I shared on page 2, I had a lot of questions when writing my first personal statement. A lot of these concerns were about what voice to have in my statement and for whom I should be writing. I looked at examples of other people's personal statements to get a feel for what was "allowed." Even if you skim just one or two other personal statements to get a sense of the tone and language used, doing this can bring a lot of clarity.

A lot of my questions were less about the stylistic aspects of the personal statement and more about how I would be perceived by my reader. Was I interesting enough? Do I have stories that show personal growth? My stories didn't feel "good enough." If you feel similarly, don't fret. Your stories are good enough. Why? Because they are yours.

Just write like you are telling the story verbally. In the personal statement, writing authentically is more powerful (and more engaging) than writing academically.

Reflect.

Write down whatever concerns you have, whether they are technical or more personal. If you have any questions, doubts, worries, frustrations, or anything else that is on your mind, get that stuff out here. You might write down questions you can ask an advisor or friend. You might also write down fears and find that, once they are down on paper, those fears aren't as strong as you thought they were. Whatever the source is, just try to get out any negative energy that will try to block your writing.



Figuring out the writing process

The writing process is more than just filling up a page with words. It starts with planning and, if done well, involves multiple rounds of revision, with feedback from others if possible. In fact, you are partaking in the writing process right now by using this workbook to prepare yourself for writing your personal statement.

Your writing process is your own, so how you approach planning, writing, and revising is up to you. I would recommend that you ask multiple people—both in and out of your area of expertise—to provide feedback. If you have friends or classmates who are also applying to programs, ask them to read a draft of your personal statement and offer to do the same for them. Ask your advisor for advice. If you are at a university, set up a consultation at the writing center or with the career center (these services are usually free to both current students and alumni!). If you know that the reviewers will include folks who are out-of-field, find someone who can give you feedback from a non-technical perspective. Incorporate this feedback and have someone else look at your essay before revising some more.

A strong personal statement will not materialize overnight, and it probably won't come forth without several rounds of feedback.

Make a plan. Jot down some goals for your writing process. Think about when your (first) personal statement is due, how long you need to incorporate feedback, and how much your peer reviewers need to give you that feedback. Who are you going to ask for help? Are you going to write in 30-minute chunks over the course of several weeks, or are you going to crank out a first draft in one sitting?



What do you want to communicate?

Oftentimes, the prompt for a personal statement will be something along the lines of, "In no more than two pages, write a personal statement that outlines your experiences and your career aspirations." Other times, a prompt will be much more detailed and will give you somewhat of a mini rubric as a guideline for what the reviewers will look for.

Regardless of what kind of prompt (if any) is given on the application, there are a few things you should typically include. In this workbook, you will complete multiple brainstorming and writing exercises to help you think about how you want to approach these components.



You'll consider all of these components separately before pulling everything together, first by making a concept map (page 22-23) to see how different components connect together and then by making an outline (page 24) to begin organizing your statement. You'll also think about how (if applicable) you might tailor your personal statement to multiple applications (pages 25). Finally, we'll break down the application process into tasks (page 26) and make a plan (page 27) so you can manage the time needed to write, revise, and submit your personal statement.

Okay, really, what do you want to communicate?

Before we break down the personal statement into components, use this page to list anything you don't want to forget to write about. Remember, the rest of your application will be data-heavy, so the personal statement is an opportunity for you to provide context.

Some questions you might consider are: Do you have any gaps in your CV? Did you take any gap years? Are you concerned about your grades, either for a specific semester or class or your overall GPA? Have you had any obstacles in getting where you are that you feel you need to share? Have you had a change of heart about your field? You'll have an opportunity to think about these questions throughout the workbook, but if any of these things are on your mind now, write them down so you can come back to them later and focus your energy on the other components in the meantime.

A personal story

Your personal statement should draw your reader in and make them want to know more about you: at a minimum enough that they stay engaged with your personal statement from start to finish, but ideally enough that they recommend you for whatever program to which you are applying.

Here, I give an example from my own personal statement for the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP). I'll then dissect it on the next page and talk about the different elements I included in my story before giving you a chance to think about your own personal story.

I was six years old the first time my family traveled through the Blue Ridge Mountains in West Virginia. Rising above the tall trees that filled the landscape were massive satellite dishes. Even at six, I knew there was something peculiar about these white giants. I remember crudely outlining two or three of the large dishes in my sketchpad, imprinting the awe-inspiring image in my mind. Twelve years later, my family returned to the area to investigate the complex that caught my gaze so many years before.

The "satellite dishes" as I had called them, were actually radio telescopes—large metal contraptions that explored the invisible universe from the National Radio Astronomy Observatory (NRAO) in Green Bank, West Virginia. During my visit, I learned how the telescopes served as receivers to collect radio emissions from distant stars and gas clouds, allowing radio astronomers to study the physical makeup of the vast spaces beyond our solar system. The most remarkable thing I learned about the NRAO, however, was that they employ scientists from a range of backgrounds, from engineers who work on the instruments to physicists and chemists who assess an astronomical object's state or chemical signature. After struggling with what type of scientist I wanted to be when I grew up, radio astronomy inspired me to incorporate diverse scientific interests into an interdisciplinary education.

In the summer of 2013, I returned to Green Bank a third time, but this time to work my dream job—tuning into the galaxy's radio signals to learn about its chemistry....

What that story tells you

Your own personal story might look completely different from the example I shared on the previous page, and that's good! Your story should be yours. As such, it will tell your readers something quite different from what mine shared about me, but I still share this example to give you ideas about what details or style might be used.

I started off with building imagery. I wanted my reader to ride along and see the dishes emerging above the West Virginia landscape. Although the story is mine, I wanted my reader to feel it was theirs, too.

I wrote about radio telescopes with an air of mystery. I could have just said something like, "I was six the first time I saw a radio telescope," and that would have been perfectly fine. However, as an observational astrochemist applying to chemistry programs, I figured there was a good chance that my reader would not know what a radio telescope was. I wanted to make them curious about radio telescopes since, knowing my audience, I might have to work a bit harder to get them excited about these instruments.

I show that I value interdisciplinary science. Especially since I was proposing to do astronomy as a chemist, I felt it was imperative to stress that interdisciplinary science is important to me.

I wrote a story that was relevant to what I want to do. I want to do radio astronomy, so I wrote a story about being introduced to radio astronomy. Your story doesn't have to be so obviously connected, but there should absolutely be some connection between who you are and the program to which you are applying. One of my favorite personal statements I've read tells the story of someone who, until college, didn't believe in dinosaurs or evolution. They talk about getting a second chance at science and how being accepted wouldn't be a waste because the applicant wouldn't want to waste that second chance. That part of their statement doesn't talk about a specific field, but it conveys they have seriously thought about why they are submitting an application.

I showed enthusiasm. You don't need "passion," which can be unhealthy and unrealistic, but you should definitely show thoughtfulness and enthusiasm. It is okay to be applying for something that you want to have as "just a job," but you need to show that you've given some thought to the path you are pursuing. "Having nothing better to do" is not compelling. Being excited (at least on most days), though, is.

Meaningful personal experiences

When thinking about meaningful personal experiences, think about defining moments in your life (an accident, losing someone, a lifechanging talk with a friend or mentor, moving or traveling), things you have chosen to spend time on and why (certain courses, extracurriculars, approaches to research), and sources of inspiration (technology, a person, a book or movie).

So, what are some of the meaningful experiences you've had in your life?

Narrowing it down

If you included all of your meaningful personal experiences in your essay, you probably would be writing a memoir instead of a personal statement. You might know exactly what you want to write about already, or you might need some help thinking through how to pick a topic. On this page, we'll go through picking a topic.

Reflect on the list you made on page 10.

Are there any experiences you don't feel comfortable sharing? Cross them out.

Which experiences are most relevant? Star them.

Which experiences show growth? Put an upwards arrow next to them.

Which experiences reveal something important about you that isn't covered in the rest of your application? Draw a box next to them.

Look at what experiences are not crossed out. Which ones stick out to you the most? Which topics are easy for you to write about (even if they are not "easy" topics, like loss)? Are there any experiences that never fail to make you smile when you talk about them? Which topics are the most important or impactful to you? Circle one or two experiences that you feel most comfortable writing about.

Now look at the symbols you marked next to the topic(s) you circled. Which symbols are present? Which symbols are missing? Think about what you want to emphasize. Are you applying for an opportunity that is outside your expertise? If so, maybe you want to show your enthusiasm for the program by picking a topic with a star next to it. Are parts of your application not where you'd like them to be? Perhaps pick a topic with an arrow to emphasize you are prepared. Is there something that you want need the reader to know, otherwise they can't possibly make a reasonable judgement about you and your interests? Go for the box.

Ultimately, the experience you choose as the topic of your story should be something personal to you and something in which you can be genuine and share a bit of yourself with the reader. Your statement should be personal, but it should not violate your comfort zone either.

Chosen topic:

Write your narrative

Free write. Use these pages to write down a paragraph or two to tell your story. Regardless of whether this becomes part of your final personal statement, this exercise should help you overcome writing blocks and feel free to express yourself before actually putting anything into your statement.	

Personal strengths

In addition to letting your reader get to know you through your personal story, you want them to know how great you are. (Because you really are!) If you feel uncomfortable talking about your strengths and triumphs, then you definitely should be sharing those things! Giving yourself praise can be uncomfortable, but there will be plenty of people who will talk themselves up in their personal statement without giving it a second thought. Use your humility as a strength, letting it guide your tone such that you don't come off as arrogant. Don't let your humility be a weakness and count yourself out before you've even submitted your application.

You should also ask your friends or mentors to give you ideas about what sets you apart. They will see extraordinary things in you that you might not think are worth mentioning in your statement. Use their help to identify what sets you apart.

of these are relevant to the opportunity awards or honors have you received? W	st your strengths. What skills do you have that set you apart? Which these are relevant to the opportunity to which you are applying? What vards or honors have you received? What compliments do people give u about your work? What work or research experience do you have? hat service experience do you have?	

Review the list above. Put stars next to the strengths that you think are most relevant to your application.

... and challenges

Everyone faces challenges. These challenges can range from external obstacles to internal weaknesses. However, the challenges you face can be used to empower you in your personal statement. They are an opportunity for learning and growth. Even challenges that can't be overcome (e.g. systemic barriers) can be expressed in such a way that you reveal positive qualities about yourself. You shouldn't feel obligated to make yourself completely vulnerable to the reader, but if you feel comfortable sharing some of the challenges you've overcome, you can use these stories as an opportunity to highlight things like dedication.

Challenges don't always make for some kind of heroic story, nor should they. We are human, and being human is messy. Sometimes you can't overcome challenges, at least not in the way you'd like, and that's okay. Perhaps your grades aren't what you'd like, and I'm guessing it's not because you are lazy (especially since you are filling out an application... that's a lot of work!). If there are places elsewhere in your application that don't reflect how great of a candidate you are—whether it is grades, a lack of research experience, or other gaps—you can address these in the personal statement. You're not making excuses, but if you have a reason for not being the ideal candidate on paper, don't let the application committee count you out without hearing why first.

List some of the challenges you've faced, or some of the areas of your application packet that aren't as strong.	

Which challenges do you want to address in your personal statement? Put a star next to them.

Demonstrating growth

Chances are, you're writing a personal statement for some kind of education or training opportunity. In both cases, growth is important. Whatever the opportunity, the goal is that by the end of it, you will have learned something new. That said, whoever is reading your personal statement wants evidence that you will appreciate the opportunity and make the most of it (not necessarily out of the goodness of their hearts, but because awarding you an opportunity is an investment that will make their program more attractive for funding and donations).

Thinking about how you have grown through the experiences highlighted in your personal statement and the rest of your application packet is a useful exercise. You might come to appreciate some opportunities that had a bigger impact than you previously thought. If you feel, as many folks do, like you know less and less than what you should, reflecting on times of growth will help you realize just how far you've come in your experiences. It is easy to take stock of the growing list of things we don't know. But we also need to be kind to ourselves and recognize the growing list of things we do know as well.

Demonstrating growth isn't just listing a bunch of technical skills you've racked up. Such skills will likely be implied by your academic or professional experiences. Instead, what have you done to work on your professional development that wasn't required for a job? What insights have you gained, and how do they reflect the values of the program to which you are applying?

On the next page, I share an example from my own statement, a continuation from the personal story on page 8. In it, I list three things I learned from a summer research experience. While I mention research skills, I focus on "soft skills" and realizations about my values. Other parts of my personal statement are centered more on research skills and outcomes (e.g. conference presentations), but these are things that are covered in other parts of the application. Emphasizing non-technical examples of personal and professional growth are more compelling in a personal statement.

This statement was written for a program that values interdisciplinary research, broader impacts (including outreach), and collaboration, among other things. In my statement, I talk about how one experience helped me grow in these areas.

An example of growth

In the summer of 2013, I returned to Green Bank a third time, but this time to work my dream job—tuning into the galaxy's radio signals to learn about its chemistry. Several of my experiences while working at the NRAO greatly influenced my goals and academic interests. The first was that I experienced first-hand the interdisciplinary nature of radio astronomy research that had so intrigued me two years before. Specifically, I used both my chemistry and mathematics background to study neutral hydrogen gas in the interstellar medium (ISM). My interest in physical chemistry significantly enhanced my comprehension of spectra, and my mathematics background helped me quickly learn many of the rules and parameters of working with computer language (specifically IDL). Moreover, I was the only chemist among physicists, astronomers, and engineers. Yet my perspective of astronomy was not considered inferior, only different, showing me the appreciation of perspectives from a variety of disciplines.

Second, I seized several opportunities to present my research, perhaps the most rewarding of which was a presentation to more than 30 high school students participating in the West Virginia Governor's School for Math and Science. Initially, I was excited to have an opportunity to use every new technical term I had accumulated into my vocabulary over the previous month at the NRAO. I soon realized, however, that my audience was a younger version of me when I arrived at NRAO; I had been someone merely fascinated by telescopes without any knowledge of astronomy research. As I prepared my presentation, I challenged myself to keep my audience in mind. Breaking away from my fellow summer students' trend of giving a traditional research talk, I told the audience my story—how telescopes had inspired me, how I knew very little about astronomy, and how creativity and critical thinking led me to an awe-inspiring research experience at NRAO. Throughout my talk, the high schoolers laughed, shouted out questions, and generally were excited by my enthusiasm. This interaction made me realize the value of not only public outreach, but outreach that is engaging, that inspires audiences to get excited about the scientific problems at hand.

Finally, despite a small population of 134 in Green Bank, I was constantly interacting with scientists from around the world and learning that collaborations across international borders are imperative for enhanced critical analysis and maximum scientific productivity. It was in these interactions that I first heard the term "astrochemistry." After....

How have you grown?

Free write. Use these pages to write about or outline experiences that demonstrate growth. If you need ideas, look back at pages 14 and 15. What are some of the strengths or triumphs you want to share, and what led up to you achieving those things? What are some challenges you've faced, and what did you learn from those experiences?	

Why this opportunity?

Writing a personal statement requires a lot of work, so hopefully you have already thought about why you are pursuing this opportunity. Even so, you need to demonstrate that you have seriously considered whatever program you're pursuing.

Some obvious reasons for applying to a scholarship or graduate school involve finances: getting paid or getting the training necessary to land you a job that gets you paid. It's okay if these are the most important reasons to you, but they might not be the ones you want to share with your reader.

Make a list of reasons you are writing a personal statement. You might want to consider the following questions: Are there any gaps in your training so far? Does this opportunity a good match for one of your values in your work? Does the opportunity include professional development training? Are there opportunities for service or giving back built into the program? Does the program to which you are applying have any connection to the personal story you are telling in your statement?

Reflect. Which reasons do you think are most compelling or relevant? Mark any of the reasons you think you might want to include in your personal statement with a star.

Why you?

Even more important than convincing the reader of your personal statement that their program is *the* perfect opportunity for your personal and professional growth, is convincing them that you are the ideal candidate. Hopefully, these reasons will shine throughout your application packet and especially your personal statement, but clearly stating why you are an excellent applicant in your final paragraph can help you end on a strong note.

For this, it is especially important to look at the program description. The application website will probably have a page about who should apply with a nice list of things they are looking for in a candidate. Do you have the experiences that make you prepared for the opportunity? Do you *not* have the typical experience, giving you a fresh outlook?

It is also good to acknowledge that you will give the folks running the program whatever outcome their program description asks for. Are they hoping you will engage in the public? If so, name exactly what you plan to do (it isn't a contract, but be honest about what you intend) and give examples of similar things you have already done. Do they want you to attend a conference? If so, say what conference(s) you might attend and when (again, not a contract). Is the opportunity abroad, and do the program managers expect you to engage in some kind of cultural exchange? If so, how do you plan to do that?

Show you've done your research. Leave no room for questions about who you are and what you will contribute to the program.

Make a list of expectations (implicit included) for the program and how you meet them.	

Mapping your personal statement

Before you write your statement, it can be helpful to find threads you want to carry through your essay.

Make a concept map over the next two pages. Look back at the notes you've made in this workbook. What are some themes that stick out? What are some skills, nouns, or actions that are central to what you want to share? Write down a word or phrase for each and draw lines between different concepts to show how they connect.

Ex:
Radio
telescopes - Public
outreach
astrochemistry /
research
research #2



Outlining your personal statement

How do you want to organize your thoughts? Here's one way to organize a personal statement:

- I. Personal story, how I got into my field of interest
- II. Research/work experience #1
 - A. Example of growth #1
 - B. Example of growth #2
- III. Research/work experience #2
 - A. Example of more technical growth
 - B. How does this relate to what I want to do next?
- IV. Why this opportunity
 - A. What have I learned that makes me a great fit?
 - B. What do I want to learn?
 - C. Relation to future goals

Outline. Write your own outline below. If you're having trouble, use the example above but swap out the generic placeholder text with words and phrases from your concept map on the previous statement. The final draft of your personal statement might end up being organized completely differently, but producing an outline now will help you get started and remember to include the pieces you want to share.

Tailoring your statement

Writing personal statements takes a lot of time, so if you are submitting multiple applications, you might be able to just rewrite parts of your statement so you can resubmit it. If you've had a successful application in the past and the personal statement from that is still relevant to you and to the program to which you are applying, perhaps you want to reuse that statement since you know it works!

Applying to multiple graduate programs

Graduate programs assume that you are applying to multiple programs, so it is important you show them you are interested in their program. I recommend talking about specific programs near the end of the statement and keeping it confined to the same paragraph so you don't accidentally leave in a mention of applying to Other University halfway through your statement. Who are professors you might work for? Have you been in contact with them already? (If so, name drop!) What facilities does the institution have? Spend some time on the program's website and show you've seriously considered the program.

Applying to two opportunities with different page limits

Sometimes you might be preparing personal statements for programs that have different page limits. You can still use the same statement for all of these! If you need to trim down a version, you might keep your introductory story but cut out some of the content when talking about examples of growth. For instance, when I applied to graduate programs, I condensed the experiences shared on page 17 of this workbook to a list that was modified from the teal text. If you have room to expand, you might elaborate on certain pieces of your statement and bluntly connect them to the program's values.

Updating an old personal statement

You might be asked for a personal statement at different times in your career, and sometimes it is appropriate to recycle your old personal statement. Hopefully, you've grown since first submitting the personal statement, but some of the fundamentals about who you are might also be the same. Look through your old statement and think about what parts are central to who you are as an applicant and keep those, while updating some other pieces to be more relevant or current. Do you have more recent examples of growth? What service have you contributed to your field since your last application? Have you published your work or presented at conferences? Show your reader that you are still an awesome candidate.

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Identify the tasks

□ Personal statement

☐ Write personal story / introduction

Preparing an application, including a personal statement, can be daunting (hence this workbook!). It can be helpful to break down your application into pieces. By approaching the application as a collection of smaller tasks, you can feel like you are making progress, even if you dedicate only 10 minutes of your day to working on your application.

Here are ideas for how you might identify individual tasks in the application process. What works best for you might be different, and it is something you have to figure out for yourself. For instance, while I break down the personal statement in the list below, I find it easier to write my statements all in one go.

Place a checkmark next to the tasks that you want to include in your application process, and add your own! On the next page, you'll make a timeline for planning out when you want to finish certain tasks.

☐ Transfer outline to a word processor to make a skeletal draft

1 / /
☐ Write about relevant experiences
☐ Tailor statement to program application
☐ Get feedback, from:
□ Revise
Letters of recommendation
☐ Make list of letter writers and what each should address
☐ Ask letter writers (1 month in advance)
□ Remind letter writers (1 week in advance)
Online application
☐ Fill out personal information
□ Request transcripts
☐ Fill out academic history
☐ Short response questions
□ Upload CV
☐ Upload personal statement
Other

Make a plan

Look at the tasks listed on page 26 and refer to the preliminary plan you made on page 5. Next to the tasks you gave a checkmark, write down how much time you want to leave to complete those tasks. If possible, aim to have everything done about a week in advance of the application deadline in case things don't go as planned. Below, write down a timeline for completing your personal statement and other application components. Feel free to break down tasks further as you go, and cross off tasks as you complete them.

Application deadline(s):

Timeline:

Congratulations! You are on your way to writing a personal statement and submitting your application. Now that you have a plan, you can start typing away at your statement. Stick to your plan and modify as necessary as you go along. Applications can be anxiety-inducing, but managing your time well can make them a little less stressful. Best wishes. I'm rooting for you!

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About the author

Olivia Harper Wilkins is an astrochemist, artist, and writer who is passionate about communicating science and helping others navigate academia. Olivia is a PhD candidate at Caltech and is writing and illustrating a book about astrochemistry for the American Chemical Society. She has also taught scientific writing for the last five years in addition to designing and teaching three of her own courses. She holds a B.S. in chemistry and mathematics from Dickinson College, where she was also a writing tutor in the Eberly Multilingual Writing Center. Olivia has written several successful telescope proposals and was awarded a Goldwater Scholarship, a Fulbright Research Fellowship to Germany, and an NSF Graduate Research Fellowship.



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