

Personal Statements

THE PURPOSE OF A PERSONAL STATEMENT

Many application processes include a requirement to state why you believe that you are suitable for the job or course in question. This section of the application form is often referred to as a 'personal statement'. It is your opportunity to convince the reader that you are interested in the position and that you have all the necessary skills and aptitudes to be successful in the role.

WHAT SHOULD A PERSONAL STATEMENT COVER?

The requirements for what you include in your personal statement can be very specific or quite general, for example:

Specific: 'Please use the space below to indicate why you feel that you are suitable for this post, including details of relevant experience and evidence of your ability to meet the selection criteria.'

General: 'Please provide any additional information in support of your application in the space below. Continue on additional sheets if necessary.'

Whether you have been asked to address specific points in your statement or to write more generally, the underlying principle of a personal statement remains the same: to demonstrate that you have the right skills, knowledge and attitude to meet the requirements of the role.

WHAT DO RECRUITERS LOOK FOR IN A PERSONAL STATEMENT?

A good indication of what an employer is looking for in a personal statement is what they have identified as the key requirements of the role and the type of skills and experiences that are important. These are often identified in the 'person specification' for the job, which is a comprehensive list of all the criteria against which candidates will be measured.

Sample person specification

Criteria	Importance	Method of Assessment
Qualifications & Experience		
A relevant professional qualification &/or at least three years' experience in a related field	Essential	Application form
Relevant postgraduate qualification	Desirable	Application form
Personal Skills		
Ability to prioritise tasks and information appropriately	Essential	Application form
Ability to communicate effectively with both clients and colleagues	Essential	Application form/Interview
Good written communication skills	Essential	Application form/In-tray exercise

If the details of the job do not include a person specification then you need to be resourceful in discovering what these criteria might be. You can usually pick up some ideas from the job advertisement. Sometimes you can find more details about the role from other sources such as the organisation's website, or information provided by relevant professional bodies. For example, if you are applying for the role of a public relations officer for a large charity, you might look at the charity's website to see what sort of work you might be involved in and the skills that would be required, or you might look at the website of the Institute of Public Relations for more information on the role in general.

When a recruiter is reading a candidate's personal statement, they are looking for the following key things:

- enthusiasm
- clarity of thought
- ability to write clearly and persuasively
- evidence of skills and knowledge relevant to the job
- some awareness of what the role will entail as well as wider issues related to the organisation or career area
- an idea of what you would contribute to the organisation or team.

SOME TIPS ON CONTENT

A good way to start planning the content of your statement is to consider the following questions:

- Why are you interested in this post/course/career?
- Why are you interested in this organisation?
- How can you provide evidence that you have the skills required for the role?

When answering these questions try to be as specific as possible. You need to offer convincing reasons why you have chosen to apply to the particular post and why you think you would be suitable. For example, it is not sufficient to say that you are interested in finance; you should be specific about what it is that interests you about a career in finance and the specific role that you have chosen. Similarly it is important to provide evidence to support any claims that you make about your knowledge or skills. It can be helpful to look at each requirement of the person specification and then brainstorm all your experiences which are relevant.

When you have thought about these questions and decided what information to include, it is important to structure your statement carefully so that it makes sense to the person who will be reading it.

Remember that a personal statement is not simply an account of your life and experiences according to you, the author. Instead it is a structured piece of writing which should provide information that is relevant to the requirements of the position for which you are applying. Your statement should be a 'response' to the brief set out by the employer. With this in mind, your statements should always contain information that is *relevant, persuasive and supported by evidence*. For example, you may want to write a paragraph which covers all the activities in which you have been involved whilst being at university. However, grouping all these activities together simply because they occurred at the same period of your life may not make much sense to the person reading your statement. Instead you could organise your statement in terms of the main themes that the recruiter has highlighted. For example, if teamwork is an important aspect of the role, you could include a paragraph on your experience of teamwork which then includes some evidence from your time at university.

'I feel confident working as a member of a team, and enjoy working collaboratively with others. For example, I was the College's Welfare Officer for a year at university and worked as part of the five-member Students' Union executive. I learnt the importance of communication in order to enable such a small team to remain informed about the different activities in which each member was involved.'

'I was also responsible for the small team of student volunteers who helped to run the College's student advice line. This experience enabled me to learn about leadership and motivation, and taught me the importance of taking time to understand the concerns of each of the individuals within my team.'

STRUCTURE

Ideally, your statement should contain information which is relevant to each aspect of the personal specification. However, the way in which you do this is a matter of personal style. Some people find it helpful to make a list of headings under which they are going to cover all the relevant points. These can then be included in the final statement or removed. Other people find it easier to write using more of an essay-based style of prose. There are advantages in both approaches so you should not feel restricted to either as long as you are writing a statement that covers all the relevant requirements of the job and which is concise and easy to read.

Point + evidence

An important principle of effective writing is to make sure that you are making a point *before* providing evidence to back it up. For example, consider the following paragraph:

'I love to read books and enjoy writing my own short stories. I am also a member of the debating society at college and have competed in several competitions. In the second year of my degree I was involved in a group project with students from another course which involved working closely with other students to produce a written report and group presentation. I am therefore comfortable working with other people and have good communication skills across a range of media.'

The theme of this paragraph - communication skills - is not introduced until the end of the paragraph, and the reader has to absorb a lot of seemingly irrelevant information before the point of the paragraph becomes clear. It would be more effective to introduce your point first and then provide some evidence to support your claim.

STYLE

It is important to be concise and to adopt a professional tone. The temptation when applying for a job can be to write as much as possible about your qualities, skills and achievements. However, a statement that is too long and which contains a lot of irrelevant detail will not make a good impression. Remember that personal statements are often

seen as evidence of your writing style and your ability to present a persuasive argument clearly using relevant information.

Editing

When you have drafted your statement, spend some time editing it. Read through each paragraph and ask yourself whether the point that you are trying to make is clear, whether you could be more concise, and if you have covered all the requirements of the person specification. Always check your statement carefully for spelling and grammar mistakes. If spelling and grammar are not your strong points then consider asking someone who has more knowledge to help you.

PERSONAL STATEMENTS FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDY

Applications for places on courses often include a personal statement. The principles for writing such a statement are the same as for any job or position, although the emphasis you place on different elements may be subtly different. You are aiming to persuade the person reading your statement that you are enthusiastic about the subject area, have the requisite knowledge and experience to be successful on the course, and have thought carefully about your reasons for choosing further study.

Most courses require a significant amount of work from students so it is important to provide evidence not only of your knowledge but also that you have good study skills and time management skills. Some course providers are also interested in what your longer term plans are following completion of the course so it is a good idea to consider how the course will fit into a larger plan.

It is also important to provide a good rationale for choosing the particular institution to which you are applying. As with job applications, it is not sufficient to draft a personal statement for one course and then send the same thing to various other institutions running the same or similar course. It is important to explain what attracts you to the institution in question - is their course structured slightly differently or does it place emphasis on certain specialist areas? Does the department have a particular subject strength area or good links with local businesses? Educational institutions are similar to any other organisation in that they contain people working together on specific projects in which they have a keen interest. It is up to you to convince them that you share their interest and would be a beneficial addition to their team, whether as a student, a researcher or a colleague.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- www.careerstagged.co.uk a unique resource designed by the Careers Group. Search the information you want by typing in tag words like 'Personal Statements'.

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