

Recommendations for Personal Statements on Scholarship or Admissions Essays

from Professor Matthew Dolloff

Look forward, not back. What you did in high school is less compelling than where you intend to go. Explain how past experiences will serve you in the future.

Look up, not down: Be positive, not negative. If you're transferring from another school or leaving an industry, don't denigrate it. You learned from the experience even if it wasn't the right fit. Don't complain about anything, EVER.

Make the personal statement personal. Talk about your interests, experiences, and goals. Don't just say what you think they want to hear. That makes you sound like everyone else.

Avoid narratives of adversity. Everyone struggles. Unless your experience was exceptional (refugee, homeless, caretaker), don't dwell on it. Instead, demonstrate how your experiences have helped you choose a certain path or field of study and/or how it makes you empathetic.

Explain why you're ready for school now. This is your chance to put your past in perspective.

Don't waste space on flattery. The school knows it's great and knows you want in. Unless you want to work with a particular professor on specific research (which applies more to graduate school), use the space to make yourself stand out.

Avoid meaningless, simple claims. "Medicine has been growing exponentially for the last few decades." "Law is important for communities and nations." These kinds of statements waste everyone's time. All the space belongs to YOU.

Be specific. To say you have leadership skills is meaningless unless you explain how you acquired them, in what context you employed them, and how you see them playing out in your chosen field. Same with volunteering: What exactly did you do and learn?

Always beware your tone. If there's any way at all that anyone might take anything you've said the wrong way, then cut or recast it. "A lot of lawyers are just in it for the money, but..." Or even if you say, "I'm joining the Navy so I won't end up with too much debt" without saying something about serving the country at the same time, then the tone is off key. Avoid clichés, common stereotypes, and misconceptions about your chosen field or anything else for that matter.

Close the sale. Write a strong conclusion that shows that you are ready to enter the school and/or field.

Don't threaten to "burn down" the establishment. Even if you're a visionary with great plans for the future, saying you will "shake up" medicine or "revolutionize" education is alarming to the people who hold your future in their hands.

Be complete. If the prompt asks for 2,000 words and you write only 1,200, then you will be judged as having missed an opportunity. If it asks for 2,000, aim for 2,000.

Read your essay again and again. Proofread! Poor grammar kills an application. Read it aloud to a friend. Read it, put it away for a day or two, and read it again. Bring it to the LTC. Every time you read your essay, you will find ways to improve it!

***For graduate research applicants:** If you are going into a specific field like psychology or English or engineering, you must have some kind of research agenda on which you intend to follow through. Graduate schools aren't looking for students with just a general interest – they worry those students will not graduate in a timely manner, if at all.