

Write a Great Personal Statement

This article is broken up into four sections:

1. Overview: personal statement basics
2. Brainstorm: what to write about
3. Structure: organizing your writing
4. Write: putting it all together

1. Overview – personal statement basics...

A personal statement is:

- A story, or more specifically, *your* story
- A window into your personality, character, priorities and/or goals
- A display of your creativity and thoughtfulness
- A display of your writing skills
- Between 250-1000 words, depending on the essay question/prompt

A personal statement is not:

- Your entire personal history
- A research paper that you are the subject of (i.e. an academic paper written in third person)
- Your resume written out in narrative form
- An answer to the question, “Why should we allow you in our school?”

How much it matters

The personal statement can count for up to 30% of an admissions decision – that’s a lot! They matter at schools that use holistic admissions – meaning they get to know a student beyond grades and test scores. Typically, the smaller and more selective the school, the more the personal statement matters.

Why it matters

The personal statement matters because it is your main, if not only opportunity in the application process to speak freely about yourself (besides an interview, which carries much less weight). Grades and test scores are critical, but they are, after all, just numbers and letters. They can’t capture your personality and character – the things that make you you. Your personal statement brings your application to life. It is your grey area, your unique history and the stuff that makes you tick. A really great personal statement can tip the scales in your favor. On the other hand, a really bad one can hurt you.

Can a great essay replace bad grades and/or test scores?

Simply put, no way.

Examples of Personal Statement Questions / Prompts

When an essay question or prompt asks you, in a very open-ended way, to share information about your background, experiences, aspirations, etc., you are being asked for a personal statement. For instance:

1. Describe the world you come from – for example, your family, community or school – and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations. (University of California application system)
2. *Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.* (Common Application)
3. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family. (Common Application)

What the admissions officer (the reader) wants to know:

1. What kind of a person are you? (e.g. empathic, focused, driven, creative, all of the above, etc.)

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2. Will you add value to our campus?
3. Does this student have writing skills?

***Note:** You will not answer these questions explicitly. You will use evidence from your life (stories, events, etc.) to prove your answers to the first two. The quality of your essay will answer the third question.

2. Brainstorm – what to write about...

What you write about will depend on the prompt. Some prompts, like the third one above (“Discuss an accomplishment or event...”), are more specific and help to focus your thinking. But other prompts, like the first and second one above, are mind-numbingly broad and open-ended. Where do you begin?

First, simplify the prompt. Reword it so it makes more sense to you and doesn’t make your brain feel like mush when you read it. Let’s use the first and second prompts above as examples:

Prompt 1: Describe the world you come from – for example, your family, community or school – and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations.

Prompt 1 reworded, simplified: Write about one key part of your life. That could be your family, community or school, but it could also be something else that has been important to you. In what ways has this one part of your influenced your goals and future plans?

Prompt 2: *Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it.* If this sounds like you, then please share your story.


Prompt 2 reworded, simplified: *Tell us something about yourself that we must know in order to really ‘get’ you. It can be a story, a moment, an interest, a talent – pretty much anything.*

Second, narrow the prompt. The prompt is intentionally broad so you have lots of choices and flexibility. Once you choose your overall topic, you can further simplify the prompt by making it more specific.

Prompt 1 reworded, simplified: Write about one key part of your life. That could be your family, community or school, but it could also be something else that has been important to you. In what ways has this one part of your influenced your goals and future plans?

What you’re thinking: Well, there are a lot of key parts of my life, but I’m gonna keep it simple and choose one: my family. Well, I guess this just got a little easier. I have a new, simpler, narrower question:

Tell us about your **family**. How have your experiences with your **family** influenced your goals and future plans?



Third, brainstorm. Let’s just say you’re sticking with this question. Your family is the focal point or “eye” of your brainstorm (Get it? Like the eye of a storm? Moving on...).

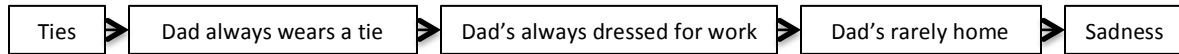
Take out your “Personal Statement Brainstorming Sheet” or create your own. Go to a quiet place. Maybe take some music with you – whatever kind helps you to think clearly and reflectively. Maybe light some candles and sit crisscross applesauce. I don’t know what you’re into.

In the center of the sheet, write “family” (or whatever your “eye” is). Start jotting down the people/relationships, experiences, objects and places that come to mind when you think of your “eye.” Think deeply. Make literal AND figurative connections. For example, under objects, you might put “tie” because 95% of the time your dad wears a tie. That’s a literal connection. But what does the tie make you

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think of and feel on a deeper level? Maybe ties make you think of your dad rarely being around because he's always at work. Maybe because of that, ties make you feel sad. That's a figurative connection.

When a person/relationship, experience, object or place connects you to deeper thoughts and emotions, write them down. Flesh those connections all the way out. For instance:



Don't be stingy. Write everything down that comes into your head. If you need one piece of paper for every category, go for it. When you feel you've maxed out, stop. Leave for a while. Then come back.

Cut all your people/relationships, experiences, objects and places down to the most significant 10 – not 10 in each category but 10 total. Now cut them to 5, then 3, and then 1. For positive reasons, negative reasons, or both, this one item is extremely significant to you. To continue our example, let's say you chose "dad," which you wrote in the people/relationships category.

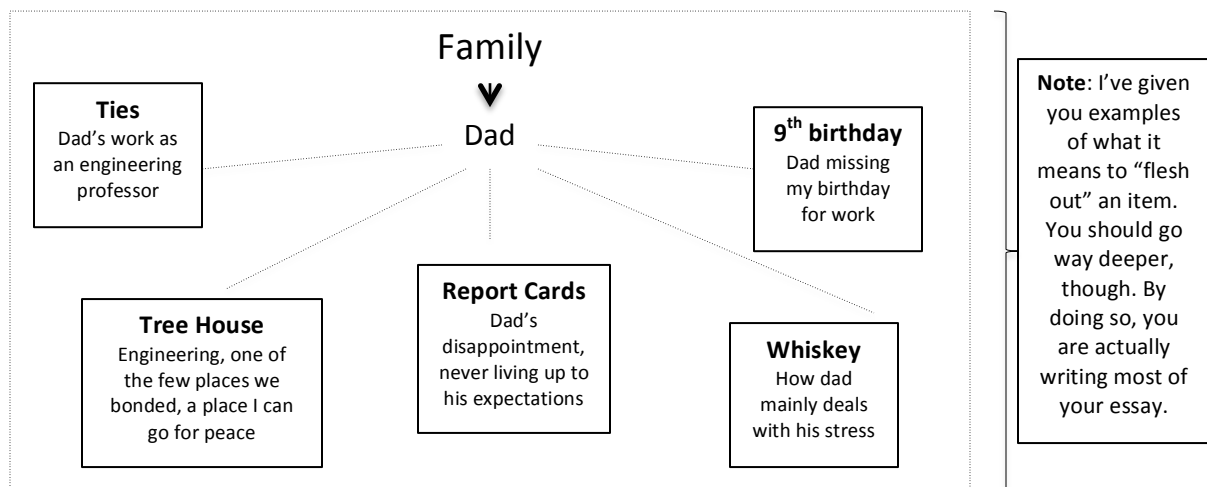
Take out a new sheet of paper. Turn it horizontal. At the top you would write family, the original eye. Draw a line down and to the word "dad," which you chose as your most salient connection to your family.

By the way, we can once again simplify the prompt by making it more specific. Our new prompt is:

Tell us about your family in terms of your relationship with your dad. How has your relationship with your dad influenced your goals and future plans?

(If you have time, just for fun, go back and look at the original prompt. Notice how much more specific we have made it throughout the brainstorming / planning process.)

Go back through your original list and find the top 5 items you most strongly associate with your dad. Write them down. Give yourself sufficient physical space around each. Maybe your paper looks like this:



Flesh out each item **thoroughly**, drawing literal and figurative connections to your dad. Go deep with each one. What does each one make you feel, think, remember, smell, etc. Some of what you write will be used as details in your essay. All of it put together will help you determine your main point.

Fourth, and finally, determine your main point / thesis / argument.

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Take a long, hard look at the prompt. Take a long, hard look at the page where you fleshed out your top five items. Make a statement that summarizes that page and responds to the prompt. Here's an example:

Statement: My relationship with my dad has been a defining factor in who I am and who I want to be, both personally and professionally. As a professional, my dad is my example. A lifelong engineer and long-time engineering professor at a prestigious college, my dad is my inspiration to achieve immense success in the field of electrical engineering. But as a person, and specifically, as a dad, he is my non-example. He is the father I will strive never to be for my children.

Your statement doesn't have to be perfectly written, just substantive and real. If you've done a good job, then you've written your essay's main point – the one argument that you will spend your essay proving. And if you've done a good job fleshing out your top five items, then you've got the proof – the specific details you will use to support your argument throughout the essay.

One final thought...

I have done my best to turn brainstorming into a clear, stepwise process for you, but it just isn't that simple. Hopefully at least some of it is helpful to you, but ultimately you will have to find the brainstorming method that works best for you and the essay you're writing.

If, during the brainstorming process, you find yourself completely stuck and uninspired, here are some questions to grease the wheels and unlock the stuff of great personal statements.

Brainstorming Questions

1. What do people not know about you?
2. What thought causes you the most pain? Joy?
3. What experience caused you the most pain? Joy?
4. How are you different when no one's watching?
5. What's the most beautiful place in the world?
6. When you're the happiest, what are you doing, who are you with and where are you?
7. When do you feel like the version of yourself you always want to be? When do you feel the opposite?
8. What are you most afraid of?
9. What smells bring you back in time?
10. When did you drop the ball?
11. What have you not told the people closest to you?
12. What has your dad taught? What about your mom?
13. What are you sensitive about?
14. Who knows you so well that it makes you uncomfortable?
15. Who knows things about you that you wish they didn't? What do they know?
16. What's a memory you couldn't forget if you tried?
17. What / who are you waiting for?
18. What is your greatest strength? Greatest weakness?
19. What wouldn't you trade for the world?
20. What do you love to learn about? Talk about?
21. Which inanimate items in your life matter to you most?
22. Who would you risk your life for?
23. Who counts on you? And for what?
24. What will they say about you when you're gone?
25. What's missing?

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3. Structure – organizing your writing...

There isn't one way to structure a personal statement or other college essay. There isn't an ideal number of paragraphs or definite way to organize them. There is no formula. What I *can* offer, though, are two broad ways of approaching your essay. Hopefully this will simplify the process for you.

A great personal statement or college essay should either go **deep** or **wide**:

- **Deep:** proving your point by sharing, in great detail, 1-2 critically important scenes/experiences.
- **Wide:** proving your point by discussing many different experiences or pieces of your life.

*For examples of deep and wide personal statements, see "Essays That Worked."

Approach 1: The Deep, Narrative Essay

A "deep" essay discusses one or a very small handful of experiences in tremendous, graphic detail. What makes it a "narrative" is the fact that events take place chronologically and are linked causally – meaning one event affects the next, and so on and so forth, like dominoes.

Many movies "go deep" to prove their point. One good example is "Saving Private Ryan." The same way the essay above was broadly about your family, "Saving Private Ryan" is broadly about World War II and its immense devastation. And just as you decided to talk about your family through the lens of your relationship with your dad, "Saving Private Ryan" portrays the terror of WWII through the lens of one particular story. The movie gives us a deep narrative.



In case you haven't seen it, "Saving Private Ryan" follows a platoon of soldiers, led by Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks), who have a special mission to go behind enemy lines, find Private James Ryan (Matt Damon), and bring him back to the U.S. safely. We learn early in the movie that Private Ryan's three brothers have all been killed in the war. Captain Miller and his men are ordered to carry out what is basically a suicide mission so that they can save Private Ryan and spare his mother the horror of losing all four of her sons in the war.

The scope of WWII is incomprehensible. Therefore, telling the "whole story" of the war in one movie (or a hundred, for that matter) would be impossible. Recognizing this, Steven Spielberg, the film's director, chooses instead to go deep, to insert us into one narrative about the experience of one group of men. Every once and a while, he zooms out from the action (literally and figuratively) to give us a sense of the war's massive global scale or to allow us to reflect on what the characters are going through. But, for the most part, he remains zoomed in on these men – their battles, friendships, fears, hopes, dreams, and for some, their deaths. Through this one very intimate, personal story, we are able to understand Spielberg's message about WWII's unfathomable devastation.

Like WWII, your life's story cannot easily be summed up, and certainly not in the given word limit. So, like Spielberg, you can choose to "go deep," to share one narrative that illustrates the main point you are trying to make about yourself / your life. But unlike Spielberg's narrative, which is made up of numerous scenes over the course of nearly three hours, your narrative will consist of one or couple of scenes portrayed through highly specific, vivid detail. At points during your story, you may zoom out to share background information, offer your analysis and reflection, and give the reader a sense of the larger backdrop against which the story takes place. But, for the most part, you are zoomed in, giving the reader

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an intimate look at 1-2 critical experiences in your life. The reader will use what you give him/her to fill in the blanks (things you don't explicitly address).

Whether or not you've seen "Saving Private Ryan," I strongly recommend you go watch it so you can get a sense of what I'm talking about – and because it's awesome. Note, however, that it is just one of thousands of films that "go deep" as a way to send a broader message.

"Saving Private Ryan" provides a nice blueprint for how to structure / organize a deep, narrative personal statement. I have to remind you, though, that there is no formula for how to structure your personal statement. There are many approaches. These are just guidelines.

Note: I would recommend taking a look at "Essays That Worked" so you can see how these structural guidelines play out in real personal statements that went "deep."

| Scene / Paragraph | Saving Private Ryan | Your Essay |
|--|--|---|
| Main Point | WWII was unspeakably devastating, not only in terms of its global impact but also in terms of its impact on the lives of the soldiers and families who were directly involved with the war. | You have to decide what your main point / argument / thesis will be. This is the point you will spend your essay proving and developing. |
| Opening: Hook | We are immediately thrust into a scene in which a character we don't yet know is walking through Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. That character stops in front of a grave that belongs to someone we don't yet know. Then we are taken back in time to the storming of the beaches of Normandy in France. We are hooked, but we don't really have any idea what the story is going to be about. We're just into it. | Your essay should immediately hook and interest the reader. Thrust him/her into your scene. No need to provide any explicit context/background info right away. Get the reader invested. |
| Right After Opening: Context (intro of central point / problem / issue) | We get some background so we understand the story. We learn that Private Ryan's brothers have all been killed and that the movie is going to be about Captain Miller's platoon trying to rescue him. We learn why the film is called "Saving Private Ryan." | Provide some background info so that reader is not totally lost. Introduce the central issue or problem you're addressing, or main point you're trying to make. |
| Body: Storytelling | The film closely follows Captain Miller's men as they try to find and rescue Private Ryan. We watch their battles and learn of their fears, hopes and dreams. Now and then, the film zooms out so we understand the bigger picture, but for the most part it is zoomed in on what's happening with the group of men. | You are bringing to life the one or handful of scenes you are using to illustrate your point. Now and then, you may zoom out to provide background or analysis / reflections, but mostly you are zoomed in on what's happening in your scene(s). |
| Conclusion: Resolution & Reflection | We learn from Chief of Staff George C. Marshall that Private Ryan is on his way home to his mom. The film skips ahead many years. We meet a much older James Ryan and we see his family – wife, kids and grandkids. It is the continuation of the movie's opening scene. James stands in front of Captain Miller's tombstone, reflecting on the experience and his life as a whole. He expresses thanks for having been rescued and he seeks reassurance that he deserves the sacrifice those men made to save him. We are left with an image of James Ryan saluting the fallen Captain, his large family standing behind him as a reminder that the sacrifice was worth it. | Bring your story to a close by discussing its resolution. Share your reflections on the matter. Discuss the overall moral or lesson of the experience. Give the reader a sense of what happens next and where the characters go from here. You don't have to end by taking the reader back to the scene with which you began the essay, but you can give the essay a sense of roundness and connectedness by invoking things you said earlier in the piece. |

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Approach 2: Going Wide

For a personal statement, “going wide” can mean two things.

First, it can mean a narrative (causal sequence of events) that takes place over a long period of time (as opposed to “going deep,” discussing one or two scenes / experiences in great detail). This approach works for a biographical essay or any essay in which you are trying to show gradual change over many years.

An excellent example of this approach is the award-winning “Boyhood,” a coming-of-age story that depicts a boy’s youth from ages six to eighteen as he grows up in Texas with divorced parents. Obviously, the film itself doesn’t last 12 years. Instead, it is a 2-hour and 5-minute narrative comprised of a selection of key experiences from a 12-year span of this boy’s life. We don’t see every single moment of the main character’s life, but from the scenes we do see, we are able to get a pretty complete picture and fill in the blanks where necessary.



“Boyhood” was filmed over the course of 12 years so that it could show the actual aging of the main characters.

For a wide narrative, the same fundamentals of college essay writing apply (see “Tips for All College Essays”). Just like a deep narrative, a wide narrative must have a central message or theme that ties it together, even though it may cover a span of many years. Descriptive and specific language are also as important for a wide narrative as they are for a deep narrative. The only difference is the amount of time each sentence moves the reader forward: in a deep narrative a sentence may move the reader forward a few seconds, whereas in a wide narrative a sentence may jump the reader forward months or years.

The structure / organization of a wide narrative can be very much the same as that of a deep narrative. For instance, the first sentence and intro should still hook the reader. Immediately following the intro should be some context. And, the conclusion should still be characterized by resolution and reflection. The big difference will be in the body, where you will cover more events in less granular detail.

A second way to “go wide” is to write a montage essay, one where you discuss a various elements in your life – people/relationships, experiences, places, objects, hobbies, etc. – and connect them all with one theme through one lens (I’ll explain more in a bit). A montage essay is **not** a narrative, meaning that the events or elements have no causal (domino-like) relationship.

An example of this style can be seen in the documentary film “Babies,” which follows the first year of the lives of four babies living in Namibia, Mongolia, Japan and San Francisco. With no narration, the film jumps from baby to baby for 79 minutes, comparing the cultural differences between the settings in which these children are raised.



The three big components of a montage essay are theme, lens and elements. The theme is the broader topic that your essay is about. In “Babies,” the theme is cultural differences. Since that’s so broad, we need a lens to focus it. In the film, that lens is babies. And what about the elements? If you watch the film you will see that there are countless elements that serve as illustrations of cultural differences. These could be the different ways the babies dress, the foods their parents eat and feed their children, the families’ different traditions, and countless others.

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The cool thing about a montage essay is that it allows you to tell the reader about yourself by pulling together seemingly random fragments of your life. How do you identify these fragments? If you did the brainstorming exercise before, you should have generated a pretty robust list of people, experiences, places and objects that are important to you. If you are serious about writing a montage essay, I recommend going through this exercise again, except this time thinking about the people, experiences, places and objects that are important in your whole life as opposed to just one part (in our example, we just focused on family).

You also need a theme, a broad idea that everything comes back to, and a lens, a way to focus your theme. The order in which you determine your theme, lens and elements is up to you.

There is no surefire way to organize a montage essay. By definition, montage essays all look different. What they have in common is that they all resemble patchwork quilts. That is, their parts do not make sense together until you create a sensible whole into which those parts can fit.

4. Write – putting it all together...

If you've spent time brainstorming and planning your essay's structure, the writing part shouldn't be that bad. Just know that the process of creating great writing takes lots of time and effort. If you expect to get your best work done in shot, you're setting yourself up for frustration and disappointment. Instead, expect that you will write several drafts before arriving at the final masterpiece.

I strongly recommend enlisting the support of a peer, mentor, teacher and/or other individual with strong writing skills who can give you helpful feedback (not write your essay for you) along the way. I also recommend holding yourself accountable to the tips I offered in "Tips for All College Essay." Finally, I recommend that you take time to read examples of great college essays (see "Essays That Worked") so you can see these tips in action. You will also see that there are a variety of ways to write a great essay.

Good luck and happy writing!