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Letters of Application and Personal Statements

Why good writing matters

A resume is a presentation of the facts of your experience and education, while a letter of application connects those facts to *you*. A well-written personal statement is one that shapes the facts into a person, and your task is to create an image of yourself that makes the reader "see" you in the position for which you are applying.

Yes, grammar matters

Good writing includes correct sentence structure, a clear relationship between parts of the idea in the sentence, and precise word choice; it is free of typos and spelling errors. Writers who demonstrate care in these areas are ones who care about how they are perceived. If your reader is looking for a person who pays attention to details and who has respect for the position and for the reader, poor writing will not be convincing.

Audience analysis is key

The first task for any writer of any document is to consider the audience:

- What are the reader's expectations for the document?
- What are the qualities that would impress the reader?
- What language and tone are appropriate for the audience's expectations?
- What will seem overused or unoriginal to that reader?

Put yourself in the place of the readers and think about what they usually see in these kinds of personal essays. Phrases like "I love to help people" or "I am interested in different cultures" are common in these essays; they are not great for a couple reasons. First, they are clichés and, like most clichés, they have lost any real meaning. Second, the, focus is on what the writer loves and wants and not what they know or can do. Third, it's boring, which does not help the writer emerge from the pack.

Most importantly, consider what is being asked of you: the personal essay should be a direct, specific answer to a question. If the directions do not pose a question (or if the application does not specify writing a letter, but you want to), work out the question yourself.

Examples:

1. **Applying for a job advertised online:** What makes you a perfect fit for this position?
2. **Applying for a scholarship:** Why is this scholarship necessary for your academic and professional life?
3. **Applying for an internship:** How will this internship fit with your goals?

Formulate your answer, which is a version of a thesis statement. At that point you will decide what details will elaborate on, support, and illustrate your claim (thesis).

A good rule: Show, don't tell

Provide examples that allow the reader to visualize your accomplishments or qualities. Rather than writing, "I am a team player," give a brief view of that characteristic: "During high school I worked with the band to raise money for travel and helped build a house with Habitat for Humanity." This sentence "shows" readers that you have worked with others for a common goal. They can "see" you talking with band members about how to raise money, organizing a fund-raising event, talking to those who attend, collaborating to tackle a complicated building project, communicating with a few or many about how to raise a wall or paint a room.

Many people can say they are team players, but only you can make that a reality in the reader's imagination.

How to use personal experience

Personal experience is a good way to introduce yourself; you can help your audience get to know what has inspired you. Many people use personal narratives in statements of purpose, but not many use them well. The best personal stories will be brief, vivid, and to the point.

While brevity is key for the entire personal statement, the "story" part should read like a good anecdote—fast and dramatic. Avoid too much background, as in this example of an application for a music scholarship:

> When I was thirteen, my father changed jobs and so my parents and I moved to a new town about six hours away. I went to seventh grade in Roosevelt Middle School. I did not like the school very much, and the other kids treated me like an outsider. The only good thing about the school was music class because I learned to play the sitar, and the teacher was really nice to me. I went everyday afterschool to practice and to talk to him. That was the beginning of my love of music.

Instead, use descriptive language: "As a *shy* new student in seventh grade, I discovered that the only *bright spot* in my day was music class, where I *struggled* to play an *old, beat-up* sitar but found a mentor in my teacher, *Mr. Banerjee*."

Details help the story come alive; unnecessary information is removed so it does not diminish the story's impact. Use vivid description, but do not overdo it; do not go for the elaborate, seemingly sophisticated diction when a simpler word can do the trick. In the example above, "old, beat-up" gives a reader an accurate and vivid mental image; "antiquated, dilapidated" is similar in meaning but is dry without being more colorful. Good language can wake up a reader but should not draw attention to itself.

A story that makes the reader see and recognize your point is much better than statements that you include to spell out that point. In the example above, the last sentence in the first version deflates the description by reducing it to a cliché. In the second version, the description is left to itself: it is clear that this was an important moment for the writer. The reader knows that the writer remembers that experience so clearly and in such detail. The key take-away here is to treat your readers as intelligent enough to "get it" as long as you have lead them up to that point with your description.

One last point about personal stories: revisit them in some way at or near the end of the essay. It brings the whole piece full circle. In the music essay above, the writer could conclude as follows: "Whether my future takes me to a symphony orchestra or a school faculty, I will always hear Mr. Banerjee's quiet instructions and seek to make him proud of his shy and clumsy former student."

Avoiding clichés

Clichés can blur individuality as well as sounding insincere. Look for alternatives, but as noted above, don't go overboard with exotic language.

Some words you can do better than:

unique	love	inspire	dream
hope	passionate	interesting	exciting

Examples of sentiments you can do without:

All my life I have loved/wanted/dreamed…
I will work hard…
My biggest inspiration…
The most important thing to me…

The "I" problem

It's impossible to avoid using "I" because this essay is about you. However, too much "I" is repetitive and distracting. What you don't want is an essay of 25 sentences that all begin "I" followed by a verb: I want, I said, I worked, I did, etc. Overuse of "I" can be reduced through some careful attention and a bit of sentence revision.

First, write the rough draft without worrying about your use of the first-person pronoun; just get your ideas down. Then, circle all the "I"s; if every sentence has an "I," this can be revised; if many, or even some, have more than one, definitely revise.

1. I volunteered for Habitat for Humanity because I knew my carpentry skills would be put to good use in a cause I believe in. 3 "I"s
2. Volunteering with Habitat for Humanity made good use of my carpentry skills for the benefit of my community. 0 "I"s

Combining sentences can help:

1. I went to work at a young age and had many jobs. I had jobs with the Post Office and with a trucking company. In both jobs I learned how to be punctual and accurate. 3 "I"s
2. Holding a variety of jobs since I was young, including the Post Office and a trucking company, taught me the value of punctuality and accuracy. 1 "I"

Another way to go about this is to write in the third person: Sam Smith has had many experiences that make him a good candidate for this internship. Sam has worked in the school newspaper, and he has contributed several articles to the local paper. Sam also has two blogs: one about local sports and one about the music scene.

Then, make it a goal to use his name only once: Many experiences make Sam a good candidate for this internship, including work on the school paper and his blogs about sports and music as well as some articles for a local newspaper.

Finally, don't forget to put yourself in place of that name! In the sentence above, use "me" for "Sam" and "my" for "his."

Conciseness

It's possible that graduate schools, scholarships, internships, and other programs that require personal statements impose a length restriction simply to reduce wear and tear on the readers, but it is a fact that those limits also ensure better writing. Many problems in writing can be addressed either directly or as a side-effect of revising for conciseness. For instance, forcing brevity encourages the writer to choose words, phrases, and even ideas more carefully, and make him/her more aware of repetition. Also, getting to the point more quickly forces the reader to be more precise about that point.

Revising your essay for brevity has a couple steps:

1. **Complete your draft** (as you usually should) by getting all your ideas down.

2. **Print the document**. We see things better in the "hard" version. When you print, triple-space the lines and/or use a different font, which makes revision easier and invites change.

3. **Read each sentence as a problem to be solved**, even if it's a perfectly respectable sentence. Be determined to cut it down so that each remaining word is essential to the meaning.

4. **After revising sentences, look for opportunities to combine**. Similar or related points can be easily combined. Use conjunctions or semi-colons to combine complete ideas that are related. Look for ways to cut down on wordiness as well by having some words do "double duty."

   For example:

   - **Transform this sentence**: I took many college courses about economic theory, but I did not have any opportunities to use any ideas in a real situation. Many college classes taught me economic theory but not how to apply it to real life.

   - **Into this sentence**: In college, I took many classes that taught me economic theory but did not have a chance to apply economic principles to real-life situations.

Proofreading

The best proofreading method—by far—is the so-called "backwards" method. Follow the steps below:

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1. If possible, print your document (which has been proven to be the most effective way for writers to really *see* what they have written); be sure the document is at least double-spaced.
2. Cover up all of the page you are working on except one sentence at a time.
3. Beginning with the last sentence, read (preferably out loud) in an unhurried way. Because we usually read without actually looking at each individual word, our brains "fill in" by making assumptions based on context, previous knowledge, and the shapes of words. Reading a single line at a time forces our eyes to take in each word; mistakes are more apparent.
4. Any time you feel a twinge of doubt about a sentence, stop. That's your signal that something may be incorrect (or unclear.)
5. Make the correction(s). If you're not sure how to correct it, make a mark in the margin and come back to that later. Consult a grammar reference book or site, or ask for help if needed
   a. (If you're writing on a printed page, don't write too small, because you may overlook those notes when making your revision later. Write with big letters, circle punctuation changes, etc.)
6. Continue reading through the document, back to the beginning, following the above method.
7. Once you've completed the document, and if you have time, read it again with the question in mind: Can I make my style even better?
   a. An error-free sentence is not necessarily a *good* sentence. You want to check for any word choice that could be improved, perhaps change the sentence order so it has more impact, reduce wordiness, and so on.

The best application letters concisely, clearly and correctly highlight the writer's qualifications, adding a personal story that reveals a deep connection to the subject.

~rev. August 2020