

Counselor's Quarterly – Fall 2022



Personal Statements: It's All About You Mostly.

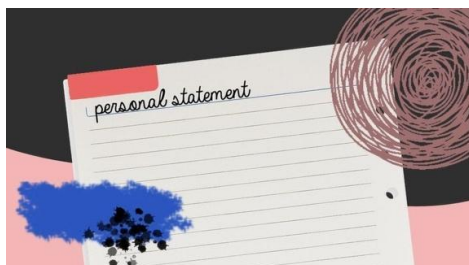
Dear Faithful Reader,

About this time of year, grade 12 students are thinking seriously about fulfilling their university requirements. Some universities require students to write the dreaded “*personal statement*.” This can strike fear in even the most confident writers, as they envision their perfectly crafted application doomed over a misplaced gerund deep in the fourth paragraph of their personal statement. The good news is that students should already be equipped with most of the information and knowledge needed to complete this task. After all, the statement is personal, and so it should include a fair bit about themselves, and maybe more importantly how they relate to the university (or the major).



The first step for students is to check out whether the universities they are applying to actually require a personal statement. This varies based on the university's country or region and the major that students are applying for. For example, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University requires a personal statement for students who want to study Ophthalmology, but Building Sciences does not. Universities in Canada rarely require such a statement, but it may be required for students applying for Paramedicine at the University of Toronto. When needed, the university will generally give some guidelines about the length of the statement and suggestions about the general content. Most universities do not specify precisely what to write nor the format to write it in; however, we can divide personal statements into two broad groups:

1. The Professional-style Statement – This statement will focus primarily on students' academic areas of interest and why they love it. **Universities in the UK and Hong Kong generally require this type of statement.**
2. The Personal-style Statement – This statement will focus on why they are an excellent addition to the population of students at that university. **Universities in the USA require this type of statement.**



Also, consider if students are sending one statement to many universities or sending each university a unique version. Universities in the UK all receive the same personal statement, so it's unwise to mention any particular university by name. Similarly, the US personal

statement isn't university specific, so it shouldn't be tailored to any individual school. Applications to Hong Kong *are unique*, so each letter can be customized to suit each school. In the case of Hong Kong, students should begin by researching each program they're interested in and take notes to reference while writing. Strong knowledge of the program can be interwoven into the statement for these universities.

Professional-style Statement

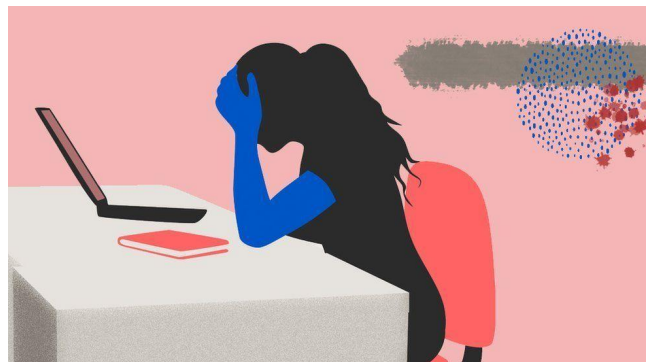
Let's look at what students should show in their personal statement:

1. Insight
 - a. Demonstrate a deep understanding of your chosen field.
 - b. Illustrate a profound takeaway from the process of writing the statement
 - c. Don't just understand other authors' arguments; synthesize and contrast various authors' ideas with your own.
2. Curiosity
 - a. Engage with the subject(s) above and beyond the curriculum
 - b. Show dedication to independent study
 - c. Demonstrate interest in a broad range of topics within the subject(s), but show a specific thread of expertise
3. Quality of Prose
 - a. Compelling writing in terms of structure and language
 - b. Have a unique voice that shows in your writing
 - c. Be artistic with how the material and arguments are woven together
4. Authenticity
 - a. The entire document is well-conceived and thoughtful
 - b. Connect personal experiences with broader insights into the issues
 - c. Don't use clichés, don't appear pretentious, and avoid hyperbole

Personal-style Statement

The personal statement written for universities in the USA should resemble a "lunch table conversation." Universities are interested in the following:

1. Learning about your life
2. Gaining insights about your values
3. Gaining insights into your growth as a person
4. Getting a general sense of the intelligence of the student



Students should include a “hook” at the beginning to catch the reader’s attention. The introduction should also have some connection to the end of the essay. There should be a central theme that the student refers to multiple times throughout the written work. The conclusion should reveal something unique and personal about the student. “A profound truth learned through hardship” is an excellent example. However, try to avoid clichés that are too general and could be shared by many students.

It’s common for students to have difficulty in starting to write this type of essay. A helpful tip is to begin by just writing down various topics and craft a narrative by combining those ideas in meaningful ways. Students can think about a story within their life that excites them, makes them laugh, feels honest, or something that they would love to share with the dean of their dream university. It’s always better to focus on more recent events; nobody wants to hear a story centered on lessons learned in middle school. Try to avoid being melodramatic, and avoid excessive content about parents and grandparents. The focus should always be on the student.

Closing Thoughts

Regardless of which type of essay a student is required to write, one key thing to remember is to be authentic. University admissions staff are clever by nature; they don’t want to see an essay that someone with a graduate degree obviously wrote. While there are many services out there who will promise to write your child the best letter possible, I think it’s best to be honest. Let the student create the best written work they can, and then have an adult look it over for structure, clarity, and content. I wish your child the very best of luck!

Until next time,

Kevin Jones

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