Here and Now: Writing a Compelling Personal Statement

Some personal statements have vague or general prompts; others are quite specific. If the prompt is specific, be sure you address it. Even when the prompt is more general, however, it’s important to remember that the goal of the personal statement is to convince a specialized audience that you and your intellectual or academic interests fit perfectly with their program, school, or department.

In this sense, personal statements simultaneously tell stories and make arguments. The story is about you – your intellectual history and academic endeavors, your future plans, and so forth; the argument is about how not only is this program perfect for your needs at this time, but also about what particular insights or experience you bring that no one else could.

Three Good Things to Remember . . .

1. Find (and articulate) a unifying thread.
   Personal statements should not read like narrative resumes, nor should they simply recount transformational or inspirational moments. They should weave selected experiences into a focused narrative that presents you in a particular light.

2. Be specific.
   Avoid clichés. Tell your story or stories as vividly as you can. While you’ll never have much (or perhaps enough space), you need to give your readers enough information that they can see the connections between your experiences and the insights you extrapolate from them clearly.

3. Do your homework.
   Be sure that you’re answering the question or questions asked. Be sure that you’re being specific not only about your experiences but why you want to study at a particular school or a particular program. Do the research about strong departments, programs, or faculty that you’ll want to work with.

And . . . be prepared to write and revise your personal statement many, many times. Show it to people to see how different audiences read it. Ask people’s advice. Take it to the Writing Center.

Resources

The Pomona College Writing Center (http://writing.pomona.edu/writingcenter) is open Sunday through Thursday afternoons and evenings. Book an appointment online. Writing Fellows are ready, willing, and able to work with you at any stage in the writing process.

You can find further useful advice on writing personal statements at the following sites:

- http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/application.html
- http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_perstate.html
- http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/tasks/graduate.shtml