

Personal Statement and Cover Letter Writing Prompts



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What is a Personal Statement?

- Some schools call it a “Statement of Purpose.”
- This is basically a 1-2 page essay in which you describe why you are a strong candidate for this program.
- Many of the elements of a **Statement of Purpose** can be used in a **Cover Letter** with a job application.
- A cover letter is for the same purpose, and usually includes a list of what employers should expect to see/look for in your application.

➤ Knight Campus Graduate Internship Program requests:

In approximately 500 words, please describe experience that makes you a strong candidate for this program. The program is particularly interested in:

- Technical experience gained through employment, internships, for-credit research or project-based coursework. While beneficial, students do not need to have direct experience in the focus area they are applying to.
- Non-technical experience (e.g. employment, volunteerism, athletics) that required significant use of soft skills (teamwork, leadership, time management, etc.).
- Description of why the program is a good fit for your career goals
- Any additional information that allows a holistic assessment of your candidacy (e.g. hardship/adversity that has been overcome; an improvement in grades at upper vs lower level coursework).

PLU Education Masters Program (Priority deadline to apply is Nov. 1st) requires:

In an essay of 500-750 words (double spaced, 12 point font) please respond to the following questions:

- Share with us why you want to be a teacher and what you hope to accomplish as a teacher.
- What do you want to teach and why?
- When you picture yourself teaching in one to two years, what do you see? Provide detailed description of what students are doing and what you are doing.

▶ Columbia University says that your personal statement should answer these:

- Why do you want to complete further research in this field?
- Why have you chosen to apply to this particular university?
- What are your strengths? Demonstrate how you stand out from other candidates.
- What are your transferable skills? Be sure to emphasize transferable skills such as communication, teamwork, and time management skills. Give examples.
- How does this program align with your career goals?



What readers look for

- Cover letter: readers are going to look for these two things: 1. why you are the perfect candidate for the job, and 2. why you are passionate about working for this company*.
- Personal Statement: The reader should feel your personal connection to the degree or program you're applying to and clearly understand your motivations. Discuss what makes you different from other candidates by including specific details and brief examples of your experiences to help your personal statement stand out**.

*Novoresume CareerBlog.

**Material from Indeed, 6 Tips to Writing a Grad school Personal Statement



Today: Writing Prompts

- Today: a **series of 8 exercises** together that will *prepare you to write a draft* of your personal statement or cover letter. This will be a pool of information that you can pull from to make your draft.
- **Open a blank document on your computer for writing**, put your name and date at the top.
- Don't worry about formatting or spelling, just write freely. Get your thoughts on the page! Fixing it up is for *later*.
- We will spend 3 – 5 minutes on each of the 8 writing prompts.



Consider the readers

- Yes, every personal statement is usually read by someone, if not multiple evaluators.
- One of the most common complaints of admissions readers is that,* “so many of the essays seem almost the same.”
- Some of them read as many as 100 essays at a time.
- So imagine how grabbing one of these openings would be...

*Material from Donald Asher, *Graduate Admissions Essays* book, (2008).



- I was taking out the garbage one morning on the Serengeti Plain when I realized what had been bothering me...
- Learning outside in a 9,000-acre forest was more engaging than sitting in a lab waiting for some bacteria to grow...
- When they told me I couldn't ride my bike across the mountain range, that made me want to do it even more...
- At age forty-eight, I left my two adult children, my husband, and the dishes in the sink and moved into a college dorm to be a freshman...
- If this information were to fall into the wrong hands, my father would go to jail...

Or,

- My uncle, after whom your library is named...

Material from Donald Asher, *Graduate Admissions Essays* book, (2008).



Writing Prompt # 1 Unusual Things

- Take a moment to write down the most unusual things about you as a person-- not you as an applicant or student-- but you as a unique and unusual person. Consider your whole life and maybe even your ancestors' lives. Include personal material, even if you know you would never include it in your essay. Can you come up with 5 things?
- Think there's nothing unusual about you? Think really hard. What might be common in your hometown, may be interesting somewhere else (have you been in an earthquake, seen a whale, watched a rodeo, picked apples on a farm, performed in front of a crowd, been backpacking?...). Consider your upbringing, your travels, your experiences, your talents.


Material from Donald Asher, *Graduate Admissions Essays* book, (2008).



Writing Prompt #2 Your Intellectual Influences

Answer each of these questions with at least one sentence:

- What writers, scientists, discoveries, or books in your field of study have had the greatest influence on the development of your thought?
- What is the single most important concept you have learned in college?
- Who were your favorite classes or professors in college and why? How has each influenced you?
- What is the best paper or exam you have ever written and what made it good?



Writing Prompt #3 Words about you

- What are some of the encouraging words others have said to or about you over the years? Did a particular teacher or leader encourage you to pursue your studies, go beyond your abilities, or pursue a goal or dream? Write the actual words of the teacher or leader and give the time and place you heard them. For example, “Julie, you’re good at math. Why don’t you consider tutoring for the department?” -Dr. Lee, sophomore year, in front of the math building.
- If you don’t remember exactly what someone said, write what you imagine they said.



Writing Prompt #4 Where were you?

- Where were you and what were you doing when you first thought of pursuing this particular direction of graduate study?



Writing Prompt #5 Historical Overview

Answer any of these questions that apply to you, in a sentence or two.

- How has your career interest evolved and what specific turning points can you identify?
- What work or research experiences have led you to believe you would like to pursue graduate education?
- What experiences as a volunteer or traveler have influenced your career direction?
- What experiences from your life have contributed to this choice?
- What are the real reasons you are attracted to your career choice?



Writing Prompt #6 Accomplishments

- What is your biggest accomplishment to date? This may take a little time. While you are thinking about it, make a list of “many things I am proud of.”




Writing Prompt #7 Perseverance

- Can you describe an experience that demonstrates remarkable drive or perseverance?
 - Are you involved in sports? Music? A team or club?
- Do you have hobbies that would help ease the stress of graduate school?
- What can you tell someone that would lead them to believe that they would enjoy your company?

Writing Prompt #8

The immediate future and the long-term one

- Next Spring, you will be doing a research project in Capstone, and presenting it. What skills would you like to gain in the coming months? (We may be able to incorporate them into your project.)
- What classes will you take to further prepare you for graduate school (or work)?
- If you can envision a specific future (it's ok if you can't yet), write a few lines about where you see yourself going.



From your heart to the page. You may have already written your essay!

- With these writing prompt answers, you may have already drafted your essay.
- You may need to string a few of the major ideas together to write your first draft.
- Keep in mind: **500 words is NOT very many.** It is hard to write a short statement. I can help you widdle your work down. For now, just keep that number in mind. Use a word count tool (on Microsoft Office, for example) to count the words you have.