

# How to write a stellar PERSONAL STATEMENT

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During college admissions season, hundreds of thousands of students across the globe scramble to get their applications in order. Apart from meticulously curating the dreaded activities list, begging teachers for recommendation letters, and fervently praying that your transcripts are submitted on time, perhaps the biggest hurdle is writing that personal statement—understandably so, given it requires you to squeeze every meaningful aspect of your identity and personal narrative within 650 words or so.

Let's get started.

Much like any other piece of writing, the first step is brainstorming. Start by deciding whether you want to write a narrative or a montage essay. A narrative essay could be anything from a challenge you overcame, meaningful relationships you've had, to perhaps a retelling of how you designed an automated feeding system so hungry birds do not interrupt your morning slumber – an actual, famously successful essay.

Here, it's important to maintain a good problem-to-solution ratio. Dedicate less space to elaborating on your challenges, and more space to talk about the creative ways in which you overcame those challenges and the unique lessons you learned. While colleges can empathise with the difficulties you faced, they care far more about your problem-solving skills and ability to self-reflect.

Alternatively, you could write a montage essay which is essentially a compilation of snapshots of different parts of your personality, interests, and lived experiences. Montage essays uniquely allow you to get creative with how you structure your response. For instance, a particular student used the different stickers on their laptop to talk about their passions and values. Another talked about the many families they've lived with and how each of them taught them a different lesson. Using objects, dates, and people as hooks to tie in different elements of your identity is a very effective technique to write a montage essay.

Being memorable is a hallmark of a good personal statement. If your essay is unique from the fifty other applications an admission officer (AO) has read that day, this automatically gives you an edge.

So, how could you stand out? The devil is

in the details. It is highly likely your story will intersect with thousands of others! The key to standing out is to be specific. Very specific. Name-drop people, places, dates. Use visceral language to describe exactly how you felt, involving all five senses. Make it so that even if you blur out your name, a friend reading it will instantly know it's you. Having a catchy intro and compelling outro are also effective hacks to remain memorable. After all, you're more likely to want to read further if the essay begins with, "I've been pooped on many times," instead of "I like to take care of animals." Yes, the former is a real essay.

The magic ingredient that can make or break your personal statement, regardless of format, is

insight. Your essay should be a window through which the AOs can peek into your soul. As such, you need to let your personality shine through your essays. If you're witty, try incorporating your effortless dry humour into your writing. If you're a big fat nerd about everything astrophysics, then, by all means, geek out about black holes and quasars. Be unapologetically you.

Then, surprise with your insight. Say you're writing about climate change advocacy. Lots of fellow applicants will also be climate change activists. But amongst a sea of optimistic green campaigners, are you a cynic who doesn't believe much change is likely? That's your hook. But do you also choose to set aside your pessimism to protest for climate reform anyway? Now that's the unique insight AOs will be excited to hear about. This may look a bit like deliberate attention-seeking, but that's the nature of the game.

Finally, accept that your college essay will never be flawless. There are so many potential values you can express within an essay: vulnerability, empathy, intellectual vitality, etc; it's impossible to cover them all. That's where you need to look at your essay holistically alongside the rest of your application. Maybe your personal statement misses out on your selfless nature, but you can always highlight that quality in your supplemental essays or activities. Even if you can't, that's okay. You don't need to win a Pulitzer or be a jack-of-all-trades to get into college. You just need to ensure your personal statement is well-polished, thoughtful, memorable, and honest about who you really are. It might not be perfect, but a little imperfection won't get in the way of that coveted acceptance letter.

*Robiah is a former A level student at Mastermind English Medium School*



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