

# DEFINITION OF A PERSONAL STATEMENT

*Mary Hale Tolar, Rhodes and Truman Scholar  
Past Deputy Executive Secretary, Truman Scholarship Foundation*

Because personal statements are personal, there is no one type or style of writing that is set out as a model. That can be liberating; it can also be maddening. But while every personal statement is unique in style, its purpose is the same. A personal statement is your introduction to a selection committee. It determines whether you are invited to interview; and if selected as a finalist, interview questions will be based on this material. **It is the heart of your application.**

## A personal statement IS:

- A picture.** Your personal essay should produce a picture of you as a person, a student, a potential scholarship winner, and (looking into the future) a former scholarship recipient.
- An invitation.** The reader must be invited to get to know you, personally. Bridge the assumed distance of strangers. Make your reader welcome.
- An indication of your priorities and judgment.** What you choose to say in your statement tells the committee what your priorities are. What you say, and how you say it, is crucial.
- A story, or more precisely, your story.** Everyone has a story to tell, but we are not all natural storytellers. If you are like most people, your life lacks inherent drama. This is when serious self-reflection, conversation with friends, family, and mentors, and permission to be creative come in handy.

## A personal statement is NOT:

- An academic paper with you as the subject. We are taught to eliminate the “I” from our academic writing. In a personal statement your goal is to close the distance between you and the reader. You must engage on a different, more personal level that you have been trained to in college.
- A resume in narrative form. An essay that reads like a resume of accomplishments and goals tells the reader nothing that they could not glean from the rest of the application. It is a wasted opportunity.
- A journal entry. Share only what is relevant, using these experiences to give a helpful context for your story. Include what you are comfortable sharing—be prepared to discuss it at an interview.
- A plea of justification for the scholarship. Defending an assertion that you are more deserving of the scholarship than other candidates is a wasted effort—you’ve likely just accomplished the opposite.

Most importantly, a personal statement is **authentic**. Don’t make the mistake of trying to guess what the committee is looking for. They want to know you. So, what must you include in the personal statement? An effective personal statement will answer the following questions:

- Who am I?
- Who do I want to be?
- What kind of contribution do I want to make, and how?
- Why does it make sense for me to study at Oxford (or York, LSE, Cambridge, Sussex)?

Remember the goal: grab the readers’ interest, and make them want to meet you for an interview. Get a sense of the experiences and dreams you wish to share, then examine them for a helpful means of making sense of it all. You will find your story; and if you share it honestly, you will have written a personal statement.

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Finally, know that writing a personal essay is hard and will take many drafts and much reflection. Don't wait until you have it right to share it with others; their input will likely make it stronger, clearer, and tighter. Don't put it off until you have it right ... just write!

## Questions to ask yourself before you write:

- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
  
- What details of your life (personal/family, history, people/events that have shaped/influenced you) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
  
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
  
- How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
  
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
  
- What are your career goals?
  
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
  
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (economic, family, physical)?
  
- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?

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- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
  
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
  
- What are the compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?