

# The Personal Statement: How to Write a Competitive Essay

The personal statement is really the one part of an application over which you exercise complete control. A good personal statement will be the difference between a successful application and an unsuccessful application. Still need to be convinced that the personal statement is important? Someday, you will be writing the professional equivalent of the personal statement – the cover letter – and the stakes will be even higher. Here are some tips and strategies for writing a good one.

## Content

These sections will help you develop a plan to create and arrange the content of your personal statement.

### Essay Prompts and Essay Length

Many applications and scholarships will provide a specific essay prompt and/or a guideline for the length of the essay. A successful essay will always carefully reflect these instructions. The fastest way for your essay to be rejected is to ignore the stated instructions.

The instructions may request that you “should include information about you and your academic interests and goals, and should explain the reasoning behind your wish to study abroad.” The Study Abroad Application personal statement should be approximately one page long. Occasionally, specific programs will add additional prompts/topics to consider – please always refer to your program’s information sheet to see if there are additional instructions.

Sometimes, the application may have more specific requirements - ex. “[d]escribe the relevance of this particular study abroad program to your academic and professional goals. Be specific. (100 words),” then that you “[d]escribe how, when and why a person, book, work of art or event impacted your decision to study abroad. (300 words).” Follow stated guidelines whenever you can.

### The Basic Argument of a Personal Statement

In a very fundamental way, all prompts are obliging you to develop an argument that clearly illustrates why *you* are an excellent candidate for *this specific program at this specific time* in your academic career. So what does that mean?

### You

The personal statement is your one opportunity to introduce yourself to the reader in your own words. The application proper contains impersonal information that does not really capture the real you: your rank, your GPA, your major, etc. You are more than these data points, so your job now is to tell your reader what makes you special, without veering too far into the realm of inappropriate oversharing. Questions to consider:

- Why did you select your major?
- What personal, professional, and/or academic goals are you currently trying to accomplish?
- What makes you a great candidate for this program or this scholarship?

### **This Specific Program**

Readers of both a Study Abroad Application as well as a specific scholarship application will want to know what brought you to a particular program, and you will need to deliver a handful of solid, legitimate reasons. Why *did* you choose this program?

- Was it the structure of the program?
- Will the credits earned on this program help you to complete a major? A minor? GE requirements?
- For RIT programs: were you drawn to a particular faculty/staff Resident Director? Perhaps you've taken a class with him/her? In what ways has this person really cultivated your interest in this program?
- How will this program help you to accomplish the personal, professional, or academic goals that you've outlined?
- What does this program offer you that another program would not?

Demonstrate that you know something about this program, that you have arrived at a careful decision and that you have really thought through the program to which you have applied. Oversubscribed programs will not privilege applications that cannot articulate a solid rationale; scholarship committees will be similarly disinclined to award students who are going "just to go."

### **This Specific Time**

For many students, timing is critical. Often, then, a discussion of why you have decided to pursue study abroad at this particular time can help to demonstrate what a serious student and a careful planner you are. Timing considerations:

- Does the length or timing of the program fit into your schedule better than others?
- Are you currently completing pre-requisite courses that make traveling on this iteration of the program ideal?
- Is the program only offered every other year?
- What have you already been doing (academically, financially, personally) to make this opportunity a reality?

These and other, similar details can really help to show that you have researched your options and that you've really thought through study abroad and how it will work for you. These details also have the benefit of more subtly illustrating why you need to be accepted *this* time around or why you need to be funded during *this* cycle: anything you can do to keep your application from the "good, but maybe next time pile" is a win.

### **Getting Started**

Step 1: Develop a plan

Remember how your high school English teachers made you write an outline for all of your essays? There is an excellent reason for that: drafting an outline obliges you to think through – in still very skeletal terms – what you would like to say in your essay. A good outline will reflect how you plan to address each of the specific points of the prompt and, equally importantly, how you plan to organize your thoughts.

Step 2: Develop your argument

Now that you know more or less what you would like your essay to convey, the goal now is to figure out the most efficient way of expressing those points. When personal statements go wrong, it generally is because of a disregard for the mechanics (discussed below) and/or a very long, meandering, and generally roundabout way of getting to the point. In a one page prompt, you simply do not have time to waste: building a coherent and compelling argument in a short amount of time will oblige you to write

each sentence with purpose. With this clarity of intent in mind, begin to address each of the points you have already identified in your outline.

### Step 3: Tighten up the writing

Ideally, you have left enough time in the application process that you can now put your essay aside for a day or two and return to it later with fresh eyes. As you read through it now, ask yourself: have you conveyed all the points you needed to? Is there anything missing? What could enhance the essay? Have you demonstrated why you are a competitive candidate? Many students will begin to realize that they have already exceeded the page limit or that they have not developed their arguments fully. Now is the time to be very economical: what can be cut in order to make room for something more important? Again, the goal is to avoid an essay that rambles: you only have your reader's attention for about a page, so make the most of it!

### Step 4: Edit, edit, edit...and then edit more

With every application cycle, there are always a handful of applications that are rejected outright simply because the writer submitted the wrong essay, submitted an essay rife with spelling/grammatical mistakes, and/or submitted a rambling and incoherent essay. Do not be that student. Some strategies for editing:

- Read your essay backwards. If you read without meaning, you are more likely to catch stray misspellings, punctuation oddities, and even sometimes grammatical errors.
- Identify a trusted "outside reader." Your outside reader should come to your essay cold, which is to say, without knowing much about the essay or why you're writing it. If your outside reader can't work out those details from the essay itself, then you need to go back and fill in some gaps. You have also, hopefully, chosen someone who would be good at noticing any spelling/grammar/punctuation issues along the way.

## Mechanics

Below, please find two sections that cover the more mechanical aspect of essay writing. In the first section, we will go over the basics: the very least that your essay needs to have going for it. In the second section, we will take a look at finer tuning.

### **Avoid the Junk Food of Writing: Clichés**

Clichés are words and phrases that have lost meaning because of overuse; adding them to a personal statement, therefore, does nothing to build your case and, instead, merely adds empty filler to what is probably a very limited word count. Essays relating to study abroad give rise to their own clichés. A strong personal statement will not include any of the following without significant polishing:

- Your love of or passion for any of the following: culture, traveling, new people, new experiences, new food, etc.
- Your desire to relate to (insert relative here) who grew up in (insert name of country here)
- Your wish to immerse yourself in the local culture
- The "once-in-a-lifetime" nature of study abroad

There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these statements (particularly if they are true), but it is worth keeping in mind that virtually every single other student is writing something nearly identical. If you are keen to write on these topics, your goal is to demonstrate how you/your situation transcend the cliché.

*Source: The Ohio State University*