



Scholarships Opportunities
Assistance & Research

How-To

Essay

Personal Statement

What are they?

Many scholarship and college applications will require you to create a personal statement or an essay; two names for essentially the same thing. These short, personal essays help the individual reviewing student applications to get a sense of who you are and what you care about. Sometimes the instructions with the application will specify a topic on which you must write, but often the topic or theme will be up to you.

In addition to noting whether a topic is specified, be sure that you understand directions from the college or scholarship sponsor regarding the maximum number of words or pages allowed for your personal statement or essay, whether it must be typed, the document format (such as line spacing), and any other technical submittal requirements.

Once you have an understanding of the technical requirements for submittal, now the creative part of writing a strong essay or personal statement begins. The College Board has a good [tips and techniques](#) page that may help you, summarized below.

How do I begin?

A great personal statement or essay is a short, informative and memorable snapshot of you to the reader; it is *not* your whole life history. It helps people reviewing your application to remember you specifically, even after reading hundreds of other essays, and it leaves them with the desire to meet and get to know you in person.

The first, and perhaps most important step, is to pick a central topic or theme about which you will write (if the topic has not been specified for you). The topic or theme you select should allow you to discuss a philosophy, event or goal that is very important to you. The trick, however, is to discuss this by relating your direct experiences and personal characteristics that bear upon that important philosophy or event. In many cases, recalling an incident that was particularly moving or memorable to you, then figuring out why it had such impact on you can help you begin. Tell your story to the reader in a vivid and heartfelt way.



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If the topic is selected for you, relate specific events or experiences in which you have participated, to the topic.

Dos and Don'ts

Dos

- **Keep Your Focus Narrow and Personal.** Essays that try to be too comprehensive end up sounding watered-down. Remember, it's not about telling the committee what you've done (they can pick that up from your list of activities) instead, it's about showing them who you are
- **Prove It.** Develop your main idea with vivid and specific facts, events, quotations, examples, and reasons. There's a big difference between simply stating a point of view and letting an idea unfold in the details
- **Be Specific.** Avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing by using vivid and specific details

Don'ts

- **Don't Tell Them What You Think They Want to Hear.** Most admissions officers read plenty of essays about the charms of their university, the evils of terrorism, and the personal commitment involved in being a doctor. Bring something new to the table, not just what you think they want to hear
- **Don't Write a Resume.** Don't include information that is found elsewhere in the application. Your essay will end up sounding like an autobiography, travelogue, or laundry list
- **Don't Use 50 Words When Five Will Do.** Eliminate unnecessary words
- **Don't Forget to Proofread.** Typos and spelling or grammatical errors can be interpreted as carelessness or just bad writing. Don't rely on your computer's spell check.