What Makes a Great Personal Statement?

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By ProFellow Founder Dr. Vicki Johnson

Virtually every fellowship, graduate school or significant individual award requires a personal statement or personal essay. This application component, which can range from 1 to 5 pages in length, is meant to express to selection committees your personal story – why you, why this program and why now. It’s one of the hardest essays you’ll ever write because it’s about YOU! So, it’s no surprise that I’m often asked by applicants, what makes a great personal statement?

I’ve got a few key pointers on the things that make a great personal statement, based on my decades of experience developing winning essays and helping others develop exceptional personal statements for graduate school and fellowships.

#1 A focus on the impact you want to make

Many people tell me they have trouble preparing a personal statement because they don’t like to write about themselves. They are unsure how to write a glowing description of their accomplishments while remaining humble. “It feels like bragging!” many applicants will say. But I have one key tip that will help you through this hurdle. Emphasize the social impact you want to make through your work, research and creative endeavors. In
your essay, specify who you want to help and why, and then describe what skills and experiences you need to achieve that impact. Explain what you have done to prepare yourself thus far for this challenge – your academic and professional accomplishments, your community service, your projects and your pursuit of personal development. As you write about your accomplishments, you need to internalize that these are examples of your demonstrated commitment to the impact you want to make! Your accomplishments demonstrate you are serious about goals, you are committed to your field of work, and that you have a very high chance of success as a student or fellow.

#2 A personal story that highlights their ideal candidate characteristics

Many applicants struggle to choose an eye-catching opening story to hook their readers. This can take some creative skill – in both the choice of story and how you tell it. I recommend you choose a story that demonstrates why you are their ideal candidate. First determine what characteristics they are looking for in candidates, and then consider what stories from your experience demonstrate that you have those characteristics. For example, if you are applying for a teaching fellowship, your opening story should demonstrate how you developed an interest – or real talent – for teaching. If you are applying for graduate school, your opening story should demonstrate a committed interest in the field of study. If you are applying for an international fellowship, your opening story should demonstrate why it’s important to you to have an experience abroad. There are *many* stories from our life that we can choose from that demonstrate things like overcoming challenges, intellectual curiosity, commitment to public service or other aspects of your career trajectory, but be sure to choose a story that is in alignment with the opportunity at hand.

#3 A note of gratitude

When your application has a personal statement component that allows an essay of only 500 words, it can seem critical to fill every word space with the description of your successes and motivations for applying. However, I believe no matter how little space you have, it is always good practice to express gratitude for the opportunities presented to you, even when you haven’t yet achieved the award! There are 5 very powerful words that you can end a personal statement with: “Thank you for your consideration.” Expressing gratitude is not just good karma – it also shows a degree of self-awareness that selection committees are seeking in candidates.

If you’d like some personalized assistance with writing a great personal statement, check out my approaching Personal Statement Bootcamp on July 9th (https://www.profellow.com/personal-statement-bootcamp-on-july-9th/)!

If you are seeking more articles with personal statement tips, check out:

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Dr. Vicki Johnson is Founder and CEO of ProFellow, the world’s leading online resource for professional and academic fellowships. She is a four-time fellow, top Ph.D. scholar, Fulbright recipient and an award-winning social entrepreneur. She is the Creator and Director of Fully Funded (https://www.fullyfundedcourse.com/), an award-winning online course and mentorship program for graduate school applicants seeking to find and win full funding.

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