

# Personal Statement

## #HELP!!!!!!



Many students cringe and writhe in pain at the thought of writing college application personal statements. Here is some hopefully reassuring advice and information:

***You can do this!*** You've taken many challenging classes at a premier college prep high school. You've written English essays about literature you might not have fully understood, or even fully read. You can write a college essay about a topic you know way more about than any novel: **YOU**

***Don't be cramped by essay prompts.*** Write your story, and don't be distracted by essay prompts that lure you into writing expository essays that reveal little or nothing about you. Almost always, you can add or adjust a few words to fit one of the prompts. Your story should reveal:

- \* who or what influences you
- \* how you spend your most precious resource -- your time
- \* what captures your interest or ignites your passions (BUT **avoid overused word *passion***)
- \* valuable lesson(s) you have learned / information you have gathered
- \* who you aspire to be / what you aspire to do, and why
- \* what values do you live by

The essay is an opportunity to tell people who have never met you things about yourself that do not fit into the little boxes on an application form. It should NOT be:

- \* a high school sports article
- \* a biographical sketch of someone you admire
- \* a resume in prose form
- \* a persuasive essay on an issue about which you are passionate
- \* a sad story (*unless it is about what you learned from your experience*)
- \* a travel article
- \* a negative diatribe about how you were treated unfairly

### ***From a College of William and Mary blog:***

There are most definitely fairly generic college essay topics: death of a relative, parents' divorce, traveling abroad, a service/mission trip, a sports injury, your epic love of *Harry Potter* books (that one has come on strong in recent years). It's not that these experiences/interests aren't salient or important; they are. But they are also fairly commonplace for 17-year olds and the ways in which you write about them will be incredibly similar. This makes an essay generic.

When an essay starts with describing an athletic injury, I can tell you the content of the remaining 1.5 pages without reading it; that demonstrates how many times (and I'd wager in the thousands) that I've read that exact same essay during my career. So as you ponder a topic, think about whether or not any of your friends could write a similar essay. If a few of them can, multiply that by 100 – at least – and that's how many essays on that topic we'll receive. In other words, pick another topic.

***Your college application essay is your personal statement.*** That means it needs to reflect YOUR voice. College admissions officers read hundreds of essays each season. They are individuals who like and study people. They love reading and language, and they are sensitive to language styles and forms.

***They can usually tell when a "ghostwriter" has written or heavily edited an essay.*** In fact, many can tell the generation of the ghost writer. Each generation has its own rhetorical markers, lexicon, vernacular, set of references, and even its own style and syntax.

***Write your own essay.*** Get feedback from parents, friends, teachers, mentors, counselors -- but don't let anyone erase YOU from YOUR essay. Your linguistic frame of reference is different from that of your parents or teachers -- *and that is OK!* Your personal statement should be in YOUR vernacular

## Don't Just Tell Us, Show Us

The diversity I encountered was a unique, life-changing experience that allowed me to make a difference, and shaped

The statement in the box tells nothing about the writer. A student who built shelters with Habitat for Humanity, or one who tutored homeless children, or another who planted trees on Arbor Day, could have written these words. I read essays every year that contain very similar versions of these words to describe a variety of experiences. Use your own fresh, everyday language, and give specific details in stories, anecdotes, and examples that demonstrate your strengths.



**TELLS** use too many adjectives:

I am brave and courageous  
I am a good team player  
I have strong leadership skills  
My internship was rewarding  
It was a unique life experience



**SHOWS** use more verbs, so show with stories:

I **stood** at the edge, **gulped**, and **jumped** out of the plane.  
I **felt** as proud of my 36 assists as I did the goals I made.  
After the fire, the costume crew was discouraged, but I **called** a few local theaters and **borrowed** the items we needed.  
I **picked up** a rock in the desert that changed my college plan.  
I **changed** a young mother's life, and my own, by spending just a few hours **teaching** simple algebra each week.

Avoid clichés – words and phrases so over-used they become trite, meaningless, and irritating.  
If you have heard a word or phrase used over and over again, RUN AWAY!

### *Some words and phrases to avoid your personal statement*

|  |                     |                          |
|--|---------------------|--------------------------|
| you, your (avoid 2 <sup>nd</sup> person) | life experience     | the world's problems     |
| make him / her / them proud              | have / has my back  | diversity                |
| unique / unique experience               | shaped me           | allow/ allowed me to     |
| life-changing                            | make a difference   | the person I am (today)  |
| led me to discover                       | team player         | commitment / committed   |
| at the end of the day                    | in conclusion       | my potential             |
| give back, giving back                   | outside the box     | bonding, bonded, to bond |
| incredible, amazing, unbelievable        | passion, passionate | eye opening              |

### *Other Essay Tips*

Use formal language; avoid contractions and slang unless an anecdote necessitates their careful use.

Avoid gimmicks, tricks, and cuteness -- they have seen it all. Just let the prompt guide you as a context for writing about yourself. Humor is wonderful; silliness is not.

The words *evaluate*, *discuss*, *describe*, *tell us about* all mean **self-reflection, analysis, and introspection** are required. The best essays reveal something about the writer's character, personality, and interests. They can also reveal something about influences, and about dreams and aspirations.