What You Should Include in a Personal Statement

by Dr Catherine Armstrong

Many job application forms include a large space for candidates to write something about themselves that will convince the employers to take them on. This can be quite daunting: what should you include in your personal statement and, more importantly, what should you NOT include?

What is a personal statement?

In this article, a personal statement refers to a particular type of information needed on an application form. This is required on the application form for teacher training positions and on the UCAS undergraduate and postgraduate application forms. Some CV advisers also recommend including a very small 'personal statement' in the heading of a CV. This is rarely found on academic CVs though.

What not to include

It is very important that you tailor each personal statement for the specific job you are applying for. Do not simply copy and paste an old personal statement into your new application.

Also, do not be lazy and simple write 'see my attached CV/cover letter'. While you may find yourself repeating much of the information contained within those documents, it is important to make an effort to craft something new here.

Although it is often called a 'personal statement' this section of an application form does not require you to give 'personal' information about things such as your hobbies. While your interests might make you sound like a rounded individual (whether you enjoy the theatre, scuba diving or whatever), employers in a competitive job market do not actually care about such things. They want to know why you are the best person for the job. So unless the form specifically requests you to do so, don't reveal details of your life outside the world of work

Personal statements written by those hoping to get on an undergraduate or postgraduate course are slightly different, so do not be mislead by the large numbers of websites advertising help with writing personal statements. These are aimed at high school and college students and are less relevant to you as a jobseeker.

How to structure it

It is important not to make a personal statement into a dense, unreadable block of text. You need to write good prose in full sentences and break it up into small paragraphs. Use headings to help guide the reader's eye to the most important information.

Try to write in a style that makes your statement fresh and slightly different to the formal prose of most of your application materials. You are trying to sell yourself as an attractive personality as well as a professional employee.

Include such things as:

- Events from your education/career to date that make you especially suited to the job (including volunteer work/work experience): it is important to be able to write about these events enthusiastically

- What it is about the job that especially attracts you to it

- The skills/knowledge base you have that is relevant to the job

- What is the unique contribution you can make to the university/company? Check online for their mission statement and refer to that when describing how you can contribute

- Refer directly to the job description using the same language and then relate that to your own experiences

- What are your career aims? You might have to be creative here! Tailor your answer to the job you're applying for and make it seem as though you are desperate to pursue a career in that area! However, try to make your statement as honest as possible; you want to come across as a real person and not simply parroting what you think the employers want to hear. It is a difficult balance to achieve

And don't forget!

As with all parts of your application, make sure as many people as possible proofread your personal statement. Nothing says 'unprofessional' like a personal statement full of typos or grammar mistakes. Also, while you may think you have expressed yourself very clearly, other readers may be able to highlight sentences or words that are incorrect, irrelevant or could be more clearly expressed. A good personal statement passes through many drafts, so make sure you give enough time to the writing and re-drafting process.