

Planning and Writing Your  
Personal Statement

Match purpose to form: tell a story  
that makes your argument

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Features of a Good Statement

- Find a defining moment to anchor story
- Choose a fitting structure for your story
- Use details to show instead of tell
- Choose an appropriate tone

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**STRUCTURE AND LOGIC OF  
YOUR NARRATIVE**

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Crafting a story from your life:  
events, qualities, goals

A Venn diagram consisting of three overlapping circles. The top circle is labeled "Personal qualities". The bottom-left circle is labeled "Other events/thoughts/goals". The bottom-right circle is labeled "Resume experiences". The circles overlap in the center and at the intersections between two circles.

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A Story with an Argument

Choose components for narrative to reflect an underlying causal argument:

Your life experiences, qualities, and goals logically prepare you for and lead you to this opportunity.

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Portrait of the Author  
as a Young . . . .

Not just a story about you, but a story of your developing interest and abilities in the area/  
opportunity you are applying for  
—  
your intellectual autobiography

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Find a defining moment

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- Defining for you at that moment: epiphany
- Defining only after further reflection

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Structuring your narrative

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- Chronological order to events
- Focus on particular event or phase, may frame with event and flashback for background

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**RHETORICAL FEATURES OF  
PERSONAL STATEMENTS**

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Focus today on two overall categories of rhetorical features:

1. Show instead of tell
2. Adopt the appropriate tone

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1. Show instead of tell

(also avoid absolutes, cliches, and empty statements)

Why is this feature so important?

- to bring your story to life
- to show your growth over time
- to show connections among areas of your life (personal, professional, academic)
- to support your claims, not just assert them

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Where does this feature emerge in personal statements?

- describing your experiences (focus on the past, including defining moments)
- presenting your interests (focus on the present, where you are now)
- explaining your goals (focus on the future)

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**Examples of telling**

- It has always bothered me when people try to define things.
- I am a hard worker, always giving 110% to my many clubs, athletic competitions and academic endeavors.
- From a very young age, I've loved science and can't imagine doing anything else as a career.

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**Showing, through details**

- However, to be honest, I have felt the siren call of theatre ever since a fourteen-second performance as Clumsy Custard in my seventh grade play, "The Clumsy Custard Horror Show."
- A lecture on smoking spurred me to face my own problem head-on by enrolling in a student position with a smoking research laboratory....After that, I could not help seeing the people behind the statistics I was crunching everyday. The guy on the high-dose nicotine patch smoking two packs a day was my roommate, and the guy who had quit 15 times in the past month was me.

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**Showing through details:  
an introductory paragraph**

I don't think I could have managed to be anything other than a scientist. I was introduced to the natural world bare feet first on my family farm in central Kentucky. Both of my parents have always encouraged me to think critically about the world around me. In the summer, I had crayfish in aquariums on the front porch and jars of fireflies as night lights. As a child, I was never told that I asked too many questions, or informed that I wouldn't understand the answers. I learned about photosynthesis snapping peas, my father helped me build bat boxes so we could watch them eat bugs, and by the time I entered kindergarten I knew just what I wanted to be: a field biologist.

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**Adopt the appropriate tone**

(confident, not arrogant—think of job-application materials)

Why is this feature important?

- helps create your persona as an applicant

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**Avoid an arrogant tone:**

- My record speaks for itself, and what it says to me is that I can do great things if I choose to.

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**Adopt an appropriate tone:**

- My honor's thesis advisor calls me a double threat: I'm intelligent and I'm also a "save the world type."

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**Pay attention to the prompt**

- Don't forget to look closely at the writing instructions you are given for each personal statement you write, including any specific questions and length requirements.

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**Reading your own draft**

- Enlist other readers, but be a critical reader for yourself.
- Write questions and comments in the margin as you read to prompt revision.
- Save separate versions (you may want to reclaim material you deleted earlier).
- Make regular appointments with others as you revise.

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**Put together a team to help you**

- Find an advisor/mentor with expertise in your field of study who can offer contextualized advice on your statement.
- Seek out multiple readers for multiple drafts.
- Get help on language and rhetoric from the Writing Center: 123 Cherry Hall, 745-5719  
[www.wku.edu/writingcenter](http://www.wku.edu/writingcenter)

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