

Planning Scholarship and Application Statements

Part 1 of a workshop series from
The Composition Program
at Wayne State University



Wayne State
Rhetoric & Composition
Program

Workshop Overview:

This hour long workshop aims to introduce students to written genre of the college application personal statement, and help them think critically about the rhetorical situations they might face when writing their own. Students will participate in a series of mini-lessons and activities designed to make them aware of the rhetorical situation and genre conventions of personal statements. At the end of the workshop, students will participate in a writing time to engage in prewriting activities to plan for their personal statement drafts.

Outcomes:

By the end of this workshop, students will:

1. Understand the concepts of rhetorical situation and genre analysis
2. Practice elements of the writing process, including brainstorming and prewriting
3. Begin composing outline or first draft of a college application personal statement

So, what is a Personal Statement, anyway?

Writing a personal statement is a lot like describing yourself in five minutes. Take the next five minutes to describe yourself to a partner. Take notes while your partner is talking, and compare notes when you are finished. What details did you include? What did you leave out?

The personal statement (sometimes called “application essays” or “personal statements”) is a piece of writing that can show who you are to admission or scholarship boards. This is an opportunity to show a side of you that isn’t your test scores or grade point average.

Your personal statement should give readers a sense of who you are, and most importantly, why you are a good fit for the institution to which you are applying. This is where readers get to learn more about you—things that could help them “think twice” about throwing your application in the trash!

Questions we will consider in this workshop:

1. What is a personal statement?
2. Who reads it (and why does that matter)?
3. How do I plan out my own personal statement?

Question 1: What is a personal statement?

→ *This can be answered through a process called genre analysis*

Below is a personal statement written by a senior at Wayne State University applying to the graduate English program. As you read, pay attention to the language this writer uses and the way she uses details about her experiences to show her personality.

A goal of mine has always been to try and reach for the moon, because even if I fail I could land among the stars. I would like to continue aspiring to this goal by pushing further into my English major. I came into the field English in a rather unusual way: by means of Korean Pop Fanfiction. For lack of a better personal outlet, I started writing my own fanfictions in high school. Through this, I found that language has the ability to change a person's whole world perspective. In these early experiences with fanfiction, I realised that writing is magical. This is the reason I began pursuing a bachelor's degree in English. Now, I wish to enter the Master's Degree program and take the passion that began in fanfiction into a more professional way of writing.

When I began applying for colleges in highschool, I knew I was at a disadvantage. I had a low GPA, and despite taking the ACT three times my score was less than ideal due to my poor performance on standards tests. I applied to only one university and fought tooth and nail to be accepted. The following fall, I proudly stepped onto Wayne State's campus as an APEX Scholars student. This is a program that takes students who may have not fit Wayne State's University guidelines for acceptance and gives them an opportunity to prove themselves. The idea of graduation from college was far away from my freshman mind; I was just happy to be here. Eagerly, I dove into my classes, determined to demonstrate my academic ability and not let myself be defined by my past performance. I finished my two-year program with APEX Scholars with a 3.5 GPA and received the APEX Promise Scholarship for students that exited the program with exceptional grades.

During my Junior year, I had the opportunity of volunteering with the pilot program for the Wayne State University English Department's Composition Learning Community as a peer mentor. I learned there is more to the subject area of English than I initially thought. Here, I worked with English 1020 students towards their success in the course. I aided the students by sitting in on their classes, helping them review their own work, and improving understanding. Through doing this, I learned the path that I wanted to take with my future career. I would like to join the Wayne State University Accelerated Master's Degree program to help me get further into the field of rhetoric and composition. The art of writing fascinates me because of the wide variety of styles and possibilities it contains; this program would allow me to explore and understand more about these aspects.

Currently I am now a Senior at Wayne State University and I feel that I am not finished striving for excellence at this university. Through this program, I will be able to accomplish my goal of having a global presence. I would like to use this program to attain a Master's degree in Rhetoric and Composition with a specialization in Technical Writing. Paring this with my minor in Japanese, I would like to become a Technical writer for a company and hopefully move to Japan. Moving out of the country is my personal goal, I would like to learn about this world first hand. With the assistance of this program, I feel that my goal is attainable in a new and exciting way.

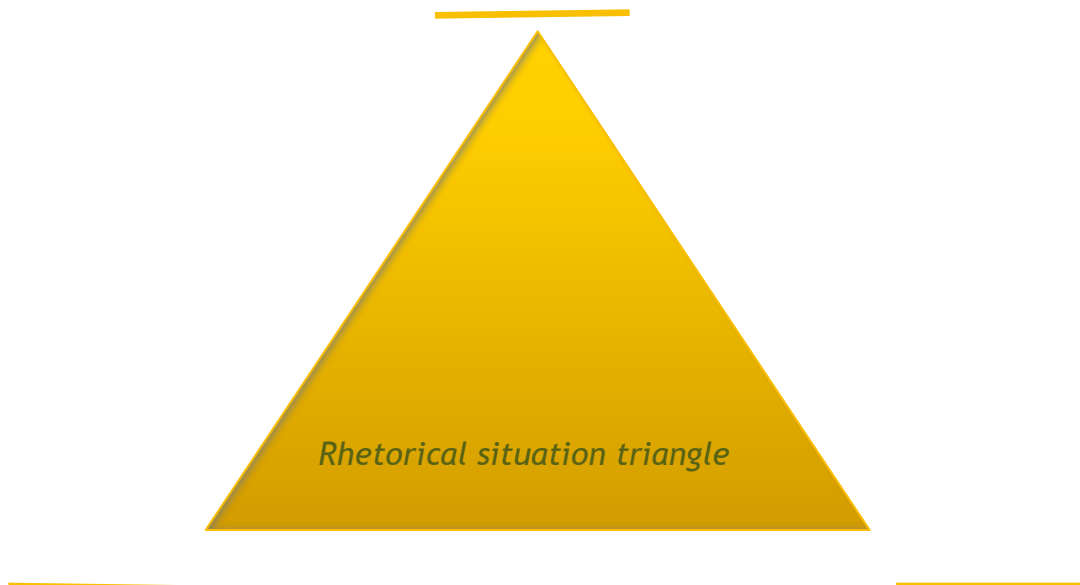
Genre Analysis Steps:

1. Look at the introduction paragraph. How does the author grab the reader's attention?
2. Circle 3 places where the author uses descriptive language.
3. How would you describe the author? List 5 adjectives, underline sections in the essay that support your descriptions.
4. How does the author show instead of tell the reader about herself?
5. What are the "key aspects" (or conventions) of this genre? How can you tell?

Question 2: Who Reads Personal Statements (and why does it matter)?

→ *This can be answered by considering the rhetorical situation*

What is the rhetorical situation
of a personal statement?



Audience Analysis:

Below are some tips from admissions staff regarding personal statements. Read through them, making notes if anything jumps out at you, and we'll discuss in a few minutes.

Lee Cunningham
Director of Admissions and Aid
The University of Chicago Graduate School of Business

The mistake people make most often is not to look at what the questions are asking. Some people prepare generic statements because they're applying to more than one school and it's a lot of work to do a personal essay for each school. On the other hand, generic statements detract from the applicant when we realize that we're one of six schools and the applicant is saying the same thing to each and every school despite the fact that there are critical differences between the kinds of schools they may be applying to. They don't take the time. They underestimate the kind of attentions that is paid to these essays. Take a look at what the essay asks and deal with those issues articulately and honestly.

At least 2, and sometimes 3, people read each essay. I read them to make the final decision. Our process works so that each person who reads the application does a written evaluation of what he or she has read and the written

Steven DeKrey
Director of Admissions and Financial Aid
J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management (Northwestern University)

We're looking for a well-written, detailed essay that responds directly to the question. The questions are about extracurricular activities, motivation, challenges, commitment to the school that kind of thing. We see a variety and that's fine. Our approach is very individualized. The way the applicant devises the answer, determines the length, develops the response, is all part of the answer. The level of effort applicants put into essays varies considerably, which sends messages to the admissions committee as well. Over-involved, elaborate essays send one message, while very brief and superficial essays send another message.

We can tell when applicants use answers to other schools' questions for our essays; we're sensitive to this. Poorly written essays are a bad reflection on the applicant.

Don't over-elaborate; we're reading a lot of these kinds of essays. Also, don't be too brief or superficial. We like to have major ideas presented well.

John Herweg
Chairman, Committee on Admissions
Washington University School of Medicine

We are looking for a clear statement that indicates that the applicant can use the English language in a meaningful and effective fashion. We frankly look at spelling as well as typing (for errors both in grammar and composition). Most applicants use the statement to indicate their motivation for medicine, the duration of that motivation, extracurricular activities, and work experience. So those are some of the general things we are looking for in the Personal Comments section.

We also want applicants to personalize the statement, to tell us something about themselves that they think is worthy of sharing with us, something that makes them unique, different, and the type of medical student and future physician that we're all looking for. What they have done in working with individuals—whether it's serving as a checker or bagger at a grocery store or working with handicapped individuals or tutoring inner city kids—that shows they can relate to people and have they done it in an effective fashion? What the applicant should do in all respects is to depict why he or she is a unique individual and should be sought after. Of course, if they start every sentence on a whole page with "I," it gets to be a little bit too much.

Below are sample prompts from the 2016-17 Common Application, which is an online application accepted at over 500 colleges and universities.

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.

Let's practice getting started!

Read through the prompts above, and consider how you might respond to one of them. Does one stick out to you? Pick your favorite and talk to a partner about why it relates to a you. Now, look at closely at the prompt and hone in on the verbs—what actions does it ask you to do? (Reflect? Describe? Recount?) What do those verbs mean? Jot notes below:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on its right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.

Pick one of the prewriting strategies from the previous page, and use the space here to begin sketching out ideas for your personal statement.

Works Cited

- “Advice from Undergraduate Admissions Officers.” *Purdue OWL*. Purdue University, 09 Oct. 2012. Web. Nov. 2016.
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