

**WRITING FOR THE
BUSINESS OF YOUR LIFE:**

**PERSONAL STATEMENTS AND
SCHOLARSHIP ESSAYS**



MARI CHRISTIE AND SEAN McCANDLESS,
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO DENVER
WRITING CENTER

TODAY, WE WILL TALK ABOUT:

- Features of this type of writing
- Things to consider when writing
- Content ideas
- Common pitfalls and mistakes
- Common questions
- Developing a writing plan

PERSONAL STATEMENTS ARE:

- **Difficult:** The hardest thing that anyone ever has to write. Even great writers hate writing biographies for book jackets.
- **Frustrating:** You are not alone in feeling irritated and overwhelmed. Everyone does.
- **Revealing:** The committees who will read your essay *really do* want to get to know you.

PERSONAL STATEMENTS ARE:

- **Worthwhile:** Learning to write these essays well can earn you a lot of money.
- **Paths to success:** Good personal statements are a sure path to the things you want in your education and your life.

PERSONAL STATEMENTS ARE NOT:

- **Resumés:** Listing your accomplishments is not the point of the exercise. You do not just repeat information from an application.
- **Journal entries:** While it is important to be personally revealing, it is not the place for intimate details.
- **Formal essays:** Personal tone and voice are very important tools to establish sincerity.

RULES OF THUMB

- **Start early:** You will want to write several drafts.
- **Collect yourself:** Have transcripts, resumes, etc. on hand to refer to as you write.
- **Tell a story:** Use detailed narratives to show reviewers who you really are.
- **Sell yourself:** Show why you are the best choice. Set yourself apart from other applicants.
- **Start with the prompt:** Answer the questions that are asked before adding other information.

RULES OF THUMB

- **Mention** the school, award, or scholarship for which you are applying. Go a step further and say why this award is relevant to your life.
- **Consider the audience:** Write for multiple reviewers. It is guaranteed that someone will read it who has no knowledge of your discipline.
- **Word count:** These statements will be much shorter than academic papers. Write as much as you want and then cut back. The piece you cut from this essay will fit nicely in your next.

SOME CONTENT IDEAS

- **Personal anecdotes** related to the essay topic
- **Reasons you are applying** for the school, award, or scholarship
- Future **educational or career goals**
- **Why you are a unique candidate**
- Work **experience**, coursework, internships, or fieldwork
- **Mentors** or others in the field and what they have taught you (especially those who are prominent in your field).

SOME CONTENT IDEAS

- **Setbacks or obstacles** that you have overcome
- **Lessons learned** that relate to your topic
- **Family** obligations or involvement that impacted your performance
- **Volunteer work, hobbies, and activities** that are relevant to your topic

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Not Answering the Question:** Use your essay as a way to showcase those specific talents and achievements that apply to the question.
- **Wrong voice/tone:** write from your experience, not your extended vocabulary. Use the terminology that you would use when **speaking** to a colleague, not when writing for a journal.
- **Listing accomplishments:** Talk about the lessons learned or the ways that your activities have shaped you, not just what you did.

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Repeating information:** You do not need to repeat things found elsewhere in the application.
- **Sharing Intimate Details:** Strike a balance between personal story and professional tone.
- **False Modesty:** Be confident. Tell reviewers why you are the best choice.
- **Hiding Your Voice:** Tell your story clearly, concisely, and in your own voice.

WAYS WE HIDE OUR VOICES

Issues with academic voice

- Trying to make yourself sound erudite (smart).
- Using jargon-heavy language
- Using third-person, or minimizing first-person.
- Imagining that your audience is a professor or other expert.
- Imagining that this will be held to the same content standard as a graded paper. (It will likely be held to a higher grammatical standard.)

WAYS WE HIDE OUR VOICES

Academic voice

- *Instead of:*
 - “Based on extensive personal experience and exemplary coursework, medicine is obviously a challenge that will last a lifetime.”
- *Try:*
 - “I have spent a lifetime preparing to join the field of medicine, because it challenges and excites me.”
- *Instead of:*
 - The profundity of the didactic and stochastic exemplifications of my academic career naturally gravitate a candidate of my paramount abilities towards fulfilling the raison d’etre of my presence in your program.
- *Try:*
 - I am very well-rounded academically, and my broad knowledge makes me a great candidate for your program.

WAYS WE HIDE OUR VOICES

Defining “passive voice”

- In active voice, the subject performs the action of the verb:
Steven Spielberg directed the movie.
{subject} {verb} {direct object}
- In passive voice, however, the subject moves to the direct object position, so the verb is no longer connected to the true subject of the sentence. Also, the strength of the verb is compromised by the use of auxiliary verbs: “to be” or “to have.”
The movie was directed by Steven Spielberg.
{subject??} {verb} {direct object??}

WAYS WE HIDE OUR VOICES

Spotting passive voice

- All passive voice sentences will include some form of the verb “to be” such as “**am, is, was, were, are, been,**” or “**to have,**” such as “**have, has, or had.**” A sentence is not necessarily passive if these verbs are present, but if it is used in conjunction with another, stronger verb, it is worth a look.
- The sentence will often have a “**by**” phrase after the verb, either written or implied. (The movie was directed **by** Steven Spielberg.)

WAYS WE HIDE OUR VOICES

Results of passive voice:

- Makes it sound as though you aren't committed, enthusiastic, and the right candidate
- Downplays accomplishments that deserve to be recognized.
- Makes you sound vague.
- Contributes to boredom and distraction.

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Defining passive construction

- **Extends the “concept” of passive voice further than sentence construction.** Passive construction hides an author's accomplishments and makes establishing ownership much harder.
- The sentence construction may not be the same as “passive voice,” but the result is the same.
- Women tend to use passive statements more often than men*, but all of us do it, especially when we write about ourselves.

* Wolf, Naomi. Voice/Identity Module. Woodhull Institute for Ethical Leadership. Ancramdale, NY, 2005

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Issues with passive construction

- Using nonchalant and wishy-washy verbs (**I seem to have had success vs. I succeeded**) leads to passive construction.
- Writers often use passive construction in personal statements if they are unsure of themselves or don't want to appear cocky.
- Using passive construction downplays achievements that **you earned!**

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Passive Construction:

Use active verbs & take ownership of action and accomplishments

- *Instead of:*
 - “I **got** two academic internships, and **was** a member of the Honor Society...”
- *Try:*
 - I **excelled** in two academic internships, and was **inducted** into the Honor Society.
- *Instead of:*
 - “The scholarships **were awarded** to me because I **have earned** good grades and **have worked** as a Teaching Assistant.”
- *Try:*
 - “I **won** academic scholarships for my **high GPA** and **undergraduate work** as a Teaching Assistant.”

WAYS WE HIDE OUR VOICES

Issues with word choice:

- Choose the most expressive words, not the biggest.
- Try telling the story using your six senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, **and emotion**. Use the most effective in your final draft.
- Write in first-person. Place yourself firmly at the center of your essay.
- Stay away from industry jargon, unless it is expressly required.
- Don't use the thesaurus (or anything else) to obfuscate (**hide or cover up**) your meaning.
- Think of different ways to express your meaning.

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Word choice:

Speak from your heart and speak your mind.

- *Instead of:*
 - **Perspicacity** is a personal gift that I **treasure**.*
- *Try:*
 - My personal gift of **wit** has **made my journey fun***—not just educational.
- *Instead of:*
 - My **rapacity for educational endeavors** augments my **profound cognitive capacity*** for **adding to the lexicon of information in this field**.
- *Try:*
 - **Real enjoyment of my education** in political science has made all the difference in **my sense of motivation**.* I am really looking forward to **contributing to this field**.

WAYS WE HIDE OUR VOICES

Issues with Hedging (especially scientific writers):

- Scientific and academic writing is almost always written to explain something to experts in the field. **In personal writing, you are explaining yourself to people who are not experts in “you.”**
- You must be clear about who you are, what you believe in, your goals, ideals, values, and needs. Your readers cannot go to a library and look up your sources if they want more information. **Especially with scholarships, you can’t assume the reader knows your industry jargon.**

WAYS WE HIDE OUR VOICES

Issues with Hedging:

- **Using qualifiers:**
 - seems, tends, may, might, suggests, often, usually, probable, assume, conceivable, sometimes, believe, etc.
- **Using clichés:**
 - “It is tempting to speculate...”
 - “As we move forward...”
 - “It is important to note that...”
- **Using bureaucrat-ese**
 - “The preferred methodology of the experiment was selected in part due to personal inspiration and extensive reflection by the experimenter.” (**Means:** I thought about it a lot before I did it.)

WAYS WE HIDE OUR VOICES

Hedging:

Eliminate qualifiers and vagueness. **Take a stand.**

- *Instead of:*
 - Although I may seem an unlikely candidate for law school, my passion makes it highly probable that I will succeed.
- *Try:*
 - My passion for the law drives me to achieve at the highest levels.
- *Instead of:*
 - It seems apparent to me that veterinary medicine would be the best path.
- *Try:*
 - Veterinary medicine is the best path for me, because...”

NEGATIVE INFORMATION

We all have negative information in our educational background. (Even the people who will read your essay.) Remember that every single essay that goes to your reviewers will have some black mark, some issue, something that means that they are human.

NEGATIVE INFORMATION

What the reviewers want to know is:

- a) How you handled it when it happened
- b) What, if anything, you learned from it
- c) How you handle talking about it honestly
- d) Whether it will impact your ability to continue your education

It is uncomfortable. You can handle being uncomfortable for the time it takes to write one or two sentences.

NEGATIVE INFORMATION

It is largely how you talk about these issues that shows a positive, can-do attitude that will always succeed in school and in life or a negative, destructive personality that will always end up in the back of the class.

The place to start looking for the positive is **always what you learned or changes you have made in your life as a result of the experience.**

NEGATIVE INFORMATION

Rephrase negative information to showcase the positive.

Instead of:

- "My grades fell because I had to work two jobs to pay for rent and food."

Try:

- "My strong sense of self-reliance really helped me keep my life together when financial issues started to impact my schoolwork."

Instead of:

- "My test scores were low, but my recommendations make up for it."

Try:

- "I have created associations with the foremost biological researchers, including Dr. John Smith and Dr. Jane Jones. These mentoring relationships have convinced me that bioethical research is both personally fascinating and essential to humanity."

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- **Be honest:** speak from your own experience in your own voice
- **Tell stories:** involve your senses and bring your essay to life
- **Watch how you say it:** Don't get hung up on complex language. Write something that can be read and enjoyed!

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- **Be tactful:** if you wouldn't say it to a complete stranger, don't say it in your essay
- **Take credit:** Own your achievements! You earned them!

Most important:

Answer the question!

WRITING TECHNIQUES

- **Be MESSY!** Don't worry about grammar, spelling, word choice, or cohesiveness. Just write!
- Try different approaches.
- Write each section separately to make sure you develop it fully.
- **For help with transitions**, try the UC Denver Writing Center handout: "Transition Words."

EFFECTIVE EXAMPLES

While attending the **paralegal program** at Westminster College, my first wife and I realized we were not meant to stay together. During this period, I started to **balance my time** spending hours studying for class in the law library with **learning legal writing, legal research** as well as learning the **personal application of the local divorce laws**. I worked hard to **fully understand Shepardizing, treatises on Divorce, Contracts, Constitutional Law, and International Law**. As a result I gained a broad knowledge of **how to analyze case law, how to implement the applicable precedent, and how to convey the importance of the legal system governing everyday lives**. Out of one of my most emotionally trying experiences, I learned to **remain persistent and maintain my drive for success in the face of difficult challenges**.

EFFECTIVE EXAMPLES

Hastily I tried to find a bottom bunk for Gordon. As he faced impending death, he also faced the possibility of a humiliating end. Although I dealt with defeat and frustration, I wanted to help him spend the last hours of his quiet, transient life in privacy. The phone rang every few hours. I heard the poignant sadness in the hospital social worker's voice. His liver failure and his inability to pay warranted imminent discharge. As shelter after shelter said "no more room," I remembered Gordon's well-regarded kindness at the clinic, his pleasant nature and his smile.

EFFECTIVE EXAMPLES

I am an impressive candidate for this scholarship, not because I am a good student, although I am; not because I work hard in many areas of my life, although I do; and not because it will help me financially, although it will. I am a good candidate because I have received from this college gifts of knowledge that I can never repay. I will be a positive representative of this university, and ideally, a positive role model for your students, for the rest of my life.

(Hint: colleges especially want to invest in students who will eventually become donating alumni or become well known in their field.)

INEFFECTIVE EXAMPLES

When we got home, my mom admitted that she had **taken pills** that should only be taken before bed. Understandably, my **dad was very upset** with her. Since **her hysterectomy** three months earlier, my mom, **diagnosed bipolar since the age of 19, had not been herself**. My dad called **her psychiatrist of 29 years, Dr. Grosser**, put me, the only child living at home, **in charge of Mom's normal duties**, and **put himself in charge of dispensing pills** to Mom.

INEFFECTIVE EXAMPLES

The subject of the involvement of the right parietal cortex in time perception will be the principal motif of my future involvement in the explication of the neuro-physiological bases of a plethora of idiosyncratic occurrences within the perceptual world of the human species. While some would consider the study of time perception to be pedantic and marked by a sense of perfunctory and pejorative inevitability of inconsequence, this field must be explored further if only for the ancient Grecian maxim of acquiring knowledge for its own sake.

INEFFECTIVE EXAMPLES

I started in education as a student teaching assistant when I was in high school. I was lucky to get into a great education program, where I have expanded my skills and learned applicable theories. I spent my summers in college working in inner-city schools, and during the school year, I volunteered at a preschool and daycare. I am currently the assistant director of an after-school program, where I help students learn skills for effective living.

FOR ADVANCED WORKSHOP

- Use your own essay question or pick one topic from this prompt:

(from UCD Miscellaneous Application for Scholarships)

“Events, decisions, life experiences that motivated you to return to school; personal special challenges you have had to overcome; describe community activities, positions of leadership; current financial/living situation; educational goals and how you will achieve them.”

FURTHER STUDY

For more information on writing personal statements, check out the following:

UCD Writing Center, Central 206, 303-556-4845,
www.cudenver.edu/WritingCenter

UCD Scholarship Resource Office,
1250 14th St., Suite 120, 303-352-3608
www.cudenver.edu/Scholarship

UCD Career Center, Tivoli 259, 303-556-2250
CareerCenter@cudenver.edu

“Writing Your Statement of Purpose for Grad School”
<http://www.accepted.com/grad/personalstatement.aspx>

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME.



Please bring your drafts to the

UCD Writing Center
(Central Classroom 206)
303-556-4845

www.cudenver.edu/WritingCenter

Feel free to contact us with further questions at:
Mari.Christie@cudenver.edu or *Sean.McCandless@cudenver.edu*

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SERIES SCHEDULE

PERSONAL STATEMENTS & SCHOLARSHIP ESSAYS

Workshop 1: February 27
Advanced Workshop: March 12

COVER LETTERS AND RESUMES (with the UCD Career Center)

Workshop 1: April 2
Advanced Workshop: April 16

THE BUSINESS LETTER

Workshop 1: April 9
Advanced Workshop: April 16

WRITING FOR THE INTERNET

Workshop 1: April 23

All workshops: 12 – 2 pm, NC 1204. Lunch will be served. Reservations Required.
RSVP to Mari.Christie@cudenver.edu
