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Whether you're applying for an undergraduate school or trying to get into graduate programs, many applications require a letter of intent or personal statement. Personal statements are one of the most important parts of the application and sometimes the deciding factor for admission.

Personal statements give a better understanding of who you are, beyond the rigid constraints of the "fill-in-the-blank" application.

Like many around this time of the year, I am finishing my graduate school applications. Looking for advice and guidance, I decided to compare different schools' personal statement

requirements and ask admissions offices for advice. Here's what I found:

1. Be yourself

The Columbia Graduate School for Journalism encourages students to write about family, education, talents or passions. They want to hear about significant places or events in your life; about books you have read, people you have met or work you've done that has shaped the person you have become.

Schools want to know about you so don't portray someone else in the essay. It's almost like going on a first date. You want to display your best qualities but be yourself at the same time. You want the other person to like you, not someone you're pretending to be.

2. Show diversity

Rayna Reid, a personal statement guru, received her undergraduate degree at Cornell, Masters at the University of Pennsylvania and is currently pursuing a Law degree at Columbia. Reid says a personal statement is really just a way to make the college fall in love with you.

"The essay is where you really get a chance to differentiate yourself from the other applicants," she said. "Explain why they should accept you. What will you contribute?"

Sean Carpenter, University of Southern California Student Services Associate and undergraduate student, reiterates the importance of differentiating yourself from other applicants.

He works in the Annenberg School for Communication admissions office and deals with prospective students daily. Carpenter says USC or any major school want to see diversity.

"They want to see how you're different from all other applicants, especially through diversity. What makes you unique out of all the other applicants?" Carpenter said, "Tell things that has helped you grow as a person and built your character."

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3. Do research and tailor each essay accordingly

Every college is different, so each personal statement should be different. Many students try to get away with having a universal essay but admissions departments will notice.

"Do research to give concrete reasons why you're interested in particular program," Carpenter said. "Speak with a faculty member that you're interested in working with or doing research for and mention that in your statement. It would also be beneficial to say what classes you've taken that were relevant to the field of study."

4. Be concise and follow directions

Make sure you read the directions carefully. One of the biggest red flags for an admissions office are students who don't adhere to word limitations. Don't give them a reason to throw out your application.

Believe it or not, there is a way to say everything you want in a page or less. If you need some help, ask several faculty members to read over your essay and give you feedback.

5. Go beyond your resume, GPA and test scores

Many students worry about how their GPA and test scores will affect the admissions process. The personal statement is an opportunity to explain any strengths or weaknesses in your application — such as changes in major, low GPA or lack of experience.

For instance, Reid was worried about not having a 4.0 GPA. Since Reid didn't have the perfect GPA, she explained what she did with her time to make up for that fact. Being on the Varsity rowing team and a Teach for America Corp member are great examples of how devoting her time to other things made an impact on her GPA.

6. Tell a story

"Nothing makes someone fall in love like a good story. It does not have to be the next Pulitzer winner," Reid said. "For college, one essay I wrote was about how I have often felt like my life was a movie and how Dirty Dancing (yes, the movie) changed my life. My sister who currently goes to Princeton even wrote about killing a fly!"

One of the worst things you can do is bore the admission officer. Make yourself memorable by telling a story about something distinctive from a creative or different angle.

With this advice, your personal statement will be the highlight of your application. Good luck!

Alexis Morgan is currently a senior at Penn State University. She has extensive experience in public relations, broadcast journalism, print journalism and production. Alexis truly believes if you do what you love, you will never work a day in your life. Follow Alexis's career on her website.

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