



INSTITUTE FOR MUSIC LEADERSHIP

Office of Careers and Professional Development Musician's Personal Statement Tip Sheet

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The personal statement, sometimes called a statement of purpose, applicant statement, or personal essay, is a common requirement in graduate applications. While it cannot compete with a performance audition, the personal statement is still an important part of your application as it sheds light on your career aspirations and your character. It can help determine your fit for a school or degree program and it may even help you receive scholarships or assistantships.

TYPES OF PROMPTS

The prompts below are sample questions asked by universities with graduate music programs. As you apply to programs, check each school's admissions site to find the personal statement prompt for your degree and take note of its suggested length and format. These statements might range in length from only 500 words to 3 pages. Here are some examples:

- Describe your professional goals and plans. How has your background influenced your goals and how will your graduate studies help you to achieve them?
- What are your present plans for a career? Tell us about yourself, your professional music journey, and why you would like to study here.
- Describe your goals, interests, and career plans as they relate to your intended academic pursuits.
- This statement should include your objectives, observations of your professional and personal strengths and weaknesses, any significant professional experiences or honors, and any other information you think important.
- Outline your objectives for graduate study, career plans, and reasons for applying to our program.
- What are your reasons for undertaking graduate study? Indicate any specific areas of research interest. You may wish to discuss past work in your intended field or allied fields.

RESEARCH AND PLAN

Research the School:

Start by researching each school thoroughly before submitting starting your statement. Examine each school's degree options, special programs, faculty expertise, ensemble

offerings, and the plan of courses for your intended track. Personalize your statement for each school based upon these foundation-level details – don't be generic. If you can swap one school name for another and it still applies, that means there is still work to do.

Research Yourself:

Before you begin writing, ask yourself a few questions. Why do you genuinely want to enter: 1) the specific professional path, 2) the specific degree program, and 3) the specific school? These are questions only you can answer and they make an impact. Readers want to be assured that you have deliberately considered your future and arrived at a confident decision to enter graduate school. The personal statement is an opportunity to show what kind of person you would be through your contributions to the school, the program, and the field.

Once you've brainstormed your answers outline your most important points and choose their most effective ordering. Use your planning to ensure a smooth flow between ideas and use transition statements to connect thoughts and paragraphs. When drafting, don't get too caught up on meeting the intended essay length, but focus instead on creating a quality document that is a clear and genuine. After you've drafted, you can go back and edit.

CONTENT

Your personal statement should tell a story about who you are, your goals, and why you belong at that school. When discussing your career decision, focus on how your actions will lead you to your dream career, rather than dwelling on the moment that led you to entering the field. *Do not resort to a chronological account of your musical experiences.* Identify desired accomplishments and how the degree will help. (For example, strings faculty may be curious if you plan to perform exclusively as a soloist, in orchestras or chamber ensembles, or if you intend to teach at the collegiate level.) Focus on your various long-term goals, your professional vision, your current ability and your motivation.

Don't just tell—show! Demonstrate your statements through relevant and concrete examples. Highlight your record of recent successes, be objective, draw conclusions from your musical experiences, and point the reader's attention to patterns or dominant themes in your career trajectory. Convey the reasons why you feel you are especially suited for the degree/field and consider sharing what noteworthy preparation you have had already. Show your knowledge of the current state of the field along with your reasons why you wish to enter it.

Optional: **The Hook** - Some applicants find it useful to begin the essay with a statement or idea that will hook your reader. This sets the tone and intrigues the reader, while providing context for the remainder of the statement. Done well, the hook should be personal, yet professional, and keep the reader invested in your words. Since a personal statement is not a work of fiction, it's best not to employ an especially dramatic or controversial hook.

SPECIAL INTEREST AREAS

In fields such as performance or composition, where no research statement is required, it may help to discuss any specialized interest areas in your personal statement. Don't worry, you are not held to these statements! If you are unsure of your research interests, you might mention details of specific high-level training that has been meaningful in preparing you for your intended future study. Refer to the topics of your previous research, thesis papers, lecture recitals, highly influential composers, or other special studies that indicate your past research interests. Aim to help the reader understand any potential paths you may pursue.

In fields like music theory or musicology, a separate research statement or writing sample is often required in addition to the personal statement. In these cases, feel free to address your research interests briefly in your personal statement, but avoid sharing too many details that would fit better in another document. Avoid too much overlap between these statements as redundancies may appear lazy or disorganized to the readers.

APPROACH AND STYLE

Answer all questions on the prompt clearly and fully, possibly splitting the paragraphs based on the questions. Write in a style that is comfortable for you, but keep in mind:

- ✓ Present yourself as confident and capable.
- ✓ Make your most important points early in the statement.
- ✓ Use language from the field. Imagine you are writing to fellow musicians or faculty.
- ✓ Keep your wording precise— Avoid clichés, casual idioms, or flowery language.
- ✓ Do not aim for an excessively academic style; be straightforward yet professional.
- ✓ Use action verbs and avoid the passive tense.
- ✓ Make efforts to vary your sentence structure and style.

EAGERNESS AND STRUGGLE

Showing enthusiasm is great but be cautious not to saturate your personal statement with overly eager sentences. For example, statements like "I am really excited and simply cannot wait to join this amazing program" seem overly zealous and do not divulge helpful information about your fit for that program. In the same vein, when highlighting your interest in a prestigious school or program, be careful not to fawn over it with meaningless praise.

Focus on your strengths, personal drive and discipline, rather than emphasizing your weaknesses. Avoid using pessimistic or negative phrases about yourself or your musical community and do not point out your flaws. Nobody wants to read "I didn't win the competition in 2016 because I had a memory slip on stage." Instead, flip statements such as these to point to personal development, like "I learned a great deal about being fully prepared for a significant solo performance when I took second place in the 2016 concerto competition."

Optional: **Special Situations** - Some applicants will address problematic issues (such as missing prerequisite coursework or time taken off during coursework) if a brief explanation is warranted. Readers also want to know about special conditions that played an important factor in shaping your life or point to your ability to overcome adversity or hardship. Consider what the reader absolutely needs to know about you that isn't evident from the accomplishments on your résumé or transcript.

MENTIONING FACULTY

While it is not necessary, mentioning specific faculty by name shows personalization and knowledge of the department. However, this should be treated carefully. It is ideal to contact the specific faculty whom you intend to mention before you submit your application (request a lesson from them or engage in some form of professional communication) so that the named faculty member will know and remember you.

The best way to mention faculty by name in your personal statement is to share why you find their work interesting (thereby indicating that you may prefer to study with them). The personal statement is not an official place to request your preferred studio teacher/advisor but, by demonstrating your interest in a specific faculty member, you might be accommodated. Bear in mind that a different faculty member may audition you, so be cautious regarding your wording and tone when omitting names.

REVISE, REVIEW, REQUEST

When you finish writing the first draft of your personal statement, take a break and review it later with fresh eyes. Read first for flow and make corrections based on overall clarity. Check for awkward phrases, areas needing transitions, or excessive words. Review your personal statement a second time to make changes for proper grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Look for places where you can reorder your sentence structure. Once you have done all of these things, read it again for optimal professionalism before requesting feedback from an advisor, mentor, friend, or family member.