

## EDUCATION ABROAD

# The Personal Statement: How to Write a Competitive Essay

The personal statement is really the one part of an application over which you exercise complete control. A good personal statement will be the difference between a successful application and an unsuccessful application. Still need to be convinced that the personal statement is important? Someday, you will be writing the professional equivalent of the personal statement – the cover letter – and the stakes will be even higher. Here are some tips and strategies for writing a good one.

## Content

These sections will help you develop a plan to create and arrange the content of your personal statement.

### Essay prompts and essay length

Many applications and scholarships will provide a specific essay prompt and/or a guideline for the length of the essay. A successful essay will always carefully reflect these instructions. The fastest way for your essay to be rejected is to ignore the stated instructions.

The OIA Education Abroad Application, for example, requests that you “should include information about you and your academic interests and goals, and should explain the reasoning behind your wish to study abroad.” The Education Abroad Application personal statement should be approximately one page long. Occasionally, specific programs will add additional prompts/topics to consider – please always refer to your program’s information sheet to see if there are additional instructions.

Similarly, the Wolfe Scholarship Application first requests that you “[d]escribe the relevance of this particular study abroad program to your academic and professional goals. Be specific. (100 words),” then that you “[d]escribe how, when and why a person, book, work of art or event impacted your decision to study abroad. (300 words).”

### The basic argument of a personal statement

In a very fundamental way, all prompts are obliging you to develop an argument that clearly illustrates why you are an excellent candidate for this specific program at this specific time in your academic career. So what does that mean?

## **You**

The personal statement is your one opportunity to introduce yourself to the reader in your own words. The application proper contains impersonal information that does not really capture the real you: your rank, your GPA, your major, etc. You are more than these data points, so your job now is to tell your reader what makes you special, without veering too far into the realm of inappropriate oversharing.

Questions to consider:

- Why did you select your major?
- What personal, professional, and/or academic goals are you currently trying to accomplish?
- What makes you a great candidate for this program or this scholarship?

## **This specific program**

Readers of both an Education Abroad Application as well as a specific scholarship application will want to know what brought you to a particular program, and you will need to deliver a handful of solid, legitimate reasons. Why did you choose this program?

- Was it the structure of the program?
- Will the credits earned on this program help you to complete a major? A minor? GE requirements?
- For Ohio State-sponsored programs: were you drawn to a particular faculty/staff resident director? Perhaps you've taken a class with them? In what ways has this person really cultivated your interest in this program?
- How will this program help you to accomplish the personal, professional, or academic goals that you've outlined?
- What does this program offer you that another program would not?

Demonstrate that you know something about this program, that you have arrived at a careful decision and that you have really thought through the program to which you have applied. Oversubscribed programs will not privilege applications that cannot articulate a solid rationale; scholarship committees will be similarly disinclined to award students who are going "just to go."

## **This specific time**

For many students, timing is critical. Often, then, a discussion of why you have decided to pursue study abroad at this particular time can help to demonstrate what a serious student and a careful planner you are.

Timing considerations:

- Does the length or timing of the program fit into your schedule better than others?
- Are you currently completing pre-requisite courses that make traveling on this iteration of the program ideal?
- Is the program only offered every other year?
- What have you already been doing (academically, financially, personally) to make this opportunity a reality?

These and other, similar details can really help to show that you have researched your options and that you've really thought through study abroad and how it will work for you. These details also have the benefit of more subtly illustrating why you need to be accepted this time around or why you need to be funded during this cycle: anything you can do to keep your application from the "good, but maybe next time pile" is a win.

## Getting started

### Step 1: Develop a plan

Remember how your high school English teachers made you write an outline for all of your essays? There is an excellent reason for that: drafting an outline obliges you to think through – in still very skeletal terms – what you would like to say in your essay. A good outline will reflect how you plan to address each of the specific points of the prompt and, equally importantly, how you plan to organize your thoughts.

### Step 2: Develop your argument

Now that you know more or less what you would like your essay to convey, the goal now is to figure out the most efficient way of expressing those points. When personal statements go wrong, it generally is because of a disregard for the mechanics (discussed below) and/or a very long, meandering, and generally roundabout way of getting to the point. In a one page prompt, you simply do not have time to waste: building a coherent and compelling argument in a short amount of time will oblige you to write each sentence with purpose. With this clarity of intent in mind, begin to address each of the points you have already identified in your outline.

### Step 3: Tighten up the writing

Ideally, you have left enough time in the application process that you can now put your essay aside for a day or two and return to it later with fresh eyes. As you read through it now, ask yourself: have you conveyed all the points you needed to? Is there anything missing? What could enhance the essay? Have you demonstrated why you are a competitive candidate? Many students will begin to realize that they have already exceeded the page limit or that they have not developed their arguments fully. Now is the time to be very economical: what can be cut in order to make room for something more important? Again, the goal is to avoid an essay that rambles: you only have your reader's attention for about a page, so make the most of it.

### Step 4: Edit, edit, edit...and then edit more

With every application cycle, there are always a handful of applications that are rejected outright simply because the writer submitted the wrong essay, submitted an essay rife with spelling/grammatical mistakes, and/or submitted a rambling and incoherent essay. Do not be that student. Some strategies for editing:

- Read your essay backwards. If you read without meaning, you are more likely to catch stray misspellings, punctuation oddities, and even sometimes grammatical errors.
- Identify a trusted "outside reader." Your outside reader should come to your essay cold, which is to say, without knowing much about the essay or why you're writing it. If your outside reader can't work out those details from the essay itself, then you need to go back and fill in some gaps. You have also, hopefully, chosen someone who would be good at noticing any spelling/grammar/punctuation issues along the way.
- Take completed essays to the [Center for the Study of Teaching and Writing's Writing Center](#). Please keep in mind that they do not proofread texts: they can help with editing, make suggestions about your essay, and even point you in the direction of good proofreading tips, but the actual proofreading is on you.

## Mechanics

Below, please find two sections that cover the more mechanical aspect of essay writing. In the first section, we will go over the basics: the very least that your essay needs to have going for it. In the second section, we will take a look at finer tuning.

### **Avoid the Junk Food of Writing: Clichés**

Clichés are words and phrases that have lost meaning because of overuse; adding them to a personal statement, therefore, does nothing to build your case and, instead, merely adds empty filler to what is probably a very limited word count. Essays relating to study abroad give rise to their own clichés. A strong personal statement will not include any of the following without significant polishing:

- Your love of or passion for any of the following: culture, traveling, new people, new experiences, new food, etc.
- Your desire to relate to (insert relative here) who grew up in (insert name of country here)
- Your wish to immerse yourself in the local culture
- The “once-in-a-lifetime” nature of study abroad

There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these statements (particularly if they are true), but it is worth keeping in mind that virtually every single other student is writing something nearly identical. If you are keen to write on these topics, your goal is to demonstrate how you/your situation transcend the cliché.

### **Know your register**

“Register” is a fancy way of highlighting the difference in the way you would write a formal essay as opposed to a text to a friend, an email to a professor, a grocery list, a letter to your grandmother, etc. Think of the register as a spectrum of formality: texting might be at one of the spectrum, whereas a personal statement might be at the other end of the spectrum. The bottom line: what is appropriate for one is probably not appropriate for the other.

Approach the personal statement as a formal writing exercise. As such, your personal statement should:

- Avoid contractions (isn't, you're, it's, etc.)
- Avoid text speak of any kind
- Avoid scenarios of oversharing/too much information
- Avoid extraneous usage of the so-called “scare quotes”

## Homographs, Homophones and Other Tricky Words

Spellcheck will not catch everything, and neither will the grammar-check: there is simply no substitute for a solid grounding in spelling/grammar and good, old-fashioned proofreading. Some of the misuses we see the most often:

- Two, too, to
- Your, you're
- It's, Its
- Here, Hear
- Their, there, they're
- Affect v. Effect (The trick? Most of the time, affect is a verb and effect is a noun.)
- Advise v. Advice
- Compliment v. Complement
- Immerse (v. submerge, emerge, e.g.)

If you are not already comfortable with the differences between these words, please acquaint yourself with their correct usages prior to sitting down to write a formal essay such as the personal statement.

## Word Choice

The thesaurus feature that your computer offers can be an enormously handy tool when drafting an essay. It can also yield unintended confusion, inaccuracy, and/or general malapropism. Do not use the thesaurus feature unless you are very comfortable with the meaning and usage of the offered synonym; doing so could result in an essay that uses, for example, "populace" in place of "people." The two are, indeed, synonyms and can in many contexts be used interchangeably, but not perhaps in a sentence such as "Many populace enjoy ice cream."

In addition to incorrect usage, over-usage is a common problem in essay writing. Over-usage issues tend to arise in one of two ways: (1) over-reliance on a particular word or term to express a point and/or (2) belaboring a specific point. When you proofread your essay, pay particular attention to the words you have used to make your point: have you repeated the same word throughout the essay? Have you continued to make the same point again and again?

## Tips for the Sophisticated Writer

You may already feel fairly confident in your writing abilities. Here are some ways to refine what you have.

### Passive Voice

Although not technically incorrect, good writers will tend to avoid using the passive voice when writing formal essays.

Passive: This opportunity would be greatly appreciated.

Active: I would greatly appreciate this opportunity.

Passive: Different cultures must be studied and evaluated for greater cross-cultural competency.

Active: One must study and evaluate other cultures for greater cross-cultural competency.

On a similar note, sophisticated writers will strive to avoid using the verb “to be” (am/is/are; was/were; be/being/been, etc.) in favor of much more active and dynamic language:

Good: I am very open-minded and open to a number of experiences abroad.

Better: I have cultivated an open-minded approach to study abroad and new experiences abroad.

Good: I am a third-year and a French major.

Better: I am a third-year and I selected the French major because . . . .

### **Dangling Modifiers**

Sophisticated writers also work to avoid dangling modifiers in their written work. A dangling modifier describes a word or phrase that has been “left hanging” because the referent (the word being described) is missing and/or unclear. The best place for the referent (in italics below) will almost always be directly after the modifier.

Unclear/Incorrect: Having now studied German for two years, *the Bonn Program* would allow me to gain greater language proficiency.

Clear: Having now studied German for two years, *I* look forward to the opportunity of developing my language proficiency on the Bonn Program.

Notice how the dependent clause modifies the subject of the next clause. In the first example, “the Bonn Program” is not the correct referent. In the second example, “I” functions as the clear (and correct) referent.

Unclear/Incorrect: As a high school senior, *the first opportunity to study abroad* presented itself.

Clear: When I was a high school senior, the first opportunity to study abroad presented itself. OR As a high school senior, *I* was able to study abroad for the first time.

In a similar way, your usage of words like “this” should be followed by the specific referent.

Unclear: This is why I am a good candidate for the scholarship.

Clear: This *reason / set of circumstances* illustrates why I am a good candidate for this scholarship.

Remember: the goal is to convey your points as concisely and as logically as possible; clear, specific language can only help you.

### **Parallel Structure**

When listing items (words, phrases, actions) in a sentence, parallel structure demands that each listed item (word, phrase, action) match grammatically.

Non-parallel structure: While studying abroad, I hope to learn more about China’s history and culture, visiting the Great Wall of China, and developing my language abilities.

Parallel structure: While studying abroad, I hope to learn more about China’s history and culture, to visit the Great Wall of China, and to develop my language abilities.

With any of these guidelines, there is always the possibility of an over-correction. In the example below, this student has kept his/her structure parallel, but at the cost of awkward word choice:

Voyaging abroad epitomizes the romantic ideals of whimsical adventure, self-exploration, and *embracement* of the exotic.

### **Subject-Pronoun Agreement**

Increasingly, spoken English allows for a gender-neutral pronoun. Facebook and other media, have brought that usage into fairly common implementation in the written sphere as well. Consider the following phrasing: “Suzie Q has changed their profile picture.” For those in love with grammar, the dissonance between the singular subject and the plural pronoun is painful. At all costs, avoid subjectpronoun disagreement in your formal writing. Such avoidance does not mean that a conscientious writer must abandon all attempts to capture gender neutrality. Notice how some style manuals will encourage an alternating usage of pronouns (he, then she, then he, and so on), while keeping the number (singular v. plural) consistent. Other style manuals have adopted the use of s/he to capture two subject positions.

### **Split Infinitives**

Depending on the context, you may or may not have readers who will get bent out of shape about split infinitives. In general, good writing will avoid split infinitives except in instances where the syntax would become impossibly awkward to do so.

Split Infinitive: I like to often go to international events here on campus.

Better: I often go to international events on campus. / I like to go often to international events on campus.

Split Infinitive: I hope to fully immerse myself in another country’s culture.

Better: I hope to immerse myself fully in another country’s culture.

Split Infinitives: In the summer of 2011, I was able to spend eight weeks in Qingdao, China to further learn the language and to better understand the culture.

This phrasing is better left alone. Look how awkward the re-phrasing would be:

In the summer of 2011, I was able to spend eight weeks in Qingdao, China to learn further the language and to understand better the culture.

Beginning a Sentence with a Conjunction (and, if, but, yet, etc.)

Technically, it is not grammatically incorrect to begin a sentence with a conjunction, and indeed, many creative writers do this often and with great effect. Tread carefully with this usage: your goal is to write a formal essay using clear and concise language. You are not writing the Great American Novel. As such, keep it firmly in the front of your mind that each sentence must get you closer to your end goal; you may not, therefore, be able to afford these syntactic stylings.