

# THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

**What is the Personal Statement?** The Personal Statement is an integral part of the UC application. The content of the Personal Statement should add clarity, richness, and meaning to the information you present in other parts of your UC application, enabling the Office of Admissions to form the best impression of you.

## TECHNICAL INFORMATION:

- You have 1,000 words to answer both prompts.
- Your shortest response should be at least 250 words.
- Avoid the use of special characters.
- Feedback and suggestions from others are useful, but you are responsible for writing the Personal Statement.

## Personal Statement Prompts

**Prompt #1 (Freshman):** Describe the world you come from – for example, your family, community or school – and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations.

### *Suggestions for Prompt #1 (Freshman)*

- The majority of your response should be the description of your world.
- While describing your world, don't forget to add how the world has influenced your development as a student, or as a person.

**Prompt #2 (All Applicants):** Tell us about a personal quality, talent, accomplishment, contribution or experience that is important to you. What about this quality or accomplishment makes you proud and how does it relate to the person you are?

### *Suggestions for Prompt #2*

- Think about answering this prompt first, as it may help set the context you want to describe in Prompt #1.
- Choose a topic that has not been addressed in detail in another section of the application.
- Keep the information relevant to your personal experiences.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

**Answer the question.** Take time and think about each prompt before you start writing. Use details and examples to make your point. Use your words strategically; is there a reason behind your example? Write to add context and depth, not to fill space.

**Give yourself time to edit.** Start writing to answer each prompt, then go back and review the word count, content, and overall message. You may not have space to tell us everything so make your words count.

**Be you.** Remember to talk about yourself so that we can get to know your personality, talents, accomplishments and potential to succeed at a UC campus. Use plenty of "I" statements.

**Stick to one topic per response.** Making a list of accomplishments, activities, awards, or work will lessen the impact of your words. Expand on a topic by using examples and facts for maximum impact to an Admissions reader.

**Brainstorm Topics.** When you are composing your Personal Statement, consider including:

- Personal triumphs or challenges – If you decide to talk about a challenge or triumph, do not forget to explain what you learned from the experience.
- Leadership opportunities – We value leadership at many levels (e.g. family, school, or community).
- Experiences outside the classroom – Consider experiences that have made an impact on your life (e.g., travels, church/temple, work, youth groups, or your family).
- Disabilities – If you are living with a disability, feel free to talk about it in the context of your ability to succeed. Explain, don't complain!
- Culture – If your culture has influenced who you are, talk about it. Let it add to the picture we form of you.

**Stay focused.** Avoid common mistakes such as:

- Inappropriate use of humor.
- Creative writing (poems, scene setting, or clichés).
- Quotations – We want to know your thoughts and words, not someone else's.
- Generalities – Stick to facts and specifics you want us to know about yourself.
- Repetition – Do not talk about the same topic in each response. Give us new information we cannot find in other sections of the application.
- Lists of accomplishments or activities.
- Philosophy – Do describe your world in facts and examples. Don't ask questions without answers.
- Don't be campus specific. You're talking to all the UC campuses in your response.

## THE PERSONAL STATEMENT...

- Offers us an understanding of you as a unique individual within the context of your family, school, community, and the world.
- Adds clarity, richness, and meaning to the information collected in other parts of your application.
- Allows you to make your best case for why you should be admitted to a UC.
- Clarifies the distinctions between applicants whose academic records appear to be quite similar.
- Provides us with information that may not be evident in other parts of your application.
- Is a forum for you to explain how factors outside of your school environment have enhanced or impeded your ability to maximize available academic and intellectual opportunities.

## TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

**Start on your personal statement early.** Give yourself time to think about your topics, and carefully consider the rationale behind each question.

**Be clear. Be focused. Be organized.** Make sure your personal statement follows a logical structure. Try to think about how it may seem to an audience who doesn't know you. Input from people you trust—teachers, friends, relatives—can help you get different perspectives on how your personal statement affects those who are reading it.

**Be careful with humor and clichés.** What might seem funny or biting irony to you might not seem that way to someone who doesn't know you. Remember that the personal statement is an opportunity for you to give us a complete picture of yourself. Don't allow clichés to speak for you.

**Don't manufacture hardship.** A personal statement isn't effective simply because it chronicles difficult circumstances. Rather, an effective personal statement gives us a clear sense of your personal qualities and how you have used and developed them in response to your opportunities and challenges.

**Finally, give yourself plenty of time for revisions.** Read your writing to others, and revise for clarity in content and in style. Pay attention to rules of correct grammar and punctuation, and don't forget to spell check.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD PERSONAL STATEMENT:

**A good essay...**

**-Is thoughtful and honest**

A strong personal statement is **reflective**; that is, it demonstrates that you have thought about and gained a clear perspective on your experiences and what you want in your future. It does not simply tell a reader what you think he/she wants to know. Instead, it gives the reader a vivid and compelling picture of you--in

essence, telling the reader what he or she should know about you. Remember that the focus of the essay is YOU--your achievements, your obstacles, your goals, your values.

***-Strives for depth, not breadth***

A good essay is not a list of your accomplishments. Remember when your mom told you that it's quality, not quantity that counts? Well, the same adage applies for your college essay. A reader will be much more interested in how your experience demonstrates the theme of your essay, not the number of accomplishments you can list. What is NOT interesting: an essay that devotes one paragraph each to a variety of different topics. This type of approach denies you the ability to give depth to your essay.

***-Follows the conventions of good writing***

A good essay uses appropriate grammar and syntax, uses precise and vivid language, and does not contain any spelling errors.

***-Answers the question!***

A good essay is the result of a writer who has examined the essay question and written an essay that explicitly addresses that question. For example, if you are asked to *describe* your greatest accomplishment or any unusual circumstances or challenges you have faced, then your reader will expect you to use vivid language that will enable the reader to visualize your accomplishment and share your sense of success.

***-Uses specific examples to illustrate your ideas***

Thousands upon thousands of personal statements discuss initiative. Only hundreds show us initiative with concrete examples of demonstrated motivation and leadership. But examples are only one part of the equation: we also need to see how you have assigned meaning to your experiences and how you have grown from them. We want you to prove to us with written examples that you have a sense of who you are, where you are going, and how you are going to use your education and your experiences to accomplish your goals. Although some events have long-term or even lifetime ramifications, it is usually better to focus on recent events because they shed more light on who you are right now.

***-Benefits from several drafts and feedback from others***

Revision allows an essay to grow. Revising is not editing; revising is the act of "re-seeing" and of looking for those parts of the essay that would benefit from more explication, more (or less) vivid language, or even deleting parts that simply don't work to move your primary theme forward. Similarly, feedback from others can help you identify those parts of the essay that work well--and those that don't.

***-Contains a catchy introduction that will keep the reader interested***

It is important to recognize that essay readers will read hundreds, maybe even thousands, of essays during the application review period. That means that an essay with a catchy introduction, one that gets right to the point and uses precise language and vivid imagery, is going to stand out more than an essay that is predictable and conventional in its opener.

***-Transforms blemishes into positives***

It's okay to have flaws! The essay is your chance to show how you have transformed blemishes. For example, if your essay theme is "overcoming obstacles" and you earned a poor grade in a class, but went to a community college at night to repeat the course, it is important for your reader to know this because it is an example of your perseverance. The reader does not want to hear complaints about poor grades or circumstances, but rather wants to know how you have overcome them.

***-Demonstrates your knowledge of the major/college***

No one expects you to know everything about the college or university to which you are applying. However, readers will want to know that you have done your homework. For example, if you write an essay that states your interest in becoming an engineer, but the college does not have an engineering program, then you haven't done your homework.

### **-Exudes confidence--you will be successful no matter what**

A good essay doesn't beg or brag. Colleges and universities want to admit the best students, and the best students are those who can demonstrate their ability to pursue their goals regardless of where they are admitted. Think of this as quiet confidence--the kind that reveals itself through your description of lifelong interests, sustained commitment, and/or perseverance in the face of adversity.

## **STRUCTURING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT:**

A typical two-page personal statement will consist of the following:

1. An introductory paragraph that provides your essay's controlling theme
2. 2-4 body paragraphs that develop your theme through examples and detailed experiences and build upon each other. The final body paragraph will contain your most poignant information
3. A conclusion that widens the lens and wraps up your essay without summarizing or repeating what has already been written

Need more help? <http://students.berkeley.edu/apa/personalstatement/structure.html>

## **SAMPLE ESSAY**

### **Introduction**

*Seventeen years ago, I came bounding into a world of love and laughter. I was the first child, the first grandchild, the first niece, and the primary focus of my entire extended family. Although they were not married, my parents were young and energetic and had every good intention for their new baby girl. I grew up with opportunities for intellectual and spiritual growth, secure in the knowledge that I was loved, free from fear, and confident that my world was close to perfect. And I was the center of a world that had meaning only in terms of its effect on me-- what I could see from a height of three feet and what I could comprehend with the intellect and emotions of a child. This state of innocence persisted through my early teens, but changed dramatically in the spring of my sophomore year of high school. My beloved father was dying of AIDS.*

### **First Body Paragraph**

- **Topic/Transition Sentence:**

*From the moment my parents told me, I confronted emotions and issues that many adults have never faced.*

Development of ideas related to the topic sentence (Signpost question addressed: values and philosophies)

*Death of a parent, and AIDS specifically, forced my view of the world and my sense of responsibility to take a dramatic turn. I had already accepted my father's homosexuality and had watched through the years as he experienced both prejudice and acceptance related to his sexual preference. However, in this case I did not have the benefit of time to understand my father's illness since he decided not to tell me until he had developed full-blown AIDS. My role in the relationship was suddenly reversed.*

- **End Sentence**

*Where I had once been the only child of my single father, I was now the parent to the debilitated child.*

## **Second Body Paragraph**

### ➤ Topic/Transition Sentence

*By the summer of my junior year, I had rearranged the structure of my life; as my father's illness progressed and he became increasingly incapacitated, he depended on me a great deal.*

Development of ideas related to the topic sentence (Signpost question addressed: evidence of responsibility)

*Each morning before school I took him to the hospital where he received blood transfusions or chemotherapy to treat the lymphoma that was destroying his body. After school, I raced home to complete my homework so that I could later go to his apartment. There I cooked meals, cleaned up, and administered his oral and intravenous medications. Working with IVs became second nature to me. I found myself familiar with the names of drugs like Cytovene, used to treat CMV, Neupogen, to raise one's white blood cell count, and literally countless others. I came home each night after midnight, yet the fatigue I felt hardly touched me; I was no longer seeing through my own eyes, but through my dad's. I felt his pain when he was too sick to get out of bed. And I hurt for him when people stared at his bald head, a result of chemotherapy, or the pencil-thin legs that held up his 6'5" frame. I saw the end he was facing, the gradual debilitation the disease caused, the disappointment he endured when people were cruel and the joy he experienced when others were kind.*

### ➤ End sentence

*I saw his fear, and it entered my life.*

## **Third Body Paragraph**

### ➤ Topic/Transition sentence

*My father died on July 28, 1995.*

Development of ideas related to the topic sentence (Signpost question addressed: accomplishment)

*In the last year of his life, I was given the greatest gift I will ever receive: the gift of deep experience. I am now able to recognize the adversity that accompanies any good in life. My father taught me about loyalty, love and strength. But most importantly, he gave me the opportunity to see through his eyes, triggering a compassion in me and a sense of responsibility to those I love and the world around me that I might not have otherwise discovered.*

### ➤ End sentence

*Not a day will ever go by when I won't miss my father, but I am so grateful for the blessing of his life.*

## **Conclusion**

### ➤ Widen the lens beyond the topic at hand and tie up the essay

*With this compassion and experience comes an even greater responsibility. Luke 12:48 tell us "To whom much is given, of him will much be required." As I move forward in my life, it is my hope that I can begin to see other people from two vantage points: theirs and mine. By doing this, I will begin to understand that with my every position or emotion there may be someone else standing at an equally valid, yet possibly opposite point. And that life, for them, has a different hue.*

# THE PERSONAL STATEMENT WORKSHEET

The following worksheet is geared to help you start the writing process for your Personal Statement on the freshman application. **There is no ‘correct’ answer to the Personal Statement**, so just start writing. The UC application is available online at [www.universityofcalifornia.edu/apply](http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/apply). Additional hints and suggestions can be found on the University of California web site.

## Prompt #1:

*Describe the world you come from – for example, your family, community or school – and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations.*

Things to consider before answering Prompt #1:

- Do you live in a small rural area or large city?

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What are the challenges or opportunities you found in your community?

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- Are you an only child or do you come from a large family? Do you identify with one or more cultures?

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Are you the first person in your family to attend college? How does your family interact with one another?

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- How large is your high school? Are you in a magnet program or charter school?

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How are you challenging yourself in school to prepare for college? Is attending college common for graduating seniors?

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The area that was easiest to answer could be a good topic for Prompt #1. Remember to add facts and examples that describe the world that has influenced you.

## Prompt #2:

*Tell us about a personal quality, talent, accomplishment, contribution or experience that is important to you. What about this quality or accomplishment makes you proud and how does it relate to the person you are?*

Things to consider before answering Prompt #2:

- Make a list of four things that describe you (e.g. athletic, a leader, first in my family to go to college, started a club, own my own business, etc.)

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Now ask a friend or family member to do the same thing:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Did anything overlap? Can you see areas where you want to share more information? If so, consider using this topic to respond to Prompt #2.

- What do you consider one of your strengths? What are you good at?

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This can be another possible topic choice for Prompt #2.

## Final Hints:

When you find your topic, remember to give *examples* of what you learned from your experiences or your accomplishments. Highlight your experiences and show how they contribute to the person you are today. Avoid using the same topic (or examples) in both responses. Every piece of *new* information can add clarity to your application. When writing you want to explain, not philosophize; add depth, not theory to your application.