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Writing a Personal Statement – Lehman College English Department

A personal statement is usually a two-page single-spaced document required of applicants to graduate school, and to certain jobs, fellowships, and scholarships. It's a document that goes through many drafts and in which you need to "humble brag," presenting yourself in the best possible light without sounding conceited. You talk about your accomplishments, hurdles you've overcome, future plans, tailoring the statement to what you're applying for. The personal statement serves more or less the same function as a cover letter for a job.

For a fellowship or scholarship, a personal statement should sum up some of your academic accomplishments so far – your personal qualities and leadership skills, as well as your interests and plans post-graduation, whether they involve grad school, travel, or working in a particular professional field. You want to paint a picture of what kind of person, student, and leader you are. Because personal statements are short, sloppiness is a quick disqualifier; they must have *zero* grammatical errors and be formatted *perfectly*.

Here are a couple of web sites to glance at to guide the process of drafting your preliminary statement:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/>

<http://grad.berkeley.edu/admissions/apply/personal-statement/>

<https://www.cmu.edu/gcc/handouts/Graduate%20School%20Application%20Essay%20Handout.pdf>

<https://careercenter.depaul.edu/documents/Preparing%20Personal%20Statements%205-31-12.pdf>

And don't forget the Lehman Career Services Center (CSC), which offers invaluable support for every phase of your application process, including your personal statement: <http://www.lehman.edu/career-services/services.php>

If you're having trouble beginning, you can think of it as a short biographical sketch of yourself. The personal statement should be written in the first person (use "I"), but if it's difficult to write about yourself, begin in the third person and imagine writing a blurb about yourself, like the "About the Author" section at the end of a book. Also, remember that you will be competing against applicants of all ages, so even if you feel as if you are just at the start of your college career, you want to sound established, with legitimate interests and activities. Show how active you have been in the Lehman community and your community outside of school. Give a sense of your major, specialization, most influential texts/authors/courses, any minors, clubs, interests, personal commitments, etc.

Even though the process is difficult, students shouldn't agonize too much over drafting a personal statement. Write your "preliminary" personal statement fairly quickly, and then revise it with faculty mentors – a faculty member you've had for an English course, the English area staff member at CSC, and (for students who meet the requirements for the English Honors Program) Professor Augustine at the Beyond the Bachelor's program.

We strongly encourage you to apply to whatever graduate school, internship, fellowship, scholarship, study abroad program, or job that appeals to you. Give it a go. Even if you're aren't selected this time around, it will be a valuable exercise as you begin to think about life after Lehman and how to make your own story a compelling one.

Remember that English faculty members are happy to read preliminary drafts of your personal statement as you Work through them. Ask us!

OLM/JBM for Lehman English