Success Center

Directed Learning Activity (DLA)

The Personal Statement

TR002.1

Directed Learning Activity—The Personal Statement

Description: ***Your personal statement demonstrates why you would be a good fit for a particular university, internship, job, or scholarship. This writing task usually combines narrative, exposition, and persuasion. In order to help you develop a thorough understanding of the elements of a strong personal statement, this Directed Learning Activity (DLA) will guide you through the process of writing one for yourself. This DLA emphasizes the prompts for the University of California (UC) transfer essays for the 2013-2014 academic year, but many scholarships ask for roughly the same information.***

Materials: ***You will need a draft of your application that is complete except for the essay. You also should have specific information on the program or scholarship you are applying for; your unofficial transcripts; your educational plan for the rest of your studies at Cerritos College; a list of your extracurricular activities, such as club memberships and volunteer work; and the particular prompts—issued by the university or scholarship officials—that you will be addressing.***

Step One: Checking Your Prior Knowledge about Personal Statements

Test your expertise in personal statements by answering the following true-false questions. Circle your responses, then check your answers against the explanations provided below.

Questions:

1. **True or False:** The personal statement is a mandatory section of the application for UC transfer and for many scholarship applications.
2. **True or False:** The word counts are important.
3. **True or False:** The personal statement one writes in high school can be used for the transfer statement, too.
4. **True or False:** It is crucial to select personal and academic experiences worthy of reflection and analysis when writing the statement.
5. **True or False:** The personal statement needs to do more than repeat what has been listed elsewhere on the application.
6. **True or False:** It is cheating to get feedback on the statement from tutors, advisors, professors, or other experts.
7. **True or False:** The personal statement must add clarity, depth, and meaning to the application so as to make the best possible case for acceptance.
8. **True or False:** If the reader knows how passionately you desire this future, you have accomplished the main goal of the statement.
9. **True or False:** Readers of your personal statement are more interested in your childhood than in your academic achievements in college.
10. **True or False:** Getting right to the point and supporting your argument with specific, concrete examples and language is the best way to handle these short essays.

Answers:

1. **True.** You will not be accepted with an incomplete application, no matter how brilliant and accomplished you are. Many scholarships ask for a general statement. Others, and most universities, ask applicants to respond to specific questions.
2. **True.** While it may be acceptable to go a few words over or under the count, you want to use the guidelines to plan your essay. The final version of your essay should be quite close to the limit. Very short essays suggest that you don't care about acceptance; very long essays suggest that you don't follow directions. For UC statements, you have a total of 1,000 words (most years) for the combined topics. Some students write 500 words per essay; most students write more (about 725 words) on their majors and less (about 275 words) on the personal topic. However, even your shorter essay should be at least 250 words.
3. **False.** You have completed significant work in college, so your readers expect maturity and professionalism. They want you to interpret patterns in your recent achievements and character even if you use earlier experience as a short bridge or lead-in. The best indicator of your future success in college is the success you have had in college so far. You will want to analyze recent experience to point to your short-term and long-term goals.
4. **True.** One of the most common mistakes applicants make in the personal statement is to depict something trivial or irrelevant at length while leaving academically significant issues unexplored. Higher education, especially at an elite institution, places high value on reflection and analysis. Honors projects, research beyond the classroom, and ambitious extracurricular activities can help you shape a meaningful essay. If you do need to explain a gap in enrollment or a dip in grades in the second essay, avoid long stories whining about victimization: instead, emphasize how you have learned to convert suffering into specific wisdom and particular academic strengths.
5. **True.** To make the best case for yourself, identify key patterns in your academic expertise and outside experience. Anticipate the inferences that others might make about you when they see your record. Examine specific offerings of the program or agency you want through online resources (such as departmental web pages or course catalogues) and then see how those programs fit with what you have accomplished so far. Your essay will build on these connections so as to make your reader eager to have your contribution to the field and the institution.
6. **False.** Do seek suggestions and get feedback from tutors and trusted advisors or professors in your field. Give readers a week to respond, or prepare to sit with readers while they offer suggestions, particularly on organization, clarity, and meaning. Take careful notes. You should not need reminding to fix every error, because even the slightest lapses damage credibility. Remember as well that generic essays rarely succeed: your personal essay needs to display your unique character and voice. It must be written by you.
7. **True.** While your essay is personal, it also should make the most effective case for your candidacy. Detailed knowledge of the university, program, or scholarship mission should help you shape the essay with your ultimate audience in mind. If you are applying for multiple universities, for example, you should tailor each essay to the particular university. If one application is going to several agencies, avoid alienating readers who

represent your second and third choices, but still be as specific about your studies as you can be.

8. **False.** You are competing with many other applicants, all of whom share intense desire for this program, university, or scholarship. Your readers respect your dreams but already know them: readers are more interested in details regarding your achievements and plans for the future. Allow your enthusiasm to emerge through your deep understanding of your record, your field, and the university programs for which you are applying.
9. **False.** If childhood established a pattern of study, interest, and commitment that you are currently pursuing, by all means mention it if you would like to, especially if those childhood patterns launched extraordinary achievements in your major. However, move on quickly to your adult, current activities: the childhood connection should be kept brief if it is there at all. For example, you may have loved stories about the moon as a child, but an application for aerospace engineering needs to bring your collegiate experience to life.
10. **True.** Bear in mind that the evaluators may be reading hundreds of essays on similar topics. Do not waste their time on rambling lead-ins, strings of rhetorical questions, or fulsome praise of your parents. Do describe relevant honors or research projects, significant patterns of achievement, and extracurricular activities or volunteer experiences that enhance your understanding of the field when writing about your major. Indicate your plans for the future. When writing about a personal quality, talent, accomplishment, or experience that is important to you, be sure to explain how that quality contributes to your overall package as an applicant and as a person.

Step Two: Examine the Prompts

You will want to answer all parts of all questions, so look at the prompts and underline key words. As an example, let's look for key words in Prompt 1 below. The word *discuss* is open-ended to allow for your unique organizational strategy. *Interest* and *experience* should spark specific ideas for topics you can write about. If you have an internship but no volunteer experience, circle *internships* but don't circle *volunteer. Involvement* is a key word in the UC application: readers want you to characterize your involvement with the major both inside and outside the classroom.

To practice this skill, underline these types of key words in a personal statement prompt. If you actually are applying for transfer, a scholarship, or a job, use one those prompts. If you are just practicing, use Prompt 2 below, which—like Prompt 1—is one commonly (though not always) used by the University of California system.

> **Prompt 1:** What is your intended major? Discuss how your interest in the subject developed and describe any experience you have had in the field—such as volunteer work, internships and employment, participation in student organizations and activities—and what you have gained from your involvement.
>
> **Prompt 2:** Tell us about a personal quality, talent, accomplishment, contribution, or experience that is important to you. What about this quality makes you proud and how does it relate to the person you are?

Step Three: Critically Examine Your Application

Put yourself in the place of the evaluator. Look over your records. What patterns do you see in the development of your major? Write down ideas here for possible use in the first essay.

Now, are there issues or achievements that might particularly interest an evaluator? For example, if you have some low grades or semesters off, an evaluator might want an explanation. If you have won some big awards, an evaluator might want details about the accomplishment. If you overcame particular hardships, an evaluator might want to know how you did it. The second essay provides the opportunity for you to characterize yourself in a memorable story. Write down information here for possible use in the second essay.

Step Four: Ask Yourself Questions Related to the First Prompt

To prepare to thoroughly respond to the first prompt, amplify and supplement your notes from Step Three to address these specific questions:

- What is my major?
- How did I become interested in it?
- What makes me excited about studying this subject?
- What interesting projects or papers did I work on in areas related to the major?
- What roles did I play in, and how did I contribute to, activities outside classes that I can relate to my major?
- Why do my awards and honors related to the major (if any—you do not *need* awards) matter to me?
- What have I gained—intellectually, morally, spiritually, socially—from my experience related to the major?

- What patterns might a stranger see in my choices related to the major, and what inferences would that person make about me?
- What particular courses and programs excite me as I look toward upper-division work in the major?
- How can I connect my development in the major to my long-term goals?
- How can I connect my development in the major to contributions I will make to society?

Step Five: Ask Yourself Questions Related to the Second Prompt

To prepare to thoroughly respond to the second prompt, amplify and supplement your notes from Step Three to address these specific questions:

- Is there an issue or achievement in my notes from Step Three above that I should address in this essay?
- If the issue is a gap or obstacle, how did I or will I overcome it, turning suffering into wisdom or knowledge?
- If I want to write about an achievement or activity, what should I say that is not evident in the rest of the application?
- If nothing jumps out as needing to be addressed, do I want to write about a personal quality?
- If I were to write about a personal quality, what personal quality do I most value in myself?
- What is something I have done, or habitually do, that displays this quality?
- What is important and good about this action in balancing my character or making a better world?

Step Six: Draft Your Thesis Statement for the First Essay

You want to write compelling essays that make you attractive to members of the university community. This community values curiosity, achievement, depth, complexity, energy, and social awareness as well as familiarity with courses and programs offered at the university to which you will be applying. Look over the notes you have made for the first prompt. Then, design a thesis statement that pulls your work in the major together.

Many students like to start with a **concession** and then progress to the **alternate view** and the **reasons**, a structure embodied by the signal words ***although***, ***instead***, and ***because***. For example, "Although the field of psychology often emphasizes conversation-based therapy, I plan to focus on the physiology of the brain, because technological advances such as fMRI currently are leading scholars to new understandings both of psychopathology and of wellness. As a result, clinicians increasingly will have the opportunity to help clients build and redirect neural pathways as they work toward mental health."

Although many evaluators respond positively to concession-based statements, you do not need to have a thesis statement of this type if you prefer a different approach, because your unique work and priorities in your major need to shape the essay. What you do need is a strong opening that gets to the point: you cannot waste your time in lengthy setting of atmosphere. This opening will set the frame for the rest of your essay. Write one now.

Step Seven: Draft the Body of the First Essay

Look over your exploratory notes in Steps Three, Four, and Five. Link your main point to your personal story, describing patterns that have directed and continue to direct your growth. Take time in individual paragraphs to develop connections among achievements and interests. You may include extracurricular activities as well as work done for courses. When relevant, use the language that professionals use in the field. Remember, your goal is to stand out as an interesting and worthy future professional. Analytical topic sentences supported by reflective detail help to make an excellent impression. Draft the body now.

Step Eight: Draft the Conclusion to the First Essay

Your work in the major is just beginning, so the conclusion provides an opportunity to connect your experience to a larger context. Particular courses and programs of interest to you, future plans, and the good you hope to do with your work in the world can give a feeling of completion and significance to your essay. Do not start with the words "In conclusion"—try a substantive transition, instead. Look over your notes in Steps Three, Four, and Five above, and then draft the closing to your first essay.

Step Nine: Select the Topic for the Second Essay

Look over your notes to Step Four. A significant gap or problem in your record might raise questions in the mind of a reader. If so, this essay should address the issue so as to demonstrate the valuable, strengthening lessons you have learned. If not, you have more flexibility. If you have a standout experience or achievement that you did not have the chance to discuss in the first essay, you may wish to discuss it here. Otherwise, a hobby at which you excel, an experience that means a great deal to you, or a personal quality that contributes to your success will work for this essay. At this point, if you are uncertain, talk to one of the tutors about your options. When you are ready, write your topic here.

Step Ten: Clarify the Relationship between Your Two Topics

If you are an engineer, devotion to skydiving may balance your character, adding an element of thrill-seeking to your usually staid existence while reinforcing your meticulous attention to detail. If you volunteer in a mental hospital and are majoring in sociology, you have cultivated a unique perspective on the functioning of a social institution. If you are a business major who needs to explain the semester of failing grades that resulted from your caring for a parent dying of cancer, you have learned how to handle tragedy and may make a better manager in the long run because of this trauma. While you do not need to open your essay on this relationship—you may even create two unrelated essays—almost all students benefit from including this information somewhere in the second essay. Write out the relationship now.

Step Eleven: Draft the Second Essay

Although this essay almost always is the shorter of the two essays, it is important: begin with a thesis statement or main point; provide meaningful detail that conveys significance; end with a memorable—strong or vivid—sentence. The relationship you noted in Step Ten above can make an effective opening. Even if you choose a different opening, you do want to provide insight as well as facts in this essay. You may open on a concession ("Although I spend many hours in the lab"), followed by an assertion ("I still make time for theatre"), followed by a reason ('in order to celebrate art in my local area"), followed by significance ("By this means, I remind myself that physicists are not mere technicians: we need to understand humanity so that we can communicate with and enjoy people around us"). In any case, bring a particular experience or quality to life through detail and analysis. Look over your notes to Steps Nine and Ten above to organize your thoughts. Then write your draft.

Step Twelve: Revise and Edit Both Essays

Use this checklist to improve your essays.

1. Are my openings direct and engaging?
2. Have I established meaningful patterns that show who I am?
3. Have I included details that are not obvious from the rest of the application?
4. Am I showing my best academic and professional self?
5. Have I eliminated all repetition and wordiness? (**Wordiness** is using more words than needed, such as *red in color* instead of *red*.)
6. Are the essays close to the required word counts?
7. Do I convey an understanding of larger academic and social contexts, such as awareness of specific programs, goals for the future, and service to the profession or community?
8. Do my paragraphs have topic sentences?
9. Are my closing sentences distinctive?

10. Does my style show verve?
11. Do I include concrete examples?
12. Will I stand out to the selection committee?
13. Have I eliminated all errors in usage?
14. Am I satisfied with a job well done?

PRINT STUDENT NAME **STUDENT #**

Tutor Feedback:

_____Has the student addressed all parts of all questions?

_____Do the essays stick closely to the word counts?

_____Do the essays include factual details related in meaningful patterns?

_____Are the essays organized in paragraphs?

_____Does there seem to be a person behind the prose? That is, when you read the essay, do the experiences and goals seem to be those of a human being rather than those of a generic writer of an essay designed to hit the bases in a formulaic pattern? Specific events, projects, and analyses create character and credibility; mere lists of abstractions do not.

_____Does the student convey awareness of larger implications and contexts?

_____Have all errors been eliminated?

_____Has the candidate made the most of her or his opportunity to impress the selection committee?

Additional Comments:

PRINT INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR NAME **DATE**

INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR SIGNATURE