



INSTITUTE FOR MUSIC LEADERSHIP

The Musician's Personal Statement Tip Sheet

The personal statement, sometimes called a statement of purpose, applicant statement, or personal essay, is a common requirement when applying to graduate programs at the master's or doctoral level. While it cannot compete with a performance audition, the personal statement is still an important part of your graduate application because it sheds light on your career aspirations as well as your character. It can play a key role in determining your fit for a school or degree program and it may even help you get noticed for scholarships or assistantships. This tip sheet offers suggestions for writing a thoughtful, organized, and professional personal statement.

The prompts below are samples of 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 or format. Depending on the school, these statements might range in length from only 500 words to 3 pages.

Examples of Prompts

- 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, if appropriate, any specific areas of research interest. You may wish to discuss past work in your intended field or allied fields.

Preliminary Steps: Research and Plan Your Statement

Start by researching each school thoroughly before submitting your application. 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.

Prepare to write your statement by thinking deeply about why you genuinely want to enter 1) the specific professional path, 2) the specific degree program, and 3) the specific school. Readers want to be assured that you have deliberately considered your future and made a confident decision to enter graduate school. The personal statement is an opportunity for them to determine what kind of citizen you would be through your contributions to the school, program, or as a future teacher.

Before writing, outline your most important points and choose their most effective ordering. Consider using a persuasive statement organizer to guide the presentation of your ideas (an online search will provide several examples of these). Use your planning to ensure a smooth flow between ideas and **use transition statements to connect thoughts and paragraphs**. At first, 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. However, don't go beyond the suggested essay length.

Content

Answer all questions on the prompt clearly and fully. Your personal statement should tell a story about who you are, what your goals are, and why you belong at a school. State your personal reasons for desiring admission to a specific music program and keep your statement forward facing. **If possible, identify specific career goals and your intended use of the degree.** (For example, applied studio strings teachers may want to know 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 and your professional vision as well as your current ability and your motivation. Never simply rehash your résumé in prose and avoid treating your personal statement like a standard musical bio.

Don't just tell—show! **Demonstrate your statements through relevant and concrete examples.** Highlight your record of recent successes rather than dwelling on your passion for music. Be objective and draw conclusions from your musical experiences. Point the reader's attention to patterns or dominant themes within your career trajectory. Consider what differentiates you from other candidates of the same program. 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 hook 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 your 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 still help to discuss your specialized interest areas to further personalize your statement and point to

your ambitions within the field. 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. Simply aim to help the reader understand any potential paths you may desire to follow within your musical pursuits.

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

When discussing your career decision, focus on actions or goals that have resulted since formalizing your plan rather than dwelling on the moment or event that led to wanting to enter the field. Do not resort to a chronological account of your musical experiences and, unless it has ties to your professional plans (such as those interested in early childhood music education), avoid boring the readers with all too common descriptions of one's love for music as a child. Your statement should include more relevant information than why you chose your instrument as a young student.

- ✓ Present yourself as confident and capable.
- ✓ Make your most important points early in the statement; get to your point quickly and fluidly.
- ✓ Use language from the field. Imagine you are writing to fellow musicians or faculty—do not allow your prose to be condescending.
- ✓ Keep your wording precise—say exactly what you mean to express and cut out extraneous words or phrases.
- ✓ Avoid clichés, casual idioms, or needlessly 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 prose devoid of substance. 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. Simply identify your perceived reasons for its preeminence or mention its record of success in statements that relate to your own reasons for wanting to attend.

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” or “my teacher and I frequently disagree on repertoire choices.” 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” or “my teacher consistently sheds light on new repertoire to stretch my comfort zone.”

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. It is ideal to contact the specific faculty whom you intend to mention well 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. If possible, consider asking someone in your shared network to help introduce you before communicating directly with faculty.

The best way to mentioning 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 and your level of detail could help the admissions team feel that you are more likely to accept an offer of admission from that school. Bear in mind that a different faculty member may audition you, so be cautious regarding your wording and tone when omitting names.

Review, Revise, 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 wording. Review your personal statement a second time to make changes for proper grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Look for places where you can reorder clauses to allow for diversity in your sentence structure. Once you have done all of these things, read it *again* for optimal professionalism before requesting feedback from trusted mentors, friends, or family.