

# **WRITING** **YOUR WAY INTO** **COLLEGE**

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How to Write Everything You  
Need to Get Into Your Top School

Joy G. Turner, MPA

# WRITING YOUR WAY INTO COLLEGE

*How To Write Everything You Need To Get  
Into Your Top School*

Joy Turner

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# Introduction

When I wrote my first personal statement as a young 17-year-old with hopes of going away to college in the months to come, I had no idea years later I'd be spending a significant measure of my life helping other people do the same. While I studied English as an undergraduate, I also attended a military college (West Point). I spent the six years right after graduation as a military police officer in the Army preparing for possible deployment and writing mission orders.

So, I guess now you're wondering exactly how I came to be a college admissions advisor and writing tutor.

Well, the truth is, after spending my undergraduate years at a military college, when I left the military to attend grad school at the University of Washington (UW), I wanted to get the real college campus experience. I ran for student government, joined half a dozen clubs, volunteered for the student union advisory committee, and almost joined our department's ultimate frisbee team.

Since I loved being on campus so much that I didn't want to leave, even to work, I applied for a job as a writing and research tutor at UW's Odegaard Library Writing Center. At the time, I didn't consider myself a great writer or even an extremely adept researcher. After being in the military

for ten years, where in my first job I supervised 35+ employees from every type of background, many under the age of 21, I at least knew how to communicate with young people. More importantly, I knew what it meant to go out on your own in pursuit of your dreams. I knew how to help students write because I knew how to help them tell their unique stories.

So, I worked—even though it rarely felt like work—helping students write up research projects, English papers, and of course, personal essays (why else would I be here). Even though my job was at a university and students had already written personal statements to be admitted, I'd wager to say 50-60 percent of the students I saw still wanted help with different personal statements or admissions essays for other programs (majors, grad school, summer job).

Since I was young, I've always loved storytelling in every form. Musical theater is my favorite manifestation, but I'm also a sucker for a good true-crime podcast or memoir (remember, English major here). What are personal essays but a form of storytelling squeezed into 500 words or less?

And so, for the better part of my 7-10 hours of work a week at the Writing Center, I listened to and helped students put their stories on paper. Some stories were more memorable than others.

I remember one student in particular who came in during my first year as a tutor. He was a Mexican-American freshman from the east side of Washington. He was applying to the Informatics major and wanted help with writing a personal statement for the major application. During our session, he told me that he'd always had aspirations to attend the

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University of Washington but had been dissuaded from even applying by, of all people, his high school counselors. He figured his school counselors assumed students who came from where he did had no path to college, so why even waste time filling out an application. He wanted to get a degree in Informatics, go back to his hometown, and use data to illuminate the disparities in economics, education, and well-being happening to his community. How do you fit all of that into a one-page personal statement? It's possible, but it takes reflection and vulnerability on the part of the writer.

See, many times, writing a personal statement is about much more than trying to persuade an admissions committee to let you in. In many ways, it becomes about learning to tell your own story to yourself and to other people.

By the time I graduated and my job at the Writing Center ended, I was in too deep, and so I started Koodoos as a way to continue to help prospective students write their admissions essays.

Over time, I've developed a keen sense of what the average college admissions essay looks like. I know how to make an essay stand out amongst the thousands of others an admissions officer will read during a typical admissions cycle.

I'm writing this book because my goal is to help students and applicants craft personal, one-of-a-kind essays for college applications. With an abundance of tutoring and test-taking prep widely available to students, the test scores among students applying to top schools are virtually identical and provide little means for admissions staff to



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distinguish candidates from one another. For this reason, the personal statement has become critically important in selecting students for the incoming cohort.

I have multiple years of experience working with writers and applicants to draft the perfect essays for scholarships, internships, and college admissions, and I know I can help you craft a personal essay that is impactful and memorable.

Let's get started.

Step 1.  
Before You Start Writing  
Your Personal Statement



## CHAPTER 1

# From the Top

If you're reading this book, then you probably already know that a personal statement is more than just THAT ESSAY you have to submit with your college applications. To explain it in the terms you might read on a college's admissions page, a personal statement is your opportunity to provide insight into who you are as an individual.

Most colleges in the United States use a holistic admissions review process to make admissions decisions. In the holistic admissions process, colleges consider the full spectrum of an applicant's profile in the context of the educational environment and personal background. Under this system, colleges might use academic indicators like grades and test scores to better understand an applicant's readiness for college-level coursework. While personal statements and other writing supplements provide insight regarding an applicant's life experiences, background, interests, and motivations beyond academics. The personal statement (also known as the college admissions essay, cover letter, statement of purpose, or personal essay) also provides a glimpse of an applicant's writing ability, creativity, and career goals.

In other words, admissions committees look to personal statements to gain insight about you as an applicant and understand your motivations as they relate to school and career choices. In addition, your personal statement serves to whet the appetite of the admissions counselor and make the case for why they should choose you. Ultimately, this statement is your opportunity to distinguish yourself from the many other personal essays that any given admissions officer reads through every year.

For almost every school, there are more students who meet the academic criteria than they can admit. So in most cases, factors apart from academics, like the personal essay, will help set you apart from your peers.

For many years personal statements have been an important part of a student's college application and are required by most schools. In 2019, a National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) Admission Trends Surveys (2007-08 through 2018-19) found that 23 percent of colleges consider a personal essay or writing sample of "considerable importance" in admissions decisions, with more selective colleges rating the essay/writing sample higher. Personal statements are consistently in the top five factors that influence admissions decisions.

Even if a college does NOT require you to submit a personal essay with your application, it may still be a good idea to do so, as an essay could end up being the factor that gets you admitted, all else being equal.

In the broader context of the holistic review process, it's also important to note that the NACAC found that colleges separately consider positive character attributes as another

important factor in the admissions process, with private colleges rating character traits a more important measure for admissions than public colleges. This may be because private colleges tend to see applicants with very similar test scores and grades and therefore rely on other factors to make admissions decisions.

The content of admissions essays, letters of recommendation, and the nature of extracurricular activities are the means through which most colleges assess character. Outside of academic indicators like test scores and grades, personal essays and supplemental writing materials (e.g., letters of recommendation) remain a top factor in the admissions process.

### **The Personal Statement is Designed to:**

1. Tell the reader(s) something about you that they cannot learn from reviewing your transcripts, test scores, resume, or other materials.
2. Demonstrate that you can write clearly, coherently, and effectively.
3. Articulate character traits used for assessment in the holistic review process.

A successful personal statement should highlight your achievements, goals, background, and special attributes. A good personal statement also addresses who you are, how you got to this point of applying to college, and where you want to go.

A personal statement is required for more than freshman college applications and is also usually necessary for applications for transfers, graduate school, and professional degree programs like medical school and law school.

**Personal statement.** An essay you write to show a college admissions committee who you are and why you deserve to be admitted to their school. It can be used for graduate school application essays as well.

**College essay.** The same as a personal statement in the college admissions context.

**Statement of purpose.** This usually refers to personal essays written for graduate school applications.

**Essay prompt.** A question or statement that your college essay is meant to address.

**Diversity statement.** A personal essay that describes how your past experiences have contributed to your personal and professional growth.

**Supplemental essay.** An extra school- or program-specific essay beyond the basic personal statement.

Personal statements can range in length from 350 words to several pages. Most are between 500 and 2000 words which means you have limited space to describe your experiences, achievements, and goals.

## **Generally, Personal Statements Fall into Two Categories:**

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement which allows you the maximum flexibility in terms of what you choose to write about.
2. The response to very specific questions like, “Explain why you’re a good fit for X Program,” that are more frequently used for graduate school statements of purpose and short response essays.

When your application is all done and submitted, your personal statement should be a concise and well-written testament to who you are. Remember, if your college of choice doesn’t do admissions interviews, your personal statement is your prime, and possibly only, opportunity to reflect the traits and attributes colleges look for in future students. It’s paramount that you put your best foot forward.

Now, let’s talk about who reads your personal statement once you send it off.