

Personal Statement:

NOTE: Want to jump ahead and just see it? There are two finished PSs on pages 9 & 12

I. What is it?:

The Personal Statement is a type of application essay that asks you to describe specific things about yourself, your goals, and **what you want**.

These statements differ from the narrative prompts on other college essays that ask for a specific story in the past: (e.g., “Tell us about a time when...” or “Describe how you were able to...” etc.)

Personal statements, on the other hand, are always focused on present and future, and do not ask for a specific story.

On college applications, personal statements typically accompany **the supplemental application sent to the specialized arts school or program** to which you are applying or auditioning. Because this statement accompanies your audition, it will be read by the auditioners *from that department, not University admissions staff*. Because of this, its purpose is not to help you “stand out”: your audition will do this already. Instead, ironically, good personal statements are actually much more business-like, a kind of resume in statement form, that emphasizes how clearly you understand how the arts education you’re pursuing contributes *realistically* to your goals, and how maturely you understand the path before you. This helps your auditioner, in turn, know with confidence that you can and will be a good fit for their department or program, which, despite the size of its parent university, may be a very small place where finding the right students is crucial.

Types of personal statements: While some departments simply ask for a “personal statement,” usually they specify what they want by using one of 3 basic forms:

- **A generic-sounding “goals statement”:** “Provide a brief statement of your personal and professional goals.”
- **The “why do you want to go here?” variation:** “Provide a brief statement of your goals in the field of ___, including your reasons for your interest in ___ University.” OR “In a brief statement, explain your interest in ___ University and describe what motivates your application.”
- **The “Artist’s statement” (following the same structure but focused on your creative and artistic, rather than academic goals):** “Provide an artist’s statement of your current artistic interests and goals.” OR “Provide a brief statement describing your artistic interests and motivations.”

Though these initially sound different, in fact, all 3 prompts ask for the same structure, which logically includes these 4-paragraphs-worth of ideas, organized from past to future:

- | | |
|---|----------------------|
| • your past experience (paragraph 1) | (I DID) |
| • Present goals (paragraph 2) | (I WANT) |
| • What you like about the school itself (paragraph 3) | (I LIKE that you...) |
| • Future goals in paragraph 4 | (I HOPE TO...) |

The following table shows the elements of each paragraph, depending on which prompt we're given:
the paragraphs go from top to bottom, with the actual different prompts placed left to right for easy comparison.

Interview Questions:	"General Statement of Goals" Essay	"Why our school?" Essay	"Artist's statement"
Paragraph 1: What have you done in the past that got you here?	Background (classes, school, study, performances, honors) specifically related to goals at intended school: <i>"I have been studying _____ seriously since, when _____"</i> <i>"I have been fortunate to..."</i> <i>"I have been honored with..."</i>	Background (classes, school, study, performances, honors) specifically related to goals at intended school: <i>"I have been studying _____ seriously since, when _____"</i> <i>"I have been fortunate to..."</i> <i>"I have been honored with..."</i> (Same in both variations)	Specific themes and ideas in art you are most interested in exploring, including background and experience in the media you work with most. <i>"In my art I have most enjoyed the challenge of..."</i> , or <i>"my art in the last year or two has focused on..."</i> <i>"I have created..."</i> <i>"I have particularly experimented with..."</i>
Paragraph 2: What do you currently want? ¹	Goals for your four or more years in school: <i>'In college, I hope to..."</i> <i>emphasize stuff about areas of technical development, new skills, things you're working on.</i>	School goals: (based on what kind of school you want:": <i>I'm looking for a school that...</i> 1. 2. 3. 4. <i>(usually organized from the most specific, practical issues to more general, big picture qualities of environment, climate, culture)</i>	Goals for technical exploration and growth within your artwork: (during your time in college) 3-4 goals: <i>"I hope to continue to expand my..."</i> <i>"I look forward to experimenting with..."</i> <i>"I am currently working with...trying to..."</i>
Paragraph 3: What do you like (specifically) about our program? ²	←Not included in this version→ (but you'll always outline it anyway!): 4 things you like about their program: They offer: 1. 2. 3. 4.	"I'm excited that your school offers:" 1. 2. 3. 4. Observe the same order as in paragraph 2	<u>THEIR approach to art:</u> +instructors +styles +Approach/culture +art they're known for <i>"I'm especially interested in the fact that your school would give me the opportunity to...I would love to work with artists like...I'm intrigued by your mission of...etc."</i>
Paragraph 4: What do you think you might do in the future?	Reasonable, realistic career goals (2-3 sentences is enough) <i>E.g., Upon graduation, I hope to...prepared to.. be ready to try..etc.)</i>	Reasonable, realistic career goals (2-3 sentences is enough): <i>E.g., "Upon graduation, I hope to...prepared to.. be ready to try..etc.).</i>	Combine realistic career goals (especially if it affects your major--illustration, design, product or industrial design, etc.) with some larger creative interest, in the themes or vision you have for your art.

¹ Note that for the school, this question shows how mature your current goals are, as well as how aware you are of your exact level of skills and needs.

² The red is a reminder that we always create this paragraph first: By building our whole statement to match what this specific school actually offers, we show that we're a good fit.

II: How to create a personal statement

1. Decide if you need one:

Many colleges may not require the written statement, as many schools only require this of graduate-school applicants. At the same time, the exact same questions will come up if you have to interview. Essentially, at the very least you need to outline one for each school so that you have answers prepared for each of the following questions:³

- Tell us about yourself (or about your art).
- What have you done? What do you like to do?
- What are your goals?
- Why do you want to come here?
- What do you see yourself doing in this field?

As a result, *not* needing a written one puts a *greater* urgency that your outline be particularly clear--since you'll essentially be creating your statement **aloud in an interview**, this means you need to be even more decisive about the content of the statement than if you turned in the written version. Some students find it easier to write the statement anyway, then memorize its parts like a script to be ready to interview.

2. How many do I need?

Create a **unique** personal statement for **each school you are applying to**--after all, to show that you're a good fit, the personal statement must be tailored to whatever unique strengths you like about that school. If a few schools seem similar, then of course most of the content in paragraphs 1 and 4 will be the same for the statements you prepare for those schools; however, the primary strength of a good statement is how specifically paragraphs 2 and 3 identify things about *their particular school and program*--the closer the match between your statement and their school, the "stronger" your application.⁴

3. Do I have a thesis?

Yes: it's the things that you say you like about their school in **paragraph 3**--because these are the specific qualities that attract you to the school. Establishing them clearly and supporting them throughout the essay shows that you are the kind of student that complements the strengths of their program. These qualities will then inform the various short paragraphs of the statement.

³ These questions, by the way, continue to be the most-common questions also asked in job interviews!

⁴ This is very similar to what happens in job interviews--a longstanding trend is to replace open-ended requests to "tell us about yourself" with the question "why do you want to work here?" which many employers find much more productive in identifying candidates.

II. HOW-TO guidelines by paragraph

*Note: we'll write the paragraphs in a different order than they appear—
Write #3 first, then 2, then 4, then 1 (we write the beginning LAST!)
(We'll put them back in order once we've written all 4)*

STEP 1:

ALWAYS BEGIN BY THINKING OF YOUR PRIMARY THEMES, based on what the school you are applying to offers: **This is Paragraph 3: What do you like about their school?**

AVOID VAGUENESS: "A great ___program": what's so great about it?

"loved the feeling on campus": what did you love about it?

"met great students": what did they do that impressed you?

THINK about describable, specific things like:

Liberal education? vs. professional/career training in your art
Competitive vs. supportive culture
emphasis on performing at high level vs. emphasis on trying new things
lots of classes vs. lots of attention
large vs. small, class size, Student-Teacher ratios
Cosmopolitan (fast-paced, tons to do) vs. bucolic (intimate, more rural, homey)
facilities? (especially related to curriculum)
Social environment: (Greek orgs or lack thereof, profile of athletics, arts, scholarship on campus, diversity of demographics, clubs/activities/organizations and how influential these are).
Contact with faculty? (teaching faculty, vs. "famous faculty?")
Specific, noteworthy teachers?, facilities, unique elements of the curriculum?
"VIBE:" your sense of what it was like when you visited, including student culture, etc. special study programs, study abroad, social diversity, on-campus culture, opportunities to see stuff, student performances and what they're doing; actual student life, including classes, etc.
What do you see and *feel like* when you visit?
Residential community? Experiences at the school? Summer programs, etc.
Special support systems, advising.
Can you actually take the classes you want without majoring in that subject?

Question: What if my school looks really great on paper, but doesn't match what I think my goals are?

Answer: Don't apply, or at the very least, do your homework before you spend any more time applying!

When I pick a few to write about, do these belong in any particular order?

Answer:

Yes: Start with the obvious, the specific, the nitty-gritty, then go to the more general, holistic, cultural and “vibey” stuff last.

Remember when you’re drafting to emphasize curiosity words:

explore, take advantage of, want to try, help provide opportunities to, have the chance to be involved in, get practical experience in...etc. (This will come off well in making you sound interested and engaged, and they’ll keep your tone from sounding like you’re too demanding, like you selfishly want too much).

STEP 2:

Complete **Paragraph 2**, working backwards from what you liked about **THEM** to what **you** want for yourself. Do keep the qualities in the same order for coherence. Use phrases such as...

- *I’m hoping to be able to...*
- *I want a school where...*
- *I’m interested in a school that allows me...*
- *Being able tois important to me because...*

STEP 3:

Frame realistic goals for post-graduation⁵ that match the general goals and culture of the school (**This will be paragraph 4**). It will contain stems like:

- *I see myself hopefully one day...*
- *After graduation I would like to be...*
- *After 4 years, I hope to be prepared to*

As with any essay, it will sound done whenever you say something particularly broad and future-oriented--there’s nothing wrong with a cliché here like “down the road, I hope to” or “perhaps someday I may...” etc.

STEP 4:

Only after finishing the other paragraphs do I complete the hardest paragraph, **paragraph 1**:

This paragraph will give the brief history of your interests to explain the basis of your goals. Not only will you match the qualities of the school in all 3, but you want to target the specific career goals in paragraph 4: a performance-oriented conservatory goes with different career goals than a state college oriented towards teaching, or a liberal arts college oriented towards exploration and interdisciplinary, creative work. If you’ve clearly established those goals, in turn, when you created the last paragraph, you’re hopefully clear on *which experiences* are most relevant to the message:

Takeaway:

⁵Job interviews continue to employ this same question: “Where do you see yourself 5 years from now?”

In composing the essay, details about the school(3) determine how you state your goals(2);
Your career goals(4) drive your choice of details from your past(1)!

III. Sample Statements **Let's see the process in action:**

The first, an example based on a real case of a penguin who went to graduate school...

Step 1: identify 3-4 things the school uniquely offers that appeal to you. Use these to outline paragraph 3 (whether the essay needs it or not)

Paragraph 3: MY school: USC School of music

1. Only Studio/Jazz Guitar MM in Major Music Market
2. Existing DMA in CG, Possibility of creating same
3. Opportunities to teach variety of classes as MM
4. Great teachers: Joe Diorio, Pat Kelley, R. Smith

Now write it up:

I'm excited that USC offers the only program of its kind in a major music market; having completed a MM at the Eastman school in a program devoted almost entirely to Jazz, I'm interested in working with musicians who are exploring commercial styles as well. The fact that you have faculty like Pat Kelley and Richard Smith, accomplished in Pop/Jazz, Steve Trovato, recognized as expert in Nashville and Roots styles, and Joe Diorio (whose books I've learned a lot from on my own) means that I'll be exposed to broad influences. Of course, as part of my application, I'm obviously looking for opportunities to teach as an assistant lecturer—the fact that I'll be able to do some work in the department with young guitar majors, not merely teach beginning guitar electives, is really exciting to me as a future college teacher. Finally, Chair Richard Smith has offered the possibility of pressing for a Jazz Guitar DMA, which could be the model program of its kind, and one I would love to be a part of, as we look to expand non-traditional offerings in music schools nationally.

Step 2: COPY, then generalize FROM, the bullet points of paragraph 3, to work inductively back to "general qualities of some school, somewhere" that I want.

Paragraph 2: MY "ideal school" *which just coincidentally happens to look almost exactly like YOUR school*

1. Studio/Jazz Guitar in Major Music Market
2. DMA?
3. Opportunities to teach variety of classes
4. Great teachers: but variety of styles

Now write it up:

First, I'm looking for a graduate program built on jazz foundations, but not limited to mainstream jazz: my recent performance experience has been in Pop/Jazz fusion and contemporary country groups, and I see myself as a multi-styled player who enjoys switching genres at a professional level, and I need access to an industry community to meet musicians doing this at a high level, so Los Angeles is my ideal location. This broad interest means I need a program that values that diversity with teachers who play all these styles, especially with a studio focus. As a future teacher, however, it's also important that I can teach majors, whether in sight-reading, theory, or musicianship: I love working with the technical side of musicianship and look forward to sharing that. Finally, having completed a master's degree, I'm hoping that my academic work, while teaching, can count towards a possible future course of major study that would give me the credentials I need as a future college teacher.

Step 3: thinking of what you'll do upon graduation, show them that you're down-to-Earth with a clear vision for where you're going. Outline this closing paragraph:

Paragraph 4/conclusion: future (*realistic*) goals:
Play, more degrees , build a college program

Now write it up:

Upon graduation, I see myself as a well-prepared, multi-style guitarist ready to work in as many performing and recording situations as possible. In fact, if possible, I'd also love to build my own program within a college setting, with more credentials in hand. I can then continue to make music, while using the tools and elements of a successful program like USC's to expand the range and number of opportunities to add to the skills and professionalism of young players who, like me, still see Los Angeles as a city of opportunity in all kinds of music.

Last Step: thinking of everything you just wrote, provide just enough background about what you've DONE already that could clarify a *past* basis for what you want in the *future*. This will be the opening: it comes first, but gets written last.

**WHAT, based on these things I just said I wanted, would SHOW that that's what I'm about?
(paragraph 1 gets written last, to MATCH)**

write it up: (“Performance and teaching”)

As a player of multiple styles of contemporary guitar, I'm obsessed with encouraging my students to explore more, diverse ways of playing, never complacent about being limited to only one style or way. This may be inspired by my extra-musical interests--as a graduate student in English literature, I made the choice to pursue college teaching in music because of how rewarding it's been to teach others, whether the high school jazz students at Birch Creek Music Center, the beginner rock guitarists I taught music store lessons to, or the adults I taught jazz appreciation to at the UW union. In each, it wasn't just the hands-on with music I loved, it was the fact that the *teaching* was so much more immediate, working with things people really liked and wanted to learn to do. I see this as an important future trend in higher education, as more schools create programs to address popular styles that musicians are playing now at high levels in commercial settings. I see a strong academic background as necessary to sell the legitimacy of teaching such styles in conservatory settings that currently only offer classical and mainstream jazz.

now, pasting in the remaining 3 paragraphs, we get the whole essay:

First, I'm looking for a graduate program built on jazz foundations, but not limited to mainstream jazz: my recent performance experience has been in Pop/Jazz fusion and contemporary country groups, and I see myself as a multi-styled player who enjoys switching genres at a professional level, and I need access to an industry community to meet musicians doing this at a high level, so Los Angeles is my ideal location. This broad interest means I need a program that values that diversity with teachers who play all these styles, especially with a studio focus. As a future teacher, however, it's also important that I can teach majors, whether in sight-reading, theory, or musicianship: I love working with the technical side of musicianship and look forward to sharing that. Finally, having completed a master's degree, I'm hoping that my academic work, while teaching, can count towards a possible future course of major study that would give me the credentials I need as a future college teacher.

I'm excited that USC offers the only program of its kind in a major music market; having completed a MM at the Eastman school in a program devoted almost entirely to Jazz, I'm interested in working with musicians who are exploring commercial styles as well. The fact that you have faculty like Pat Kelley and Richard Smith, accomplished in Pop/Jazz, Steve Trovato, recognized as expert in Nashville and Roots styles, and Joe Diorio (whose books I've learned a lot from on my own) means that I'll be exposed to broad influences. Of course, as part of my application, I'm obviously looking for opportunities to teach as an assistant lecturer—the fact that I'll be able to do some work in the department with young guitar majors, not merely teach beginning guitar electives, is really exciting to me as a future college teacher. Finally, Chair Richard Smith has offered the possibility of pressing for a Jazz Guitar DMA, which could be the model program of its kind, and one I would love to be a part of, as we look to expand non-traditional offerings in music schools nationally.

Upon graduation, I see myself as a well-prepared, multi-style guitarist ready to work in as many performing and recording situations as possible. In fact, if possible, I'd also love to build my own program within a college setting, with more credentials in hand. I can then continue to make music, while using the tools and elements of a successful program like USC's to expand the range and number of opportunities to add to the skills and professionalism of young players who, like me, still see Los Angeles as a city of opportunity in all kinds of music.

Here's a second essay by another guy I know, who applied to a small liberal arts school near his home:

Step 1: identify 3-4 things the school uniquely offers that appeal to you. Use these to outline paragraph 3 (whether the essay needs it or not)

Paragraph 3: MY school: Lawrence University

- +open access to conservatory for non-major
- +Top conservatory with LUJE: innovative pieces, modern approach
- +small school environment, comfortable proximity to home
- +Liberal arts, exploration encouraged.

Now write it up: (p.3)

I'm excited that Lawrence offers an open relationship between the conservatory and the college; I would take advantage not only of all the free concerts, but the opportunity to audition for and hopefully play in the Jazz Ensemble, take lessons, and take as many music history and theory classes as possible. The fact that Fred Sturm's ensemble is doing so many innovative and contemporary pieces excites me, as I've been exploring music as a jazz-rock guitarist by some of the artists whose music I heard featured in the band's recent concerts. The fact is, growing up close to Appleton, I've actually already built relationships with people in these programs--I value going to a school where I've attended workshops by your faculty, worked with my guitar teacher (and yours) Dave Sullivan, and see myself as part of a close-knit community. Most importantly, though, as a student with broad academic interests, I look forward to attending a liberal arts school where my exploration will be encouraged and challenged in all my college classes.

Step 2: COPY, then generalize FROM, the bullet points of paragraph 3, to work inductively back to "general qualities of some school, somewhere" that I want.

Paragraph 2: MY "ideal school" *(which just coincidentally happens to look almost*

exactly like YOUR school ;)

- +open access to conservatory for non-majors
- +Top conservatory , modern approach
- +small school environment, comfortable proximity to home,
- +Liberal arts, exploration encouraged.

Now write it up:

I'm looking for a program where any student in any major with a love of music can participate in musical life, including in ensembles and classes--having come from a small town with few

performance opportunities, it's especially important that many performances are featured and available, and that I can push myself to audition for groups where I can perform alongside majors as I consider the role of music as a possible career. I feel like I can do this best in an intimate, small-school environment, where peers work together as part of a performing community, especially when that environment encourages them to explore, experiment, and take risks together without competitiveness or barriers to participation. Of course, it's vital that this musical focus not overshadow challenging and rigorous academic programs: I want to see where my academic interests can take me and need a liberal arts curriculum of deep exposure to great books and a rich general curriculum.

Step 3: thinking of what you'll do upon graduation, show them that you're down-to-Earth with a clear vision for where you're going. Outline this closing paragraph:

Paragraph 4/conclusion: future (*realistic*) goals:

2-3 "down-the-roads"

- find an academic major/field
- develop musically to keep playing Jazz, other?
- possible grad school?

(note: in this example, our applicant really was, I mean is, undecided, so by being honest, we'll turn that weakness into a strength--Curiosity always wins!)

Now write it up:

While I'm not sure where I'll be musically upon graduation, I hope that I'll have identified new directions in music that I may explore, leading my own groups and performing. I'm not ruling out graduate school, though that depends on the subject I discover a real passion for in my time at Lawrence. Like many liberal arts students, I'm honestly not yet sure if another area of study will attract me like music has, but I'm open to finding out, and am sure that if it's waiting for me to find it and pursue it, I'll have a chance to explore it in the next four years and follow that path to wherever it leads me.

Last Step: thinking of everything you just wrote, provide just enough background about what you've DONE already that could clarify a *past* basis for what you want in the future. This will be the opening: it comes first, but gets written last.

WHAT, based on these things I just said I wanted, would SHOW that that's what I'm about? (paragraph 1 gets written last, to MATCH (my theme: the best way to explore is to solve problem and consider that the big idea may be close-to-home.)

Write it up: (liberal arts school--but still playing music)

I've loved music for a long time, but really began serious study when I joined my high school jazz band; I love the challenge as much as the style itself--Jazz guitar is a constant journey, a set of puzzles, a battle of wills at times, but also the way into almost every other style of popular music. It's what's driven me to push myself, largely as a self-taught musician in a small town with no jazz guitar players, but also as a musician who loves to jam or play rock, country, and oldies in local bars since I was 16. I'm also really interested in other subjects, not yet explored in my school: my mom was an English teacher, and I share her love of a good story. I think from my dad I get my interest in political and economic issues---I think my school success has come about because I really haven't found only one area of interest, but really want to find one, and I've learned the most in subjects where challenging controversies or conflicts push people to find more. I've been gratified that I've been good enough to make some opportunities in music, but I know that those successes have come from looking for puzzles to solve.

now, pasting in the remaining 3 paragraphs,

I'm looking for a program where any student in any major with a love of music can participate in musical life, including in ensembles and classes--having come from a small town with few performance opportunities, it's especially important that many performances are featured and available, and that I can push myself to audition for groups where I can perform alongside majors as I consider the role of music as a possible career. I feel like I can do this best in an intimate, small-school environment, where peers work together as part of a performing community, especially when that environment encourages them to explore, experiment, and take risks together without competitiveness or barriers to participation. Of course, it's vital that this musical focus not overshadow challenging and rigorous academic programs: I want to see where my academic interests can take me and need a liberal arts curriculum of deep exposure to great books and a rich general curriculum.

I'm excited that Lawrence offers an open relationship between the conservatory and the college; I would take advantage not only of all the free concerts, but the opportunity to audition for and hopefully play in the Jazz ensemble, take lessons, and take as many music history and theory classes as possible. The fact that Fred Sturm's Ensemble is doing so many innovative and contemporary pieces excites me, as I've been exploring music as a jazz-rock guitarist by some of the artists whose music I heard featured in the band's recent concerts. The fact is, growing up close to Appleton, I've actually already built relationships with people in these programs--I value going to a school where I've attended workshops by your faculty, worked with my guitar teacher (and yours) Dave Sullivan, and see myself as part of a close-knit community. Most importantly, though, as a student with broad academic interests, I look forward to attending a liberal arts school where my exploration will be encouraged and challenged in all my college classes.

While I'm not sure where I'll be musically upon graduation, I hope that I'll have identified new directions in music that I may explore, leading my own groups and performing. I'm not ruling out graduate school, though that depends on the subject I discover a real passion for in my time at Lawrence. Like many liberal arts students, I'm honestly not yet sure if another area of study will attract me like music has, but I'm open to finding out, and am sure that if it's waiting for me to find it and pursue it, I'll have a chance to explore it in the next four years and follow that path to wherever it leads me.

What does it mean to say that this is really a “business” document?

If you add the phrase: “I’m interested in the position of...” = “cover letter”

Tell us about you:	I’ve done...
What do you want?	I’m interested in...
What do you like about us?	I’m excited that you...
Where do you see yourself in 4 years?	I hope to be able to grow by...

Which question is most “lie-proof” and the strongest indicator of who will fit best?

