

Personal Statement Idea Generator

By Jane E. Dabel, PhD

How to Get Started

Before you get started, you need to get organized. You first need to collect some materials, including the list of prompts that you are required to answer, as well as your student resume (or your list of extracurricular activities). In all likelihood, you will only have to write one or two different prompts. If there are numerous different topics, however, there should be a fair amount of overlap between different essays.

Create Timeline of Your Life

Before doing any writing, you should begin with a brainstorming activity. What you're going to do is to create a timeline of your life from birth to the present. You need to do is get a couple of pieces of 8.5" x 11" paper and tape them together lengthwise to make a very long sheet of paper. Draw a line on the far left side and write your birthdate. Draw another line on the other side of the timeline and write "today."

Your first job is to show 25 different significant or interesting events from the past. Basically, what you are doing here is creating an autobiography. You want to focus on events that you consider to be the most memorable or most important.

There are no right or wrong answers for this activity. The goal is to come up with at least 25 different memories over the course of your life. Once you have filled out everything that you can possibly think of on your timeline, it's time to sit down with family members and ask for their input about what might be missing. You should have a pretty full timeline by the end of this activity.

Idea Generator

The next step is to brainstorm a bunch of ideas for your personal statement and get them down in one place. You want to focus on events that you consider to be the most memorable or most important. Begin by reviewing your timeline.

Then write down ideas based on the five following types of events or activities: Trips, Challenges, Fun Events, Important Objects, and Accomplishments. Then think about what you remember most from each activity or event. What experiences can you remember based on the above 5 areas? Write your answers down and see how those can be converted into interesting topics for your personal statement. See the table below for an example of what that might look like.

Event/Activity	Sample Answer	What You Remember Most
Trips that you have taken	New York City San Francisco Mammoth	Tenement Museum Murals at Coit Tower Snowboarding
Challenges you have faced	Broken leg D in Geometry Physical therapy	Couldn't run for months Did tutoring, received a B Recovered enough to run
Fun events	Bay to Breakers race Pumpkin patch Finals for cross country	Running salmon Helped kids get pumpkins Came in 3 rd place
Objects that are important to you	Snowboard Runner's bib Sketch book	Learned with my brother My first half marathon My drawings
Accomplishments that make you proud	Passing Geometry Full recovery from injury Completing half marathon	Hard work with tutor Twice weekly PT Great music in San Diego

Event/Activity	Answer	What You Remember Most
Trips that you have taken		
Challenges you have faced		
Fun events		
Objects that are important to you		
Accomplishments that make you proud		

Once you generate some ideas from the items above, you have plenty of material to work with for your personal statements.