

What Makes a Great Personal Statement?

When I make comments on personal statements such as Common App essays, I refer to these standards to celebrate what's working and also to stretch your skills. Check out the models I sent you to see evidence of these elements in action.

Essay Element	Developing	Successful	Exemplary
<p>Personality -- Do we feel like we know and understand this person? -- Is the person unique? -- Is the person intriguing?</p>	<p>This writer allows some moments of openness and willingness to share unique qualities. The reader still can't hear, see, and imagine the writer's unique personality. Perhaps the writer needs to brainstorm more about what makes them uncommon or quirky or different, no matter however small. The writer needs to take some risks with both ideas and language in order to "pop" off the page.</p>	<p>This writer demonstrates uniqueness and individuality, and is quite interesting in some areas of the essay. There may be lines or moments that fall a bit flat because they sound common or typical or safe, or they just aren't polished yet. The writer may be reluctant to try new ways of describing ideas.</p>	<p>We can see, hear, and connect with this person. We can hear a voice in the sounds of the words, the rhythm, and unique phrasing. An essay reader could advocate for this individual because they share unique, quirky, individual elements. They are unafraid to surprise, to create suspense, to laugh, and/or take other risks. The essay is truly memorable.</p>
<p>Character -- Does this person express meaningful values? -- Is this person vulnerable and honest? -- Is this person still learning?</p>	<p>This writer acknowledges some important values. The writer may need to say more about the personal meaning of the values so the reader truly believes these values matter to the writer. Why not share some more thoughts about the meaning of these values, the why? What other connections can this author make with these values? How can the author convince us that there is true commitment to these values?</p>	<p>The writer states key values and shares openly about flaws and mistakes in some regard. It's believable but not as compelling as it could be. The writer is almost there with making connections to lifelong learning and exploring values. The writer could ask and answer more questions and show more dedication to those values.</p>	<p>Application readers may well want this student to enroll because it's clear the student fully embraces their stated values, living them in clear, demonstrable ways. The writer is unafraid to admit struggles and/or failure. The writer explores questions fully and demonstrates a passion for learning. The writer sees mistakes and flaws as growth opportunities.</p>

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<p>Specificity -- Do we believe this writer because examples are substantive and specific? -- Does the writer prove their claims, interpretations, and opinions?</p>	<p>Gold Coin details appear, showing the writer understands the importance of specificity. The reader can connect with these details. Now the task is to ensure that every paragraph has multiple instances of Gold Coins. The writer should try techniques such as using one of the five senses, quotes, statistics, metaphor or simile, dialogue, or interior monologue to make details leap off the page. The author must prove Blue Sky points.</p>	<p>Several Gold Coin details leap off the page, either via sensory detail, figurative language, statistics, dialogue, quotes, or other strategies. The writer could dig more deeply for Gold Coins or polish some by making them more visual or sensory in another way, or try another strategy. Maybe there is more of a scene to explore more deeply and find new details to render. The author proves some of the Blue Sky points but has not yet proved all.</p>	<p>Every detail is rich, golden, and memorable. Whether it's sensory detail, a rich range of figurative language, quotes, dialogue, statistics, anecdotes, interior monologue, or other strategies, the author "had us from hello," hooking us with highly visual and memorable moviemaking. Whenever the author makes a Blue Sky point, there is detail or evidence to support it.</p>
<p>Insight & Intellect -- Does the writer share interesting claims, interpretations, and opinions? -- Is this person a deep learner with a passion for greater understanding?</p>	<p>This author has begun the process of answering, "So what?" and "Why should I care?" that the reader will be asking. Now the author really needs to commit by making some new connections and opening up their mind even further. How can this writer read more, research more, and discuss more to get to some real depth in this subject? Can we get higher into the Blue Sky and make some more powerful statements?</p>	<p>The essay shows interest in intellectual pursuits, sharing various interpretations, questions, and conclusions. Some are impressive. There may be one or more interesting connections. Still we might not know enough "why." We are still asking, "So what?" This author can deepen Blue Sky statements by reading more, researching more, thinking more, and maybe discussing more on the topic till they step into new territory. What do books, current events, lessons, or research say about the student's area of interest? How can this author dive more deeply into the subject?</p>	<p>We know why we should care about this author's subject. The essay shows a deep intellectual curiosity and/or passion, sharing interpretations, conclusions, connections, and questions that intrigue and impress. The author may make some connections we don't expect. We can see this person joining a university community and studying deeply. It also may be clear that this person has read, studied, or ruminated on the topic, and wants to do so more through references to books, current events, lessons, conversations, concepts, principles, and/or research. We see the world differently through this person's eyes and learn something new.</p>

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<p>Structure & Flow <i>Does the writer move from idea to idea seamlessly, so we're not aware we're reading?</i></p>	<p>The author has made an effort to include Gold Coins and Blue Sky statements in multiple places. Now the author needs to read through the entire piece and make sure the connections are being made for the reader, that there is a flow and good transitions, and that the reader isn't asking questions. Do all Gold Coins have a Blue Sky statement somewhere to match? Where does reader attention fade or slow?</p>	<p>The structure is strong, with good coherence inside most paragraphs, and flowing well between most paragraphs. There are a few statements that don't quite connect and need clarification, and there are awkward moments where we are pulled out of the reading. This author should read this essay aloud and revise some more, and return to the original structure to see how Gold Coins and Blue Sky statements connect. Where might the reader's attention fade?</p>	<p>Whether the writer uses narrative or montage structure or a more formal academic structure, the paragraphs are coherent and the transitions between paragraphs are smooth. We forget we are reading and do not need to loop back in order to understand. Language is working at a level to bring added coherence via strategies such as repetition, rhythm of alternating sentence lengths, and other pacing techniques to keep the reader reading. It's clear the author read this essay aloud and revised multiple times.</p>
<p>Creativity & Uniqueness <i>Does the writing surprise us?</i></p>	<p>There are glimmers of creativity in various details and a moment or two of experimentation with insight, or form, or style, or structure. Voice has yet to emerge. Think more deeply and outside the box. How could you surprise us with creative approaches that show how interesting you are?</p>	<p>There are strong moments of creativity where the writer offers unique details and insight and also experiments in one or more areas: form, style, structure, and/or voice. The storytelling methods render an interesting person but voice could be more creatively developed. How else can you surprise us? How can your approach be uncommon?</p>	<p>Stories, examples, and insights are highly creative. The writer has taken a risk and it pays off. Whether the topic is common or not, it's handled in an uncommon way. There is uniqueness in content, form, style, structure, and/or voice. The storytelling methods render a compelling person we want to follow.</p>
<p>Grammar and Mechanics <i>Is the essay correct?</i></p>	<p>The writer has not read the essay aloud and should remedy comma splices, run-ons, misspellings, missing punctuation, and other mistakes.</p>	<p>The writer has caught most errors and only needs to address an occasional issue.</p>	<p>There are no noticeable grammar or mechanics mistakes. The writer is crafting sentences on a high level.</p>