

Personal Statement Pre-Writing and Revision Strategies

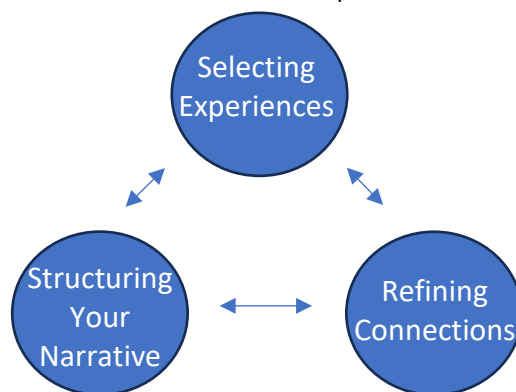
Start Here, Explore Broadly, and Circle Back as Necessary

This packet offers you ways to start brainstorming for and revising your personal statement and builds upon the Writing Studio's all-purpose [Invention \(aka Brainstorming\) handout](https://vanderbilt.edu/writing/resources/handouts/invention/) (vanderbilt.edu/writing/resources/handouts/invention/) and [Revision handout](https://vanderbilt.edu/writing/resources/handouts/revision/) (vanderbilt.edu/writing/resources/handouts/revision/). The activities within this document are divided into three distinct but intertwined phases: selecting experiences, structuring your narrative, and refining connections. Each phase includes activities for those who are pre-writing and those who already have a draft. While it may be helpful to approach the phases as sequential building blocks when starting from scratch, you should expect to move back-and-forth between the phases as you draft your statement in light of new insights and reflections. When drafting a personal statement, it's important to stay flexible and willing to explore new material and new arrangements even late into the process. The most compelling ways to organize our experiences into a coherent narrative arc tend to emerge organically over time as we write and rewrite.

As a general principle, be sure to give yourself permission (and time) to do a lot of brainstorming, writing, and revision as you prepare your statement. Make time to seek feedback from readers, too. At the Writing Studio, we are glad to be among those readers for you, and we are available for both in-person and synchronous online writing consultations. Visit us online to schedule appointments and learn more: vanderbilt.edu/writing

Where to Start: What is Personal Statement, What are the Brainstorming Phases?

Being informed about the program you are applying for and being on target in addressing the prompt and following all direction for a particular application is essential. Personal statements, in particular, tend to focus on storytelling of experiences related to who you are and how these experiences shaped your interests relative to the opportunity for which you are applying. A portrait of yourself. As you begin brainstorming and drafting your personal statement, you'll want to move between the phases below:



Phase 1: Selecting Experiences

In this phase, you will focus on finding your motivation for pursuing the opportunity and reflect on the experiences that underpin your passion.

Phase 2: Structuring Narratives

In phase two, you will discover the story that ties together your experiences and build a cohesive structure.

Phase 3: Refining Connections

In the last phase, you will unpack each experience and explore the connective tissue between each STARR-powered anecdote to reinforce your overall narrative.

Selecting Experiences: Finding Your Motivation, Relevant Experiences

Pre-Writing / Brainstorming

Selecting Experiences Activity 1: What is Your Motivation?

Freewriting and Looping Exercise

Consider setting a timer for 5-10 minutes and try to freewrite without stopping in response to the following question:

- Why are you interested in pursuing this particular opportunity? What drives you to pursue this opportunity that would not be possible through another career?

Consider this activity a tool for discovery; do not expect to produce polished or even necessarily usable prose. After your initial freewrite, you may find it helpful to read back over your text and select a sentence or thought that you (or a reader) identify as worth exploring in more depth. Rewrite that sentence at the top of a blank page and use it as the starting place for a new freewriting session. This recursive freewriting process, known as looping, can be repeated as many times as necessary.

Selecting Experiences Activity 2: Exploring Your Source Material (Experiences etc.)

Listing, Associative Exercise

Remember: Many applicants share motivations and attributes in the abstract. What inevitably sets applicants apart are our concrete, individual life experiences that shaped and were shaped by those motivations and attributes. The following technique based in list-making can help you take time for broad associative exploration of your life experiences and accomplishments as the source material for your personal statement.

Step 1: List, List, List

Set a timer and generate a list of the moments from your life that you could use to create a portrait of yourself. As you list, aim for breadth over depth and quantity over quality. Try to keep item short and avoid lingering to judge an idea's relevance or merit. If helpful, consider moving between the categories of a "listing" grid.

Model "Listing" Grid for Personal Statement Brainstorming

Personal history and background	Intellectual development and education	Moments that sparked relevant interests	Professional or research opportunities	Leadership experiences and opportunities	Relevant personal traits or keywords

Step 2: Explore and Map Out Possible Connections

Review your list and select several to explore further.

- How does each experience connect to the development of your perspective, special interests, abilities, career plans or life goals? Can you identify "keywords" (themes, personal traits, attributes, etc.) that describe each experience's potential to help provide a picture of you as an individual? Which seem most relevant to your interest in and the priorities of the specific opportunity you are seeking.
- Brainstorm a list of other experiences that would share one or more of the most relevant keywords. Begin to look for different ways that themes and connections might provide a thread holding your personal statement together. (Remember that compelling threads can involve conflict, growth, and change.)

Selecting Experiences: Finding Your Motivation, Relevant Experiences

Working from an Existing Draft

Selecting Experiences Activity 3: Are the Most Appropriate Experiences Included?

Charts and Shapes Exercise

If you already have a draft of your personal statement, it can be helpful to revisit the experiences you include in your draft to ensure they are the best fit for your statement goals.

Step 1: Underline Your Experiences

To begin, read through your draft and underline each unique experience (or each part of a larger experience) you mention. For now, it doesn't matter how much detail you provide about each experience in your draft; you may reference it in passing or discuss it at length.

Step 2: Spatially Arrange Your Experiences

At the top of a new page, write down the primary "thesis" of your statement (or, what you would like it to be). What is the overarching message you want your statement to convey? Next, using a short phrase or word to identify each experience, arrange the experiences spatially with a graph, grid, table, chart, or some other method that you feel appropriately highlights the relationship between experiences. If it's easier, you can start by writing down each experience and drawing lines between them to indicate attribute similarity, skill progression, etc.

Step 3: Add Other, New Experiences

Looking closely at your experiences and the relationship between them, add other experiences to your chart and/or shapes graphic from your personal and professional life that you don't currently address but could include in your statement. Get as creative with these additions as you can; nothing is off limits. Once you have added everything that comes to mind, consider if any of these new experiences allow for stronger and/or more interesting connections with your other experiences in relation to your overarching message. Which experiences do you ultimately want to keep (or add) to your draft?

As you explore altering the experiences included in your statement, you may discover that you want to change the narrative of your piece (Phase 2) or that you need to revisit the way you unpack and connect each experience (Phase 3) in service of your evolving narrative. As you continue revise, move freely between the activities in each phase as necessary.

Structuring Your Narrative: Discovering the Story in Your Experiences

Pre-Writing / Brainstorming

Structuring Your Narrative Activity 1: Try on some Narrative Threads

Visual Mapping Exercise

Once you've identified some experiences of interest in Phase 1, this next exercise offers you a way to start exploring storytelling possibilities by placing your experiences into different storytelling buckets.

Step 1: Don't Get Stuck, But Do Get Sticky (Notes)

You will need a pad of sticky notes (aka post-its) for this exercise, although you can also use note cards or any medium that allows you to arrange and rearrange the pieces you are working with. Select 4-5 experiences you might write about and dedicate a sticky note to each (consider including short descriptions as well as relevant keywords). Keep the sticky note pad handy for adding new notes as needed.

Step 2: Try Chronological Order

On a blank piece of paper (or other surface), arrange your sticky notes from earliest to latest. This chronological order offers a solid starting place to evaluate how each piece might relate to the others and form a coherent whole. Chronological order is certainly not the only order you can use (for instance, lots of stories start in the middle of things and circle back), just always remember to offer your reader cues as to when events took place.

Step 3: Which Bucket? Which Order?

For each sticky note consider multiple ways to categorize the role it could play in your personal statement. In each role, how would it affect the notes before and after it in chronological order? Do keywords shared among notes suggest possible narrative threads? Try creating threads by adding and removing notes.

1. **Could it make a good introduction?** Effective introductory materials offer opportunities for a vivid, memorable opening, an episode that you can explore in enough detail to build a reader's sense of investment in you as a person or candidate, but should also be relevant and set up threads to follow.
2. **Might you categorize it as a "formative" moment?** Whether as an introduction or early body paragraph, "formative moments" illustrate early personal development or growth. They might detail early influences or sparks of inspiration, challenges grappled with (and resulting success or setbacks), or a simple moment that in retrospect speaks to the person you have become or provides context for the person you aspire to be as part of the opportunity for which you are applying and after.
3. **Might you categorize it as a "transformative" moment?** While formative moments tend to introduce you and what drives you, we can think of transformative moments as opportunities to show growth and craft a narrative arc: how your earlier direction and commitments were clarified, confirmed, refocused, or redirected. They can be as simple as acquisition of a new skill, a situation that required persistence, or a challenge to see things in a new way. Monumental "transformation" does not need to be the aim, but rather a thoughtful, reflective depiction of growth toward readiness for and fit with the opportunity that will build a reader's investment in you.
4. **Could it make an effective conclusion?** Application essay readers are reading for the person you are *now*, the individual being considered for the opportunity you are applying for, so effective concluding material will likely showcase your maturity and readiness for that experience or depict culminating experience(s) from which to gesture ahead to your broader life goals and aspirations.

Structuring Your Narrative: Discovering the Story in Your Experiences

Working from an Existing Draft

Structuring Your Narrative Activity 2: Evaluating Current Structure

Reverse Outline Exercise

If you already have draft of your personal statement, you can evaluate the strength of your current narrative thread and consider alternative storytelling possibilities by creating what we call a “reverse outline” of your statement. To create a reverse outline, complete the following steps:

- 1) Number each paragraph of your statement.
- 2) On a separate sheet of paper, number each line to reflect the number of paragraphs in your statement.
- 3) Next to each number, write down the main idea of that paragraph. Include the experience(s) you discuss as a part of that idea. *If you are having trouble identifying the main idea of a paragraph, this sometimes indicates that the paragraph contains too many ideas/experiences and could benefit from splitting content into smaller paragraphs.*

You should now have a series of sentences that capture the overall message and structure of your personal statement. Using this reverse outline, ask yourself the following questions

- How are your ideas and experiences currently organized? Are you following a chronological, thematic, or some other organizational structure?
- Would you like to make any changes to the way your statement is currently structured?
- Does each paragraph and experience clearly connect back to your “thesis”?
- Are there any paragraphs that contain more than one idea you would like to split? If so, what ideas, themes, or messages do you want each newly created paragraph to convey?
- Do any paragraphs feel repetitive? If so, consider how you could differentiate the focus or angle of each paragraph to highlight more nuance in your experiences or understanding of the issue(s) at hand.

Once you have addressed these questions to your satisfaction, go back to your draft and begin making edits. Keep in mind that this exercise may reveal that you need to select different experiences for your statement (return to Phase 1 of brainstorming) or work more closely on refining the connections between experiences (Phase 3). Move back and forth between the phases until you feel confident in your statement’s narrative structure.

Refining Connections: Unpacking and Connecting Experiences

Pre-Writing / Brainstorming

Refining Connections Activity 1: Unpacking Experiences

Freewriting

Now that you have identified the experiences you would like to include in your personal statement and have settled on an initial structure for your draft, we recommend spending some time additional time with each experience to ensure you are effectively conveying both your role in the experience and its impact on you. While effective personal statement storytelling cannot be boiled down to a single formula, we do recommend the STARR model as a tool for recounting individual experiences that readers will receive as well-rounded stories.

Situation and/or Task

Action you took

Result(s)

Reflection(s)

Look at each experience you plan to include in your personal statement and engage in a five-minute freewrite focused on including all pieces of the STARR model. As you think through the Action portion of the model, be sure to show (rather than tell) the reader what your individual contribution to the situation/task was using vivid, concrete descriptions that exemplify the attribute you would like to focus on through the anecdote.

Refining Connections Activity 2: Reflect to Connect

To begin fleshing out the connections between a few key experiences that you have begun to write about, we find that many writers benefit from some serious thinking about the final “R” in STARR: Reflection.

A grid like the one below offers one way to brainstorm your way to more reflection. Use the grid’s middle column to jot down the experiences you will write about or have already. Next, take some notes about why you pursued those opportunities (given previous experiences) and what you learned from them.

We find that these “motives” and “reflections” can often be translated into effective transitions between your experiences. Such transitions are an opportunity to help the reader better understand your journey and follow the threads that make it read as a coherent whole.

Model “Reflection” Brainstorming Grid

Why I pursued it (Motive)	Experience (Opportunity or Event)	What I learned (Reflection)

Refining Connections: Unpacking and Connecting Experiences

Working from an Existing Draft

Refining Connections Activity 3: Finding Your STARRs

Anatomy of a Paragraph Exercise

If you are working from an existing draft, read through each experience paragraph and assess whether all elements of the STARR model (**S**ituation/**T**ask, **A**ction, **R**esults/**R**esolution) are effectively present or if you need to say more (or less) about each element. To get started, select different colors to represent each element of model. Then, highlight each sentence of your draft to indicate if it is addressing the ST, A, or RR of your experience. Include content that discusses your motivation for pursuing an experience in the same color used to denote your Reflection.

Once you have created an easy visual of the STARR elements in your draft, determine if all aspects of the STARR model are included for each key experience or if they need to be added. Also consider whether the proportions of attention to each element feels appropriate. In general, you will want to spend the most time talking about the Action and Motivation/Reflection for each experience.

Refining Connections Activity 4: Developing Your STARRs

Unpacking an Idea Exercise

After you identify (or add) STARR elements in your draft, it is time to ensure each part of your experience is conveyed in the most effective way. Take some time to add in more details related to each experience and how it connects with other experiences in the draft. As you write, ask yourself:

- Is the context sufficiently clear? Does the reader know what the experience is and when (in relation to other experiences in the draft) it took place?
- Are you providing adequate detail about what you did? Are you using concrete examples to “show” us rather than “tell” us about the skills and attributes displayed or gained through this experience?
- Are the current skills and attributes the ones you want to highlight, or are there others from this experience that might be a better fit with your overarching narrative?
- Is there a strong sense of what you learned from the experience and how it set the stage for (i.e., motivated) future experiences? (Note: It’s ok if the experience primarily raised new questions for you to explore!)

By taking some time to elaborate on each of your experiences, you will be able to select the most compelling, STARR powered information to include in the final version of your draft. It is also possible, of course, that through this exercise you will uncover new aspects of an experience that will require you to revisit your narrative structure (Phase 2) or even the inclusion of other experiences (Phase 1). Don’t hesitate to continue moving between phases as needed.