

SSSI RESOURCE · ESSAY

The Personal Statement Guide

How South Sudanese students write personal statements that get read, remembered, and rewarded.

Why this guide exists

A personal statement is the only part of your application where you speak directly to the reader. Test scores, transcripts, and recommendation letters describe you. The personal statement is you.

Most rejected statements are not badly written. They are forgettable. They sound like they could have been written by anyone, about anywhere, for any program. This guide is built to keep yours from being one of them.

Everything below assumes you are applying to competitive scholarships and universities from a South Sudanese context — in country, in the diaspora, or from a displacement setting. The advice is adapted to that reality.

What admissions readers are actually looking for

Admissions readers spend an average of six to eight minutes on a complete application. The personal statement gets two to three of those minutes. They are scanning for four things:

- **Clarity of purpose.** Do you know why you want this — beyond prestige or escape?
- **Evidence of thought.** Have you reflected on your experience, or only listed it?
- **Specificity.** Can you describe one moment in concrete, sensory detail?
- **Fit.** Does what you want match what this program actually offers?

If your essay does not deliver all four within 600–800 words, it will not stand out from the 8,000 others on the same desk.

Structure: the anchor-moment essay

1. Open with a specific scene

Drop the reader into one moment. A place. A conversation. A decision. Not 'Ever since I was young...' Not 'In today's world...' Those openings tell the reader you have nothing specific to say.

Example opening: *The morning the IELTS results came back, my mother was selling tomatoes at the Konyo Konyo market in Juba. I read the email on a borrowed phone, walked the two kilometres home, and told her I had passed. She did not understand what that meant. I did not yet either.*

2. Widen the lens

After the scene, step back. What does this moment represent? What pattern in your life does it sit inside? This is where you show the reader how you think, not just what happened.

3. Show the work

Then move into the substantive evidence. Projects you have led. Subjects you have studied seriously. Failures you have learned from. One paragraph, three to four concrete examples, each tied to the through-line you established above.

4. Connect to the program

Name the specific program, the specific course, the specific professor, the specific opportunity that pulled you to apply. Vague 'world-class education' language is the single fastest way to look like you did not do your reading.

5. End with intent, not summary

Do not restate what you said. Project forward. What do you intend to do with this education — in the next five years, in South Sudan, in the field? Keep it specific. Keep it modest. Modesty about scale, conviction about direction, is the right tone.

Voice: how to sound like a real person

South Sudanese students often over-formalize. The reflex to sound 'academic' produces stiff, generic prose. The reflex to sound 'humble' produces vague prose. Both fail.

Three rules that fix most voice problems:

- Read every paragraph aloud. If it does not sound like you would actually speak it, rewrite it.
- Cut every adjective doing emotional work — 'incredibly', 'truly', 'deeply'. They lower trust.
- Replace abstract nouns with verbs. 'My passion for education' is weaker than 'I have spent three years teaching reading at the IDP camp in Mangateen.'

Common mistakes — and how to fix each

Mistake	Why it fails	Fix
Quoting Nelson Mandela / Malala	Every fifth essay does this	Quote someone the reader has not heard from — a
Trauma as the whole story	Reduces you to your hardest moment	Use trauma as context, never as conclusion. Always
Listing achievements	Repeats your CV	Pick one. Go deep. Show what it taught you
Naming the wrong program	Disqualifying	Read the email one more time before you submit

Begging tone	Lowers confidence in the reader	Write as someone they would want to admit, not someone they would want to reject
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Editing process: from draft to submission

Draft 1 (1500 words). Write past the word limit. Get everything out. Do not edit.

Draft 2 (1000 words). Cut every sentence that does not earn its place. Move your strongest paragraph to the top.

Draft 3 (word limit). Hit the limit exactly. Read aloud. Cut filler. Tighten verbs.

External review. Send to two readers: one who knows you well, one who does not. Compare their feedback.

Final pass. Run a spelling check. Read on a phone screen. Check the program name. Submit.

SSSI mentors offer a free first-round review on every personal statement. Submit yours through the Mentorship page at least three weeks before your deadline.

A complete annotated example

Below is the opening of a successful Mastercard Foundation Scholars personal statement, lightly adapted. Notice the four-part structure inside the first 220 words.

The first time I taught a class, I was sixteen and had not yet finished secondary school. The teacher had left to attend a funeral in Bor. The headmaster handed me a chalk and said: 'You know more than they do. Begin.'

I taught for forty minutes. Most of what I said was wrong. But the class listened, and at the end a Grade 7 girl asked me why the angles of a triangle add to 180. I did not have a good answer. I went home, found a maths book, and learned the proof that night so I could explain it the next morning.

That is when I understood what teaching costs and what it gives. It costs your evenings, your certainty, your pride. It gives you a problem you cannot put down. I am applying to the Bachelor of Education at the University of Toronto because I want to keep being given that problem, and because the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program will let me return home with the answers South Sudan's schools need.

Notice: a scene, a widened lens, a concrete claim, and a program-specific reason to apply — in three paragraphs.

Submission checklist

- Word count within the limit
- Program name, course name, university name correct in every paragraph
- Reads aloud naturally

- Two external readers have signed off
- No clichés, no quotations from public figures, no 'in today's world' openings
- PDF exported with embedded fonts (if uploading as file)
- Filename: **FirstName_LastName_PersonalStatement.pdf**