

Crafting an Effective Personal Statement

Introduction

How can you convince an employer, landlord, government agency, or other decisionmaker to give you a fair chance when you have a criminal record?

One of the most powerful strategies is to provide “evidence of rehabilitation,” which means information about any positive changes you have made since your conviction(s). Evidence of rehabilitation can include school transcripts, certificates from job training, proof of employment, letters of recommendation, Certificates of Relief or Good Conduct, and **personal statements**.

Personal statements are letters in which you accept responsibility for your conviction(s) and, more importantly, tell the reader about the positive changes you have made since the time of your conviction(s). They are your opportunity to show that there is more to you and your life than what is on your RAP sheet. In this outline, we will demonstrate how to write an effective and strategic personal statement that you can submit to employers, government agencies, landlords, and for any applications where your criminal record could prevent you from getting a fair chance.¹

This outline will also help you address the eight factors (listed below) that most employers in New York State are required to consider when deciding whether to employ someone with a criminal record.² Many government licensing agencies in New York State are also required to consider these factors when deciding whether to grant an employment license.³

- 1.** New York State’s interest in encouraging the licensing and employment of people with convictions
- 2.** The specific responsibilities that you would have if granted the job or employment license
- 3.** Any relationship your conviction(s) may have to your ability or fitness to complete those responsibilities. For example, an employer is permitted to consider whether a person convicted of identity theft is “fit” for a job where the responsibilities include handling customers’ financial information
- 4.** The amount of time that has passed since the conviction(s)
- 5.** Your age when the convictions(s) occurred
- 6.** The “seriousness” of the conviction(s)
- 7.** Any **evidence of rehabilitation** you provide the employer or licensing agency
- 8.** Whether employing or granting a license to an individual with your conviction(s) creates an unreasonable risk to “property and the safety and welfare of specific individuals or the general public”

¹ While this outline generally uses examples from the employment context, the same principles apply when writing a personal statement for other applications like housing, school, or vocational training. For additional help writing a personal statement or gathering evidence of rehabilitation, people living in New York may call the Legal Action Center at 212-243-1313.

² N.Y. Correct. Law § 753, commonly known as “Article 23-A”.

³ Landlords, schools, vocational programs, and other entities do not have to consider these eight factors when evaluating an application by a person with a criminal record. However, there are other legal protections that may apply. To learn more about your rights as a person with a criminal record, call the Legal Action Center at 212-243-1313 or visit us at lac.org.

What to Include in Your Personal Statement

I. Introduction

- Introduce yourself
 - State the job title you are applying for. For example, “I am writing to you about my application for a security guard position.”
 - Summarize where you are in the application process. For example, “I recently received a conditional job offer.”
- Remind the prospective employer why you are qualified for the position
 - Summarize your job qualifications
 - Describe the work-related qualities, skills, and work ethic that make you a good fit for the job
 - Describe your interest in the specific position (this should be tailored to the specific job description and qualifications)

II. Address the Conviction

The purpose of this section is to tell the employer that you accept responsibility for the conviction(s) on your RAP sheet and to show remorse for any harm that resulted. You may have completely valid grievances with the way you were treated by the criminal legal system. However, your personal statement is not the best place to express those feelings because employers may view that as “making excuses” for your conviction. The goal of your personal statement is to help you get the job.

- Address the facts of the conviction(s) in 1-3 sentences
 - Accept responsibility for the conviction. For example, “In 1993, I was convicted of...”
 - Only address the crime(s) you were actually convicted of:
 - For example, if you were charged with a felony but you pled guilty to or were convicted at trial of a misdemeanor, you ONLY need to address the misdemeanor. Do not talk about the original charges.
 - Do not address any charges that were dismissed, sealed, or expunged, or for which you received a youthful offender adjudication.⁴

⁴ Call the Legal Action Center at 212-243-1313 if you are not sure whether any of your cases ended in dismissal, sealing, expungement, or youthful offender or juvenile offender adjudication

- If the conviction(s)⁵ occurred a long time ago, consider mentioning the date. For example, “The circumstances leading to my conviction occurred more than 16 years ago.”
- You can also mention your age at the time of the conviction(s) to highlight the amount of time that has passed and the fact that you have matured since then. For example, “In October 2012 when I was 22 years old, I was convicted of...”
- Describe any **remorse you feel** for the actions that led to your conviction(s). For example, “I am deeply remorseful that I caused pain and suffering to another human being, my community, and, my family. “
- Explain briefly **how you have changed since the time of the conviction(s), what motivated you to make those changes, and the steps you have taken to get there.** [You will support this with your evidence of rehabilitation, as described in the section below.]
 - What are the experiences, feelings, or reflections that inspired you to seek and achieve positive change? Think about what would help the employer look past your conviction(s) and see the person you are today.
 - Example: “I was motivated to change by the realization that people I love depend on me.”
 - Focus on the changes in your life since the conviction, rather than explaining why you were involved in the offense or how you were unfairly treated by the system.
 - Example: “After my release I moved to a new area so that I would not be around the people I got arrested with.”
 - Example: “I joined a leadership group at my church, where I found new mentors and learned strategies that helped me make positive choices in my life.”
 - Example: "In the time since my conviction, I have grown up a lot. I now have a more mature perspective and insight into my behavior.”

III. Show Evidence of Rehabilitation

*The purpose of this section is to further describe your positive change in more detail. This is your opportunity to show the employer **who you are now and the work you did you to get here.** This is also a chance to show the employer why you are qualified for this job. You can strengthen your demonstration of personal change by attaching other evidence of rehabilitation, such as letters of recommendation.*

⁵ In some cases, several years may have passed between the “offense,” meaning the actions that led to your conviction, and the date you were actually convicted. If the offense was much earlier than the conviction you may have started making positive changes to your life even before your date of conviction.

- Professional/Educational Experiences
 - Previous employment (including length of time in the position, job description, job responsibilities)
 - Education, including job training and vocational certificate programs
 - Volunteer work or internships
 - Highlight anything related to the responsibilities of the job you are applying for
 - Example: For a job that lists “time management” and “strong people skills” as necessary qualifications, someone might write, “For the past three years I have helped organize a summer youth basketball tournament in my neighborhood. This requires time management skills to meet important deadlines and good people skills to do outreach to local community groups that work with young people.”
- Personal Experiences
 - Support and guidance from family, friends, and mentors
 - Involvement in a spiritual or religious community or personal practice
 - Involvement in community groups or hobbies
 - A change in your environment
 - A change in your priorities, for example, that you are now focused on education or family
 - Involvement in counseling or similar programs
 - This is sensitive and private information that is not necessary to disclose in most personal statements. You may choose to disclose in cases where the counseling directly relates to your conviction, for example, if you successfully completed an anger management program after a conviction that involved a conflict with someone. You should weigh the benefit of sharing this information carefully.
 - If you have received treatment for substance abuse disorder, call the Legal Action Center at 212-243-1313 before disclosing that treatment as part of your personal statement or in any application. There are specific laws that protect people with substance use disorder, and you should know your rights.

IV. Conclusion

- In 1-3 sentences, summarize your personal statement. Consider including the following:

- Summarize why you want this job based on the specific job description or employer
 - Summarize the qualities that that make you a good candidate
 - Briefly restate remorse and/or responsibility for conviction
 - Briefly highlight that you have made positive changes
 - Example: “I would love to work at [Company Name] because of the important service you provide to my community. I am deeply remorseful for the mistakes I made in my past and have worked hard to transform my life in the five years since my last conviction.”
- Thank the employer for their consideration
 - Sign the letter (Example – “Sincerely, [your first and last name]”)

If you live in New York State, feel free to call the Legal Action Center if you have any questions about writing your personal statement. With advance notice, a Legal Action Center staff member may be available to review and edit your statement. You can reach us by calling 212-243-1313 Monday-Friday from 9am-5pm. You can also visit us anytime at www.lac.org.

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