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AT THE NATION'S TOP  
LAW, BUSINESS,  
MEDICAL, AND  
GRADUATE SCHOOLS**

# **HOW TO WRITE A WINNING PERSONAL STATEMENT FOR GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL**

**RICHARD J. STELZER**

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**THIRD EDITION**

# **HOW TO WRITE A WINNING PERSONAL STATEMENT FOR GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL**

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**Richard J. Stelzer**

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**HOW TO WRITE  
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## PREFACE

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**O**f all the tasks you face when applying to graduate or professional school—from choosing universities to preparing for and taking standardized tests, from soliciting recommendations to having transcripts sent out—writing the personal statement(s) is among the most formidable. With the keen competition for admission to graduate schools, the personal statement or autobiographical essay often becomes a crucial element of the application package. This book provides a wide array of information and suggestions that should make preparation of your personal statement easier, less intimidating, and more successful.

At the back of this book you will find a set of exclusive, revealing interviews with a group of admissions professionals from more than two dozen of the nation's top-tiered law, business, and medical schools, as well as other selected graduate programs. With candor and clarity, these professionals disclose what they look for in personal statements, describe the mistakes applicants commonly make, and offer advice on how to make your statements as effective as possible. In conjunction with the information, exercises, and advice provided on the following pages, their comments should prove an invaluable resource to you.

Naturally, nothing in this book shall be construed as guaranteeing any applicant admission to any graduate or professional school.

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## **PART I:**

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# **INTRODUCING . . . YOU**





A personal statement or autobiographical essay represents a graduate or professional school's first nonnumerical introduction or exposure to you, to the way you think, and to the way you express yourself. There might be interviews later on (for medical school applicants and some others), but for now, in the beginning of the application process, the personal statement alone must serve as a reflection of your personality and intellect. You must sell yourself through this statement, just as you would attempt to do in a job interview, and preparation and thought are essential.

As hard as it is to write in general, it is even more difficult to write about oneself. So don't be discouraged; as a consultant who has advised many applicants, I can assure you that everyone has problems composing these statements. If you have a friend who cranks one out in two hours flat with no agonizing over what he or she is writing, chances are it's not a statement that will do much to enhance the prospects for admission. Good ones take time. Bad ones can sabotage your chances for success.

The personal statements or essays required of graduate and professional school applicants fall into two major categories. There is the general, comprehensive personal statement, which allows the applicant maximum latitude in terms of what he or she writes. This is the type of statement often prepared for the Personal Comments section of the standard medical school application form. It is also the kind of statement that many law school applicants elect to write.

The second category encompasses essays that are responses to very specific questions, such as those found on business school and other graduate application forms. Here you might have less latitude in terms of the content of your essay(s), but it is still possible and prudent to compose a well-considered and persuasive response that holds the reader's interest.

No matter what type of application form you are dealing with, it is extremely important that you *read each question carefully and make every effort to understand it and respond to it*. Whatever else you choose to discuss in your essay, you must be certain to address the specific question that the application poses. Some applications are more vague

or general in their instructions than others; for these it is often possible to compose almost any sort of essay you wish. In these instances it is almost as if you are participating in the dream interview, in which you both ask and answer the questions. You have virtually total control, and you also have a remarkable opportunity that you can either maximize or squander—the choice is yours.

It is crucial to understand that even graduate schools offering the same degree often have very different requirements with respect to the personal statement(s). For example, there *are* some law schools that expect essays to revolve around the issue of why you wish to attend law school (or become a lawyer). Many law schools, however, very deliberately avoid asking that question because they are bored with the generally homogeneous responses it tends to provoke, or simply believe another question (or type of statement) provides them with a far more interesting and revealing look at their applicants. For the latter law schools, the applicant's motivation for studying law becomes almost a peripheral issue.

### Understand and Explain Yourself

The most surprising—and damaging—error that many would-be law students, medical school candidates, and other applicants make is failing to take a very thorough, probing, and *analytical* look at themselves and their objectives. Admissions committee members are looking for interesting, insightful, revealing, and nongeneric essays that suggest you have successfully gone through a process of careful reflection and self-examination.

### Set Yourself Apart

By “nongeneric” I mean a personal statement that only *you* could have written, one that does not closely resemble what all other applicants are likely writing. You come up with this type of statement by being *personal* and *analytical*. You could achieve the former by including information rarely shared with others and the latter by assessing your life more critically than usual. In any event, a personal and analytical approach is key to success in this endeavor.

## AN IMPORTANT EXERCISE

In order to begin writing your personal statement—your story—you'll need the answers to some basic questions. Pretend you have five minutes to speak with someone from an admissions committee. This person asks, "What's most important for us to know about you?" You must make a case for yourself and hold the listener's interest. What would you say? Figuring that out, determining what you would say, is a challenge that is critical to your success in preparing an effective statement. Answering the following questions will facilitate this task, but be patient with yourself—this is a difficult exercise.

### Questions to Ask Yourself

- What's special, unique, distinctive, or impressive about you or your life story? What details of your life (personal or family problems/history, any genuinely notable accomplishments, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you originally become interested in this field and what have you since learned about it—and about yourself—that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- *How* have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If work experiences have consumed significant periods of time during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has the work contributed to your personal growth?
- What are your career goals?

## **How to Write a Winning Personal Statement**

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- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades and mediocre LSAT scores, for example, or a distinct improvement in your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (e.g., economic, familial, physical) in your life?
- What personal characteristics (integrity, compassion, persistence, for example) do you possess that would enhance your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (leadership, communicative, analytical, for example) do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field—than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

It won't be easy to answer all of these questions, but this is an exercise that will have great practical benefit in readying you to write an outstanding personal statement.

Probably at least part of the answer to the question "What's most important for the admissions committee to know about you?" will be contained in the first paragraph of your essay. But one thing is certain: Once you complete your essay, you will know exactly what you would say in that hypothetical meeting with the admissions committee member. If you've written the essay in the correct way, you will have thought about yourself, your experiences, and your goals and formulated an interesting and persuasive presentation of your story.

### **TELL A STORY**

The personal statement is (in many cases) just that: a sort of story. By that I *don't* mean that you should fabricate or invent *anything*; be



truthful and stick to the facts. What you should do, however, is think in terms of telling a story. If your statement is fresh, lively, different—not to mention articulate—you’ll be putting yourself way ahead of the pack. Why? Because by distinguishing yourself through your story—by setting yourself apart from other applicants—you’ll make yourself *memorable*. If the admissions committee remembers you because what you wrote was *catchy* (without being inappropriate), you have an obvious advantage; much of what is submitted to the committees is distressingly homogeneous and eminently forgettable, if not sleep-inducing.

It never hurts if the story you tell has drama. Some people have life stories that are inherently dramatic. For example, here in the United States there are many applicants who have come from other countries, often settling in a new homeland with no money, connec-

**One of the worst things you can do with  
your personal statement is to bore the  
admissions committee, yet that is exactly  
what most applicants do.**

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tions, or knowledge of the language or culture. Such circumstances, which obviously apply only to a minority of applicants, constitute dramatic obstacles that the applicant has had to overcome to reach his or her present position. But you do not have to be foreign-born to have experienced some sort of challenge or difficulty that could be relevant, absorbing, and—if properly presented—memorably dramatic. (The latitude you have in composing your essay obviously depends on the question asked.)

**Find an Angle**

If you’re like most people, however, your life story might well lack significant drama, so figuring out a way to make it interesting becomes the big challenge. Finding an angle or “hook” is vital. For example, a law school applicant with ordinary grades but outstanding credits in

other areas might choose to present herself as follows, emphasizing exceptional athletic prowess and relevant work experience in order to distinguish herself: “As a former college tennis star, now playing on the women’s professional circuit, I am in a position that many athletes would covet. If I want, I can earn a living in pro sports. For most, this would be a dream come true. In my own case, however, I have decided—after working as a paralegal in a law firm—that I can make a more significant mark as an attorney, winning my battles not on tennis courts but in courts of law.” This would provide an offbeat and memorable introduction to such an applicant’s story.

### **Concentrate on Your Opening Paragraph**

Keep in mind when composing your statement that the lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab the reader’s attention—or lose it. Once you figure out this first paragraph, the remainder of the essay should be less problematic because you will have a framework for what you’re going to say. If there’s drama to your statement, it will be introduced in the opening paragraph so that the reader is eager to continue. If you’re telling some sort of story, you’ll use this first paragraph to introduce the elements most relevant to that story—and the ones that will hold greatest interest for the reader.

### **Tell Who You Are**

Beyond the first paragraph or two, there might be an elaboration on material introduced earlier, or simply further distinguishing information relating to your background and experiences. The committee should be getting a sense of who you are, what makes you tick, and how you are different from other applicants. They should be interested in you by now, eager to hear more, impressed that what you’re saying to them—the story you’re relating—is not simply what they’ve read a thousand times before.

Later in your personal statement you might want to detail some of your interest in or exposure to your particular field. You might say something to suggest to the committee that you have a realistic perception of what this field or profession entails. Refer to experiences

(work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other sources of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it.

Sometimes a personal statement can be perfectly well written in terms of language and grammar, but disastrous in lacking punch or impact and in being totally off the mark concerning what it chooses to present about the applicant. Remember, what's most important about your personal statement is *what you say* and *how you say it*! Be *selective* about what you tell the admissions committee. Often you are specifically limited to a certain number of pages (two double-spaced typed pages—or just over—should suffice for most applicants, unless multiple questions require more space), so it is necessary to pick and choose in relating your story. What you choose to say in your statement is, again, very much a reflection of *you* because it shows the committees what your priorities are, what you consider to be important. For this reason, the personal statement is often an indication, too, of your *judgment*, so be careful and give a great deal of thought to what you write. Much thinking—probably over a period of *weeks*—should, ideally, precede the writing. Think about yourself, your background, experiences, and abilities—as well as what you know about the profession—and develop a strategy.

### **Review Your Personal History**

Applicants preparing personal statements very often fail to remember or include facts (experiences, events, achievements) that are extremely relevant, either to their career choice and application or in terms of explaining what makes them tick. One law applicant almost forgot that he had spent a summer working for an assistant district attorney—the most potent, relevant, and interesting weapon in his arsenal! It sounds unbelievable, but this occurs all the time. Another law school applicant almost forgot to tell the admissions committees of his experience as chief defense witness in a criminal trial. My suggestion: *Review your life very carefully* (get help from family or friends if necessary) for facets or experiences that reveal an unusual dimension, relate to your profes-

sional goals, or could serve as evidence of your suitability for a certain career (the Preparatory Questionnaire at the back of this book will be very helpful to you).

### What Not to Include

There are certain things that normally are best left out of personal statements. In general, references to experiences or accomplishments during your high school years or earlier are not a good idea. There are exceptions, I am sure (if there was an extraordinary achievement or traumatic event that had a significant impact on your development or career plans, go with it), but as a rule, introducing material from this period of your life can make your statement seem sophomoric, at a time when you *should* want to come across as a mature young adult (or as even more sophisticated if years have intervened since your undergraduate work).

Don't mention subjects that are potentially controversial; it is impossible for you to know the biases of members of various admissions committees. Religion and politics normally don't belong in these statements, although, again, there may be exceptions (an applicant who has held an important office on campus or in the community would likely want to include this fact). Personal political views usually are not appropriate for personal statements. Any views that might be interpreted as strange or highly unconventional should also be omitted because you want to avoid the possibility of offending any of the individuals in whose hands the fate of your graduate school application rests.

Sometimes there will be things you want to mention because you are proud of them, perhaps justly so. At the same time, though, there are achievements and experiences that do not belong in your statement, not because you're hiding anything but because you're being *selective* about what you write. Don't pull something out of left field—something that doesn't fit into the story you're telling or the case you're trying to build—just to stroke your own ego. Be smarter than that. Again, *be selective*!