

## **Writing the Personal Statement**

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An excellent source of help is Richard Stelzer's **How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School** (Princeton, NJ: Peterson's Guides, 1989). \$9.95

The book has guidelines for writing, examples of successful statements, and advice from admissions officers. This handout summarizes Stelzer's guidelines and contains a few of the examples he includes of statements and admissions officers' advice.

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### **The personal statement, your opportunity to sell yourself in the application process, generally falls into one of two categories:**

#### **1. The general, comprehensive personal statement**

This allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write and is the type of statement often prepared for standard medical or law school application forms.

#### **2. The response to very specific questions**

Often, business and graduate school applications ask specific questions, and your statement should respond specifically to the question being asked. Some business school applications favor multiple essays, typically asking for responses to three or more questions.

### **Questions to ask yourself before you write:**

- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, 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 become interested in this field and what have you 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 you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) 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?

## **General advice**

### **Answer the questions that are asked**

- If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar.
- Don't be tempted to use the same statement for all applications. It is important to answer each question being asked, and if slightly different answers are needed, you should write separate statements. In every case, be sure your answer fits the question being asked.

### **Tell a story**

- Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do is to bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you'll be putting yourself ahead of the pack. If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable.

### **Be specific**

- Don't, for example, state that you would make an excellent doctor unless you can back it up with specific reasons. Your desire to become a lawyer, engineer, or whatever should be logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.

### **Find an angle**

- If you're like most people, your life story lacks drama, so figuring out a way to make it interesting becomes the big challenge. Finding an angle or a "hook" is vital.

### **Concentrate on your opening paragraph**

- The lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab the reader's attention or lose it. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.

### **Tell what you know**

- The middle section of your essay might detail your interest and experience in your particular field, as well as some of your knowledge of the field. Too many people graduate with little or no knowledge of the nuts and bolts of the profession or field they hope to enter. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field and use the language professionals use in conveying this information. Refer to experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other source of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it. Since you will have to select what you include in your statement, the choices you make are often an indication of your judgment.

**Don't include some subjects**

- There are certain things best left out of personal statements. For example, references to experiences or accomplishments in high school or earlier are generally not a good idea. Don't mention potentially controversial subjects (for example, controversial religious or political issues).

**Do some research, if needed**

- If a school wants to know why you're applying to it rather than another school, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. If the school setting would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention.

**Write well and correctly**

- Be meticulous. Type and proofread your essay very carefully. Many admissions officers say that good written skills and command of correct use of language are important to them as they read these statements. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Adhere to stated word limits.

**Avoid clichés**

- A medical school applicant who writes that he is good at science and wants to help other people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from often-repeated or tired statements.

## **Some examples of successful statements**

### **Statement #1**

My interest in science dates back to my years in high school, where I excelled in physics, chemistry, and math. When I was a senior, I took a first-year calculus course at a local college (such an advanced-level class was not available in high school) and earned an A. It seemed only logical that I pursue a career in electrical engineering.

When I began my undergraduate career, I had the opportunity to be exposed to the full range of engineering courses, all of which tended to reinforce and solidify my intense interest in engineering. I've also had the opportunity to study a number of subjects in the humanities and they have been both enjoyable and enlightening, providing me with a new and different perspective on the world in which we live.

In the realm of engineering, I have developed a special interest in the field of laser technology and have even been taking a graduate course in quantum electronics. Among the 25 or so students in the course, I am the sole undergraduate. Another particular interest of mine is electromagnetics, and last summer, when I was a technical assistant at a world-famous local lab, I learned about its many practical applications, especially in relation to microstrip and antenna design. Management at this lab was sufficiently impressed with my work to ask that I return when I graduate. Of course, my plans following completion of my current studies are to move directly into graduate work toward my master's in science. After I earn my master's degree, I intend to start work on my Ph.D. in electrical engineering. Later I would like to work in the area of research and development for private industry. It is in R & D that I believe I can make the greatest contribution, utilizing my theoretical background and creativity as a scientist.

I am highly aware of the superb reputation of your school, and my conversations with several of your alumni have served to deepen my interest in attending. I know that, in addition to your excellent faculty, your computer facilities are among the best in the state. I hope you will give me the privilege of continuing my studies at your fine institution.

(Stelzer pp. 38-39)

### **Statement #2**

Having majored in literary studies (world literature) as an undergraduate, I would now like to concentrate on English and American literature.

I am especially interested in nineteenth-century literature, women's literature, Anglo-Saxon poetry, and folklore and folk literature. My personal literary projects have involved some combination of these subjects. For the oral section of my comprehensive exams, I specialized in nineteenth century novels by and about women. The relationship between "high" and folk literature became the subject for my honors essay, which examined Toni Morrison's use of classical, biblical, African, and Afro-American folk tradition in her novel. I plan to work further on this essay, treating Morrison's other novels and perhaps preparing a paper suitable for publication.

In my studies toward a doctoral degree, I hope to examine more closely the relationship between high and folk literature. My junior year and private studies of Anglo-Saxon language and literature have caused me to consider the question of where the divisions

between folklore, folk literature, and high literature lie. Should I attend your school, I would like to resume my studies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with special attention to its folk elements.

Writing poetry also figures prominently in my academic and professional goals. I have just begun submitting to the smaller journals with some success and am gradually building a working manuscript for a collection. The dominant theme of this collection relies on poems that draw from classical, biblical, and folk traditions, as well as everyday experience, in order to celebrate the process of giving and taking life, whether literal or figurative. My poetry draws from and influences my academic studies. Much of what I read and study finds a place in my creative work as subject. At the same time, I study the art of literature by taking part in the creative process, experimenting with the tools used by other authors in the past.

In terms of a career, I see myself teaching literature, writing criticism, and going into editing or publishing poetry. Doctoral studies would be valuable to me in several ways. First, your teaching assistant ship program would provide me with the practical teaching experience I am eager to acquire. Further, earning a Ph.D. in English and American literature would advance my other two career goals by adding to my skills, both critical and creative, in working with language. Ultimately, however, I see the Ph.D. as an end in itself, as well as a professional stepping stone; I enjoy studying literature for its own sake and would like to continue my studies on the level demanded by the Ph.D. program.

(Stelzer pp. 40-41)

## **Some advice regarding personal statements from admissions representatives:**

**Lee Cunningham**

**Director of Admissions and Aid**

**The University of Chicago Graduate School of Business**

The mistake people make most often is not to look at what the questions are asking. Some people prepare generic statements because they're applying to more than one school and it's a lot of work to do a personal essay for each school. On the other hand, generic statements detract from the applicant when we realize that we're one of six schools and the applicant is saying the same thing to each and every school despite the fact that there are critical differences between the kinds of schools they may be applying to. They don't take the time. They underestimate the kind of attentions that is paid to these essays. Take a look at what the essay asks and deal with those issues articulately and honestly.

At least 2, and sometimes 3, people read each essay. I read them to make the final decision. Our process works so that each person who reads the application does a written evaluation of what he or she has read and the written evaluations are not seen by the other reader.

(adapted from Stelzer, p. 49)

**Steven DeKrey**

**Director of Admissions and Financial Aid**

**J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management (Northwestern University)**

We're looking for a well-written, detailed essay that responds directly to the question. The questions are about extracurricular activities, motivation, challenges, commitment to the school that kind of thing. We see a variety and that's fine. Our approach is very individualized. The way the applicant devises the answer, determines the length, develops the response, is all part of the answer. The level of effort applicants put into essays varies considerably, which sends messages to the admissions committee as well. Over-involved, elaborate essays send one message, while very brief and superficial essays send another message.

Trying to second-guess what we are looking for is a common mistake--which we can sense.

We can tell when applicants use answers to other schools' questions for our essays; we're sensitive to this. Poorly written essays are a bad reflection on the applicant.

Don't over-elaborate; we're reading a lot of these kinds of essays. Also, don't be too brief or superficial. We like to have major ideas presented well.

( adapted from Stelzer, p. 55)

**Michael D. Rappaport**

**Assistant Dean of Admissions**

**UCLA School of Law**

Applicants should take the time to look at what the law school is asking them to write about. At UCLA, we say, "we know you have lots of extracurricular activities--we want to know how you differ, what makes you unique? What can you bring to the first year class that's going to make you distinctive from the other 99 people who are already there?" The fact that you were active in your fraternity or sorority is really not going to do it. What we're looking for is somebody who, in their personal statement, stands out as being so unusual, so diverse, that they're extremely attractive as a law student for the first-year class. Maybe what's going to make them distinctive is the fact they spent six months living in a log cabin in Alaska. You try to give the law school some justification for admitting you. With a lot of people, there's nothing that's going to make them distinctive. If that's the case, they've got to recognize that, indeed, the essay is not going to make that much difference here at UCLA.

We're also asking if there's any reason their LSAT or grades are not predictive. You'd be amazed at the number of people who completely ignore this--they don't take advantage of the opportunity.

Most law schools operate fairly similarly. There's a certain group of applicants whose grades and LSAT scores are so high that the presumption is that the applicants are going to be admitted unless they do something terribly stupid to keep themselves out. I have seen applicants whose personal statement has done that, but it's extremely rare. At the other extreme is another group of applicants who, no matter what they write, are not going to get in.

The applicant has to realize, first of all, where he or she stands. If you have a straight-A grade point average and a perfect LSAT score, you don't have to spend a lot of time worrying about your personal statement. On the other hand, if you know you're in the borderline area, that's where the personal statement becomes very, very important.

The applicant should take the time to read the application to see what the schools are asking for. Sometimes the school will ask for a general description of why you want to go to law school, or why they should admit you, something of that nature. In such case you can be fairly sure that the school is just interested in the essay to see how well you write. So what you say isn't as important as how you say it. On the other hand, some schools are more specific--UCLA being a very good example of that.

Make sure the essay is grammatically and technically correct and well written. Avoid sloppy essays, coffee stained essays, or ones that are handwritten so you can't read them. You'd be amazed at what we get!

(Stelzer, pp. 70-71)

**Beth O'Neil**  
**Director of Admissions and Financial Aid**  
**University of California at Berkeley School of Law (Boalt Hall)**

We're trying to gauge the potential for a student's success in law school, and we determine that, principally, on the basis of what the student has done in the past. The personal statement carries the responsibility of presenting the student's life experiences.

Applicants make a mistake by doing a lot of speculation about what they're going to do in the future rather than telling us about what they've done in the past. It is our job to speculate, and we are experienced at that.

Applicants also tend to state and not evaluate. They give a recitation of their experience but no evaluation of what effect that particular experience had on them, no assessment of what certain experiences or honors meant.

They also fail to explain errors or weaknesses in their background. Even though we might wish to admit a student, sometimes we can't in view of a weakness that they haven't made any effort to explain. For example, perhaps they haven't told us that they were ill on the day that they took the LSAT or had an automobile accident on the way. Such things are legitimate reasons for poor performance. I mean, we understand that life is tough sometimes. We need to know what happened, for example, to cause a sudden drop in the GPA.

Another mistake is that everyone tries to make himself or herself the perfect law school applicant who, of course, does not exist and is not nearly as interesting as a real human being.

Between 1 and 5 people read each application.

(Stelzer, p. 72)

**Dr. Daniel R. Alonso**  
**Associate Dean for Admissions**  
**Cornell University Medical College**

We look for some originality because nine out of ten essays leave you with a big yawn. "I like science, I like to help people and that's why I want to be a doctor." The common, uninteresting, and unoriginal statement is one that recounts the applicant's academic pursuits and basically repeats what is elsewhere in the application. You look for something different, something that will pique your interest and provide me some very unique insight that will make you pay some attention to this person who is among so many other qualified applicants. If you're screening 5,500 applications over a four- or six-month period, you want to see something that's really interesting.

I would simply say: Do it yourself, be careful, edit it, go through as many drafts as necessary. And more important than anything: be yourself. really show your personality. Tell us why you are unique, why we should admit you. The premise is that 9 out of 10 people who apply to medical school are very qualified. Don't under any circumstances insert handwritten work or an unfinished piece of writing. Do a professional job. I would consider it a mistake to attempt to cram in too much information, too many words. Use the space as judiciously as possible. Don't submit additional pages or use only 1/20th of the space provided.

(Stelzer, p.81)

**John Herweg**  
**Chairman, Committee on Admissions**  
**Washington University School of Medicine**

We are looking for a clear statement that indicates that the applicant can use the English language in a meaningful and effective fashion. We frankly look at spelling as well as typing (for errors both in grammar and composition). Most applicants use the statement to indicate their motivation for medicine, the duration of that motivation, extracurricular activities, and work experience. So those are some of the general things we are looking for in the Personal Comments section.

We also want applicants to personalize the statement, to tell us something about themselves that they think is worthy of sharing with us, something that makes them unique, different, and the type of medical student and future physician that we're all looking for. What they have done in working with individuals--whether it's serving as a checker or bagger at a grocery store or working with handicapped individuals or tutoring inner city kids--that shows they can relate to people and have they done it in an effective fashion? What the applicant should do in all respects is to depict why he or she is a unique individual and should be sought after. Of course, if they start every sentence on a whole page with "I," it gets to be a little bit too much.

(Stelzer, p. 82)

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*This information was adapted from a web page located at  
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