

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

**THIRD EDITION**

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**RICHARD J. STELZER**

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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.

**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

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

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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.