

The 5 Steps to Writing a Personal Statement

Writing the personal statement can be one of the most challenging tasks among those required for graduate school admission. This task requires you to reflect upon your life and determine the experiences leading to your desire for further study in your chosen field.

Step 1:

- What is special, unique, distinctive, or impressive about you or your life?
- When did you originally become interested in this field of study?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record you should explain?
- Have you overcome any unusual obstacles?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

Step 2:

Do you notice a repeated positive theme in your answers? If not, you might ask a trustworthy reader to peruse your answers and offer thematic suggestions. Keep in mind that the format for your personal statement will likely be that of a story and you will not only want to catch but also maintain reader interest.

Step 3:

In Donald Asher's 1991 edition of *Graduate Admissions Essays - What Works, What Doesn't, and Why* he cautions writers against entering the following Essay Hall of Shame: Errors and sloppiness, misspellings, even an occasional handwritten essay. You have to wonder how they made the grades on transcripts.

- Spelling errors, poor English.
- Anything that starts out, "I've always wanted to be a _____."
- We ask for dates on activities. It's a red flag if all the activities are brand new.
- A whole essay on deep personal problems or excuses for past performance. It's amazing how common that is. The essay should be upbeat, convincing, and persuasive.
- Too long.
- It shows no discipline.
- Don't tell me what _____ is. I know what my own discipline is! What can they be thinking? Tell me what _____ means to you.

Richard J. Stelzer's *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School, 3rd Edition*, published by Peterson's, 1997.

Stelzer recommends that you make sure the admissions committee has a good sense of "who you are, what makes you tick, and how different you are from other applicants....Later... you might 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.

Step 4:

Make sure you have avoided the inclusion of the references to high school accomplishments and potentially controversial subjects. The most important concern is that you are honest. Generally, keep in mind that the writing, what you say and how you say it, is the next most important concern. If your school or department asked a question in their requirements of the personal statement, be sure you answer that question within the word limits.

Step 5:

Stelzer suggests that you ask the reader to answer the following questions.

1. Did my opening paragraph capture your attention?
2. Did you find the statement as a whole to be interesting?
3. Did you find it to be well written?
4. Did it seem positive, upbeat?
5. Did it sound like me?
6. Do you regard it as an honest and forthright presentation of who I am?
7. Did it seem to answer the question(s)?
8. Can you think of anything relevant that I might have inadvertently omitted?
9. Is there material within the statement that seems inappropriate?
10. Did you gain any insight about me from reading this?
11. Did you notice any typos or other errors?
12. Do you think the statement has in any way distinguished me from other applications?
13. Do you think my application to _____ is logical?

If there is a writing center in the school you currently attend, request an appointment for someone there to look over your essay and offer advice for revisions.