

## Using the DAPPS Formula for Student Goal Setting

Help students write effective goals that will provide them with motivation and an increased likelihood of completion. Explain to students that, to be truly motivating, a goal needs five qualities. You can remember them by applying the DAPPS rule, developed by Skip Downing (2011). “DAPPS” is an acronym, a memory device in which each letter of the word stands for one of five qualities: Dated, Achievable, Personal, Positive, and Specific.

**Dated.** Motivating goals have specific deadlines. A short-term goal usually has a deadline within a few months. A long-term goal generally has a deadline as far in the future as 1 year, 5 years, even 10 years (like the goal you have for your most advanced academic degree). As your target deadline approaches, your motivation typically increases. This positive energy helps you finish strong. If you don’t meet your deadline, you have an opportunity to examine what went wrong and create a new plan. Without a deadline, you might stretch the pursuit of a goal over your whole life, never reaching it.

**Achievable.** Motivating goals are challenging but realistic. It’s unrealistic to say you’ll complete a marathon next week if your idea of a monster workout has been opening and closing the refrigerator. Still, if you’re going to err, err on the side of optimism. When you set goals at the outer reaches of your present ability, stretching to reach them causes you to grow. Listen to other people’s advice, but trust yourself to know what is achievable for you. Apply this guideline: “Is achieving this goal at least 50% believable to me?” If so and you *really* value it, go for it!

**Personal.** Motivating goals are *your* goals, not someone else’s. You don’t want to be lying on your deathbed some day and realize you have lived someone else’s life. Trust that you know better than anyone else what *you* desire.

**Positive.** Motivating goals focus your energy on what you *do* want rather than on what you *don’t* want. So translate negative goals into positive goals. For example, a negative goal to not fail a class becomes a positive goal to earn a grade of B or better. I recall a race car driver explaining how he miraculously kept his spinning car from smashing into the concrete racetrack wall: “I kept my eye on the track, not the wall.” Likewise, focus your thoughts and actions on where you *do* want to go rather than where you *don’t* want to go, and you, too, will stay on course.

**Specific.** Motivating goals state outcomes in specific, measurable terms. It’s not enough to say, “My goal is to do better this semester” or “My goal is to work harder at my job.” How will you know if you’ve achieved these goals? What specific, measurable evidence will you have? Revised, these goals become, “I will complete every college assignment this semester to the best of my ability” and “I will volunteer for all offerings of overtime at work.” Being specific keeps you from fooling yourself into believing you’ve achieved a goal when, in fact, you haven’t. It also helps you make choices that create positive results.