

Writing Personal Statements and Graduate/Professional School Essays

INTRODUCTION

Writing a personal statement is often the most difficult part of the graduate/professional school application process. However, an essay or “personal statement” should always be submitted with your application, even if the school says it is optional. If your qualifications make you a borderline student at a school that makes a point of considering subjective factors in its admission decisions, then your personal statement could make a difference between acceptance and rejection.

Writing requirements vary widely. Some programs request only 1 or 2 paragraphs about why you want to pursue graduate study, while others require numerous specific essays. Since personal statements can reveal your character more clearly than other application materials, they provide evidence that you bring something distinctive to the field such as unusual ability, background traits, experience, or a unique way of looking at the world.

WHAT TO WRITE

Before writing anything, stop and consider what a reader might be looking for; the general directions or other parts of the application may give you some indication. A number of things may be evaluated, including:

- Expectations with regard to the program and career opportunities
- Writing ability
- Major area of interest
- Educational background
- Immediate and long-term goals
- Reasons for pursuing a graduate/professional degree in a particular field and at a particular institution
- Maturity
- Personal uniqueness - what you would add to the diversity of the entering class

Some schools require specific essays, while others provide no direction at all. There are both advantages and disadvantages to vagueness. Since no specific topic is required, one can write about whatever will do the most good. The drawback of not having a precise topic is that you’ll have to choose your own topic. This choice will probably be difficult to make.

HERE ARE A FEW THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND!

Write about Yourself. Schools want to know about you, your talents and evidence that you will succeed academically and professionally. Usually this would include some personal history; however, unless an institution specifically requests autobiographical information, you do not have to supply any. Even if you write an autobiographical piece, it does not have to be arranged chronologically.

Be Specific. Write about events and activities. Often the best essay topic is a description of some incident or activity which led you to your chosen field. Also, if you mention an attribute about yourself (ex. persistence or leadership ability) be sure to give one or more compelling examples.

Tell a Story. Stories can keep attention of a tired reader.

Emphasize Your Uniqueness. An essay about a problem you solved or an obstacle you overcame is always appropriate. You could also find an interesting way to write about a feature of your personality or what you have learned about yourself and/or your field. Be assertive but not boastful by highlighting your positives in a context that goes beyond just yourself.

Don’t Choose a Topic that Makes You Seem Immature or of Questionable Character.

Avoid Talking in the Abstract. This can sound like a personal ad or make you seem distant.

Avoid Negatives. A positive, attractive personality is hard to exhibit while dwelling on negatives. Focus on positives. Talk about what you learned, not why your grades were low. Keep the reader's attention on what is attractive about you and avoid reminding him or her that you are not the perfect candidate.

Avoid clichés. "I want to help people." "The human body fascinates me." "This career would be rewarding and challenging."

Ultimately, an essay or personal statement for an application should be a clear, succinct statement showing that you have a definite sense of what you want to do and enthusiasm for the field of study you have chosen. Your essay should reflect the clarity, focus, and depth of your thinking.

Five Standard Topics for Personal Statements:

- Motivation for your career
- Influence of extracurricular activities
- Influence of family and friends
- Long term goals
- Personal philosophy

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER BEFORE STARTING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT:

Exploration of Characteristics of a Medical Professional

- What are the qualities necessary to be successful as a medical student and a medical professional?
- What work, volunteer, and life experiences have you had that show you possess those qualities?

Exploration of Personal Characteristics

- What are two things about you that make you different from anyone else you know?
- What are some things you like to do? Why do you like to do them?
- What do you feel is unique, distinctive, or impressive about your life story?

Exploration of Career Decision

- Why did you choose medicine as a career? Why do you want to be a doctor as opposed to a teacher, counselor, or researcher?
- What are your future goals? Why?
- What is your first recollection about doctors and the medical field?
- Who do you consider as your role model? What do you like, respect, and admire about that person?

Exploration of Influential Experiences

- What event most influenced your life? How?
- What were some of the biggest challenges in your life? How did you handle them?
- What did you learn from your work, volunteer, or life experiences?
- Have you matured as a result of these experiences?
- How have you matured as a result of these experiences?
- If you had a leadership role, how did you contribute to getting the job done?
- What is the most memorable experience you've had in a volunteer capacity?
- How have each of these influences and experiences prepared you to be a successful medical student and medical professional?

HOW TO WRITE

You've done this before. Writing for graduate/professional school is no different than writing anything else, except that it may count more. Writing a clear and persuasive essay takes time. You'll need to organize and write several drafts, polish the grammar and rhetoric, and have the essay read and critiqued by others. The chief reason application essays are unconvincing is that insufficient time is taken with them. When beginning, write down all the information as fully as possible, even if there's repetition. You may outline the points you want to cover and then expand on them, or you can simply put your ideas down on paper as they come to you. Making an outline will likely lead to an organized essay, whereas writing spontaneously may yield a more inspired piece. Don't worry if the initial drafts are too long, the information should be pared down and refined. Now you are ready to organize the essay. **CATCH THE ATTENTION OF A BORED AND EXHAUSTED ADMISSIONS OFFICIAL BY WRITING A FORCEFUL FIRST SENTENCE.** Then, use 1 of 2 approaches for organizing an essay. Begin with specific details and progress to a general conclusion, or state some general

principle first, and then describe the pieces of evidence that support it. Some essays fall more naturally into a deductive, or conclusion first, mode of organization, while others are more effective if told inductively, or detail first. Regardless of what and how you write, always have others critique it. Don't be surprised, however, if you get differing opinions on the content. In the end, only you can decide on the best way to present yourself.

ADVICE ON STYLE:

- Use "first person" point of view. Think of the personal statement as speaking directly and clearly to your reader.
- The personal statement is all about the applicant, but beware of using "I" too often.
- Avoid cliché approaches such as "I've always wanted to be a doctor..." and beginning or ending your statement with quotations.
- Don't be too modest or boastful. Let the facts speak for you.
- Be lively and interesting. Don't be cute.
- Replace passive words with active words. Avoid overuse of "to be" verbs.

TIPS

- Before attempting to write the first sentence, construct an outline of your main ideas and themes. **If a specific question is asked make sure to address it.**
- There is no need to list your honors, awards, and activities if these were specified elsewhere. However, feel free to highlight things like these in the context of your essay.
- Your essay has to be unified and include nothing unnecessary. Prune away anything that is repetitious.
- Without required specificity, the best advice for writing a personal statement is to draft and polish one carefully, and then use essentially the same creation for all schools.
- Ask people to read your essays. Lots of people. Some of them should be strangers. Friends know your stories and can guess what you are trying to say even if you haven't written it clearly. Ask your readers to paraphrase the main point. Also ask if anything was confusing or unclear.
- Type your essay unless a school specifically requests that it be handwritten.
- Grammar, punctuation, word usage, proper paragraphing, and other writing techniques all count.
- Place your name on each page of your essay. For multiple page essays, number the pages and use paper clips rather than staples. Your final application should reflect an attention to detail and thoroughness.

ADVICE ON AFFIRMING YOUR PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Make sure that your personal statement sincerely represents you as an applicant.
- Only write about things that you are comfortable discussing—be yourself and write about your best points.
- Consider life experiences as valid indicators of your ability to be successful in medical school.
- Don't be afraid to reveal stressful/difficult life experiences that can serve to demonstrate your leadership qualities, resourcefulness, and ability to cope.
- If you have a non-traditional background, don't try to mold your personal statement to appear more like a traditional applicant. Consider how a non-traditional background can be presented as an advantage.
- Be careful when writing about your personal philosophy. If it could be interpreted as controversial, it is best discussed in the interview, not the personal statement.

ADVICE ON DEVELOPMENT AND THE USE OF EVIDENCE:

- Work toward an overriding theme or image of yourself as an effective medical student and professional to unify the message of your statement.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the characteristics of an effective healthcare provider.
- Describe experiences that show you possess pertinent qualities such as compassion, creativity, initiative, maturation, and diplomacy.

- Don't simply list abstract qualities you possess; give examples. In other words: "show, don't tell." Let the readers draw their own conclusions based on the clear description of the situation you provide.
- When providing examples, don't be vague. Check for unsupported adjectives. Avoid just saying, "The experience was rewarding and challenging." Explain how it was rewarding or challenging.
- Don't write about experiences as if preparing an abstract or science report; reveal your responses to events by including thoughts and feelings.
- Show that you have explored your intended career. Don't, however, presume to know what it means to be a doctor. Carefully consider your audience: avoid blanket statements on the inadequacies of medical professionals.
- Provide explanations, NOT EXCUSES for any irregularities in your academic record. Indicate what you have done to rectify the situation, and emphasize what you have learned from the experience.
- If you are re-applying, emphasize what you have done and learned since your last application.

CHECKLIST FOR CRITIQUE OF THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

1. SUBSTANCE

- Does it answer the question (if specified)?
- Does the statement point out something **unique** about the applicant?
- Are "marketable attributes" featured and **substantiated**?
- Does it focus on the **applicant**, rather than commenting on the state of the profession or its practitioners?
- Does it indicate that the applicant knows what is involved in the profession?
- Is there anything that might suggest **immaturity** or **questionable personal traits**?
- Are any **negatives** viewed in a positive light?
- Is it lively and interesting without being **cute** or **overbearing**?
- What **overall impression** does it leave with the reader?

2. FORMAT

- Is it well-organized?
- Does it have a compelling "lead-in" sentence/idea?
- Does each paragraph have a topic sentence?
- Does it have a good focus or are there too many topics?
- Does it have a good ending that is more of a conclusion than a summary?

3. MECHANICS

- Are sentences the right length (short to moderate)?
- Are any words overused?
- Any redundancy?
- Any clichés?
- What about spelling and grammar?

PLEASE NOTE THE FOLLOWING MAXIMUM CHARACTERS FOR PERSONAL STATEMENTS SUBMITTED TO APPLICATION SERVICES:

Professional Program	Allopathic (MD)	Dental	Chiropractic	Occupational Therapy	Optometry	Osteopathic (DO)	Physical Therapy	Physician Assistant	Pharmacy	Podiatry
Application Service	AMCAS	AADSAS	ChiroCAS	OTCAS	OptomCAS	AACOMAS	PTCAS	CASPA	PharmCAS	AACPMAS
Maximum Characters	5300	4500	NA	7500	4500	4500	4500	5000	4500	4500

REFERENCES

Lennack, P. (1997). How to get into the right law school. Lincolnwood, IL: VGM Career Horizons.

Peterson's graduate and professional programs: An overview. (1996). Princeton, NJ: Peterson's Guides.

Adapted by Cogie and Rosene from Write for Success by Jackson & Bardo, "Story Works!" by Molitor & Campe, and the Health Professions Advising Forum listservs