Writing Your Personal Statement

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Why is the personal statement so important? It is important because it is the only part of your application that is not based on test scores or other people’s perceptions of you. For this reason committees place a heavy emphasis on the personal statement. It is the one part of your application that you have complete control of and allows you to make a personal case for yourself. Because of these reasons, however, it is so very difficult to write.

There are some basic questions that you need to address in your personal statement. These are usually divided into three paragraphs that address: 1) what got you interested in the field that you have chosen; 2) what are you looking for in a residency program; and 3) what are your expected goals in the field you have chosen. You are always free to add other commentary that is relevant to the above topics. But, make sure you discuss these 3 topics in your essay.

Your personal statement should fit onto one page when it is printed from the ERAS system. You can test this prior to submitting your statement to residency programs.

Some helpful suggestions in getting started:
1. Go back to your medical school application essay. Some students find it useful to look at that as a basis for their residency statement. Specifically the introductory and final paragraphs.
2. Find out if your school has a writing office, which can help you with your statement.
3. Use a theme to structure your essay. This helps unite all aspects of your statement.
4. Provide concrete examples that pertain to your life, goals and experiences.
5. Be concise. Refrain from using a lot of unnecessary words.
6. Begin your essay with an attention grabber: a quote, a story, an anecdote, or a riddle.
7. Finish your essay with a conclusion that refers back to the beginning of your statement and restates the theme.
8. Have your departmental program director evaluate/critique your statement. Remember they have probably seen thousands of essays and is most likely the best authority at your institution to evaluate your work.
9. Don’t be afraid to start from scratch if your essay is not working.
10. Do write about what interests you, excites you. Your reader wants to hear a positive essay not a negative one about the profession.

Mistakes to avoid in a personal statement:
1. Underestimating the importance of the personal statement.
2. Underestimating the time and difficulty involved in developing the personal statement.
3. Lack of “flow”. You read the essay and have no idea what the applicant is trying to say. They jump from one tangent to another. When reading a statement like this I would rather not read the essay at all. To prevent this error you need not one, not two, but at least three people to read your essay and give you feedback. You need to revise your essay several times. Therefore, you cannot start working on the essay one week before it is due. I recommend starting to work on your personal statement in July. Remember that most attendings will ask for a copy of your personal statement in order to write a letter of recommendation. You therefore need to start early.

4. Spelling and Grammar mistakes. These can kill you. It says a lot about an applicant if they have not taken the time to carefully proof read their essay. Is this someone who pays attention to detail and will spend time taking care of patients in my hospital? No!

5. Avoid clichés.

6. Making the writing process a group effort. This does not work.

7. Being too cute. This is not an essay for college admissions where originality/strangeness is applauded. Keep it simple to the point and address the issues I have brought up before.

8. Procrastinating until the very end to begin your statement. You need to start months in advance.

9. Failing to let yourself come through. This goes back to trying to make your statement too cute. You do not want to show up to an interview and have the interviewer thinking: Am I speaking to the same person that wrote this statement?

10. Including topics in the statement that if asked to discuss you would not be able to answer, such as particular research points, volunteer activities, etc...

Sample Personal Statement

Early in medical school, I suspected I would choose a field in medicine based on a long-standing fascination with the complexity and varied nature of disease processes. With an open eye, I embarked on a rigorous year of clinical clerkships. However, while rotating through medicine, my initial interests were solidified. I found the ability to connect with patients and the development of strong emotional ties all encompassing. When taking care of patients was focusing not on one, but multiple body systems.

The marriage in medicine between pathophysiology and man is best exemplified by MP. I had begun my month in hematology when I was first consulted on his case. Recently transferred from an OSH for management of “the worst case” of ERCP induced pancreatitis anyone had seen, his diminished platelet count of 30,000, PT of 16, and numerous schistocytes led me to believe it was disseminated intravascular coagulation (DIC). As his underlying pancreatitis was controlled his DIC resolved. The following week, now as part of the infectious disease team, I was seeing him again this time for continual spiking fevers to 103 degrees despite negative cultures and a trial of antibiotics. Since cultures of his pancreatic cysts had been negative, we went ahead and stopped all antibiotics, and waited, believing this to be a drug fever. The days passed and MP remained in the hospital, with out much change. I moved on to the liver service, which had been his primary team, and eventually left him still fighting for his life - and me wondering if there was anything different that we could have done. Although fractured at time, I found the relationship which developed with him and his family to be the most rewarding experience I have had as a medical student.

During medical school I have used the opportunities afforded me to broaden my networking and educational experiences in pursuit of a more well rounded medical education. During the summer after my first year I spent a month in one of the university hospitals in Madrid, Spain, gaining insight into the differences and similarities inherent in our health care systems. I found that medicine abroad is much more holistic and spiritual when compared to our system. My goal when I returned was to share these findings with my classmates. I began acting on this interest by revitalizing the William Pepper Medical Society under the guidance of the Department Chairman, Dr. Peter Traber. My responsibilities include recruiting medicine faculty to lecture students interested in internal medicine on topics that are not covered by the traditional medical curriculum, such as medical futility and alternative medicine. For many students in their pre-clinical years, this forum serves as an introduction to the field...
of medicine, and hence is of enormous import in medical education at the University of Pennsylvania. Another of the intriguing challenges that I have faced at Penn includes living with nine other medical students at Nu Sigma Nu, a medical school co-op. Being able to work as a team with many diverse personalities had been a formidable task, but one that has shown me that many times you need to step back, let go of your ego and think of the broader picture. Only then can you proceed. For the next three years, I hope to join a program that will impart a solid foundation in the science and technical practice of medicine while maintaining a personal connection with the patients I see. Eventually I aspire to a career in academic medicine, which will allow me to increase my effectiveness as an educator and researcher. Academia allows for a continuous exchange of ideas as well as interaction among colleagues enabling me to contribute and keep up to date with new advances in medicine. The training and rigors an academic institution will also strengthen my interests in combining clinical research with that of patient care. By partaking in such activities I will also be acting as an educator passing my insights to rising residents and medical students.

As someone who has always been very goal-oriented, I am looking forward to beginning my residency. My life to date has prepared me to deal with many obstacles and also has shown me the determination, resilience, strength, and caring that are a part of my character. As I look toward my future in medicine, I believe these characteristics will enable me to succeed and be a valuable asset to the profession. My experiences have been very rewarding because I have identified with patients and admired their courage in the face of an uncertain prognosis. I anticipate that working in internal medicine will be equally rewarding and look forward with enthusiasm.