Writing a Personal Statement

The personal statement can be difficult to write and a source of much frustration for students, but it is a useful tool to give the selection committee some idea of your background, goals and character. Think of this as an opportunity to highlight your strong points. A good personal statement should focus on your medical career objectives- your specialty choice and aspirations. It should not be a rehash of why you came to medical school or a summary of your CV, but rather a succinct statement of your career goals that reflects your personality and style.

Your personal statement should include:

- An explanation of why you want to go into your chosen specialty and the characteristics or points that attracted you. If there is a particular event that led to your interest, describe it.
- Clinical activities, research or special projects that solidified your interest. You want the reader to see your commitment to the specialty and the profession.
- Your personal characteristics that make you well suited for the specialty, and the strengths you can offer the program. Your self-assessment results may be helpful to you in describing the attributes that you bring to the program and specialty.
- What you are looking for in a program, clinically and academically (making sure you are sending it to programs that can meet those needs).
- Your future plans and goals within the specialty.

There may be situations where a unique personal statement focused on a single residency program may be in order (ex: if you have done a sub-internship at your first choice location or did research as an undergraduate with a faculty member at a particular program). With your advisor, think about strategy given your credentials and the places you want to apply. Your personal statement should be succinct, yet provide the reader with an overview of who you are and where you are headed.

Tips for writing your personal statement:

- Keep it to one page, neatly typed with proper grammar and composition
- Avoid abbreviations
- Avoid repetitive sentence structure
- Get help - have your advisor and student affairs dean read it over
- Give yourself adequate time to prepare a well-written statement
- Read it aloud or have someone read it aloud to you to make sure it flows and makes sense
- Be error-free - proof your work for grammar, spelling, and typographical errors

Your Student Affairs Office may have sample personal statements that you can review for additional ideas. Have someone else read over your personal statement to proof your work. Remember that in the early part of the residency selection process, the personal statement is the closest thing your reviewers have to knowing you personally. A good personal statement won’t necessarily get you the position, but a bad one can torpedo your candidacy.
Personal Statement Checklist

Pre-writing

☐ Set deadlines for completing your pre-writing, first draft, edited draft, and final draft. (Your final draft deadline should be well before September 1.)
☐ Choose a writing partner, an editor, or both
☐ Choose a place to keep your notes for your personal statement
☐ Think about what information you would like to include in your personal statement, who will be reading it, and what you would like your readers to understand about you once they have read it.
☐ If you have a good idea of what you would like your personal statement to say, jot down the main points you would like to make and proceed to the drafting stage.
☐ If you’re stuck, consider the following:
  • Why did you choose this specialty?
  • Are there any anecdotes or examples that might help illustrate how you made your choice?
  • What personal characteristics would a residency director in this specialty want residents to have?
  • Are there any anecdotes or examples that illustrate that you have these personal characteristics?
  • What makes you unique as a human being? As an applicant? Is this something you would like program directors to know? Is this something they will be interested in?
  • Are there any anecdotes or examples that illustrate your unique personal characteristics in a positive, appropriate way for your personal statement?
  • How do your unique personal characteristics relate to the specialty you have chosen and to the requirements for residency in that specialty?
  • What are your future plans within this specialty?
  • What are you looking for in a residency program?

First Draft

☐ Transfer your notes to an electronic document (unless you write first drafts on paper).
☐ If seeing your ideas all together helps clarify things for you, begin to flesh out your notes.
☐ See whether your ideas fall into a logical order.
☐ Group similar ideas together and sub-sort them if possible.
☐ Decide how you want to structure your personal statement.
  • Like a traditional essay? Chronologically? Based on a theme or metaphor?
☐ Decide what the basic purpose or theme of each paragraph will be.
☐ Begin writing your paragraphs. Don’t edit yourself as you go along. Consider leaving your introduction until after you have finished the rest of your essay.
Editing

☐ Check that each paragraph has a clear topic sentence.
☐ Make sure that there are clear, logical transitions between paragraphs.
☐ If you haven’t yet written your first paragraph, draft one that clearly outlines the structure of your personal statement, its main theme, or both.
☐ Make sure that your personal statement doesn’t include any of the following:
  - Potentially damaging information about yourself
  - Negative impressions of any specialty, program, region of the country, etc.
  - Discussion of lifestyle concerns
  - Abbreviations
☐ Read your essay aloud to yourself and consider the following questions:
  - Does your writing sound like your natural voice? Is the language appropriate for the audience you are addressing, but still comfortable? If something sounds awkward to you, consider how you would say the same thing if you had to explain it out loud to a friend or an advisor.
  - Do the ideas in each of your sentences build on one another?
  - Do your first and last paragraphs work well together? Do they touch on similar themes?
☐ Read through your statement once more, looking for the verb “to be” (is, was, am, are, were, and be). Re-write passive and awkward sentences as necessary.
☐ Read each sentence to make sure that it is as concise as possible. Delete unneeded words (adverbs are prime candidates.)
☐ Read your essay out loud again, to someone else. Have that person stop you if something sounds awkward or they don’t understand the idea you are trying to convey.
☐ Have your editing partner read your essay aloud to you. Fix anything that is awkward or confusing.

Proofreading

☐ Print out your personal statement.
☐ Read your personal statement several times, checking for different types of errors each time. Do not try to proof everything at one time.
☐ Make a special check for errors that you know you are prone to.
☐ Check for homophones (it’s/its, there/their/they’re, effect/affect, principle/principal, roll/role, led/lead, etc.).
☐ Begin at the end, reading each sentence aloud.
☐ Begin at the end, reading each word separately.
☐ Use a ruler or a sheet of blank paper to slow your eyes down by exposing only one line at a time.
☐ Look at small words like “it,” “is,” “or,” “of,” “a,” “an,” and “and” to ensure that you have not accidentally typed one in place of another.
☐ Put your personal statement away for a while and do something else.
☐ Begin the editing and proofreading process again.