

Guide to Creating Effective Personal Statements

PURPOSE OF THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

- The opportunity to describe who you are and why you are uniquely qualified for a career in the health professions beyond GPA and standardized test results. Advocate for yourself.
- Medical schools receive thousands of applications from applicants with strong GPAs and MCAT scores, but they have a limited number of interview invitations to extend. The personal statement plays a role in determining who gets an interview. You may improve your chances by submitting a well-written and interesting essay.

SPECIFICS OF THE AMCAS ESSAY (AKA “PERSONAL STATEMENT”)

- **The Prompt:** Use the space provided to explain why you want to go to medical school.
- 5300 characters, including spaces.
- MD/PhD candidates: must submit two additional essays (“MD/PhD Essay” and “Significant Research Experience Essay”).

SPECIFICS OF THE AADSAS ESSAY / PERSONAL STATEMENT

- Your personal statement is a one-page essay that gives dental schools a clear picture of who you are and, most importantly, why you want to pursue a career in dentistry.
- Not to exceed 4500 characters, including spaces, carriage returns, numbers, letters, etc.

SUGGESTED TOPICS

- Why do you want to be a physician (or dentist)? What experiences have motivated and reinforced your desire to pursue this profession?
- Something to think about (but not necessarily state): what can medicine (or dentistry) offer that other professions do not? For instance, you can help people by being a teacher or social worker. What draws you specifically to “helping people” through medicine (or dentistry)?

- What experiences have allowed you to develop the skills necessary to be successful in medical school and to become an effective physician (or dentist)?
- Which individuals have shaped your life and influenced you to pursue medicine (or dentistry)?
- What will you contribute to the medical (dental) school community?
- What do you want admissions committees to know about you that is not addressed elsewhere in your application?

QUALITIES TO PORTRAY

Maturity
 Compassion and empathy
 Reflectiveness
 Genuineness and sincerity
 Honesty and integrity
 Leadership
 Clarity of thought
 Insightfulness
 Passion
 Humanity
 Individuality
 A realistic perspective
 Positivity
 Enthusiasm
 Logic
 “Distance traveled”/lessons learned
 Distinctiveness
 Industriousness and persistence
 Commitment
 Self-awareness
 Ability to relate to diverse people
 Insight into the chosen health profession
 Strong written communication skills

THEMES TO AVOID

- **Clichés:** Admissions committees have read the phrase, “I want to become a physician (or dentist) because I like science and I want to help people” many times over.
- **Writing what you think the admissions committee wants to hear:** Tell your story (not what you *think* should be your story because it is “impressive” or “interesting”). You don’t know what admissions

committees want to hear, because it can vary from individual committee member and school. Be true to yourself!

- **The “epiphany into medicine”:** Your pursuit of the health professions should be the result of a series of thoughtful, conscious, and reflective decisions, NOT an instantaneous realization.
- **Manifest Destiny:** You have not “always known” that you want to be a physician (or dentist, etc.). See above.
- **The narrative resume:** Do not rehash all of your activities and achievements. Choose to highlight ONE or TWO significant and distinguishing experiences.
- **“I know what it is like to be a physician (dentist) from [shadowing, clinical volunteer experience, etc.]”** Although your experiences have been meaningful and informative you still do not know exactly what it is like to be a provider. That is why you are hoping to go to medical (or dental) school.
- **Grandiosity:** Claiming that you plan to cure cancer (or HIV, or healthcare disparities, or anything else) shows a grave lack of understanding the complexities of whatever problem you are planning to solve.
- **Negativity:** No one likes a complainer. In particular, do not be negative about Johns Hopkins, your professors, or your research mentors.
- **“I am special”:** You *are* special. But claiming “you probably do not see many applicants like me” is not only arrogant, it is also likely untrue. Admissions committees have seen it all.
- **Anything potentially inflammatory or controversial:** You do not know the values, beliefs, and background of the person who is reading your essay. Additionally, your beliefs are not the only “correct” beliefs. Furthermore, some people – including admissions officers – have personal biases and prejudices. For these reasons, it is advisable to avoid making any strong statements regarding politics, religion, and other polarizing topics. Be extremely cautious to avoid expressing any views that could be construed as derogatory to any group.
- **“I am a victim”:** Victims are never attractive candidates. If you have experienced difficulties, explain your experiences dispassionately and focus on how you overcame these difficulties, what you learned from your experiences, and how you are a stronger person because of your experiences.
- **Excuses:** In general, there are better uses for your personal statement than explaining away and justifying poor grades, incidents of misconduct, etc. However, if you choose to address these subjects, be sure to focus on what you have learned from those incidents and how

your experiences have made you a stronger person. Never, ever blame anyone else for your mistakes.

- **Lies:** This includes information that may be factually accurate but is presented in a misleading way.
- **Leading with a quotation written by someone else:** Admissions committees are interested in what *you* have to say rather than someone else's quote.
- **Any unusual formats:** Do not write your personal statement in verse, limerick, haiku, etc., or get too "creative" in your formatting.

FOR MD/PHD APPLICANTS

- **The "MD/PhD Essay" prompt:** Describe why you want the dual degree in 3000 characters.
- In brief: your patient interactions should inform your research, and your research should enhance your patient interactions. You need to articulate passion and aptitude for BOTH basic scientific research AND patient care.
- When discussing your research interests: Be specific, but general. For instance:
Do **not** write, "I want to cure cancer."
Do write, "I am interested in developmental biology, specifically how developmental pathways become inappropriately regulated, resulting in tumor formation."
- Do **not** mention specific PIs with whom you are interested in working.
- **The "Significant Research Experience Essay" prompt:** Describe your research experiences in 10000 characters.
- Describe both the "big picture" of the lab's work as well as your independent role. Follow this general format: 1) what is known (i.e., background information); 2) the "hole" in the field (i.e., the specific question or problem that the lab's work aims to understand or solve); 3) the hypothesis; and 4) your specific contributions to the project.
 - For each experience: specify your mentor's name and affiliation and the duration of your experience.
 - If your work resulted in a publication on which you were an author, provide the full citation in the "Work/Activities" section of the application. Be certain to cite publications properly and accurately, using the standard formatting for your field. In general, do not cite papers that are "in preparation" for publication. It is fine to cite papers as "submitted." Definitely cite papers that are "in press."

- Do not overstate your contributions to a lab. Washing glassware, preparing solutions, and doing minipreps does not constitute “research.”
- Be REALLY SURE that you understand what you are writing about and that you are being as accurate as possible.
- The two additional essays will ONLY be forwarded to your designated MD/PhD programs (i.e., schools to which you are only applying to the MD program will not receive these essays).

SECONDARY APPLICATION ESSAYS

- Answer the questions asked.
- Know your audience. This will involve researching the schools and programs to which you are applying.
- Do not be tempted to reuse secondary essays verbatim. Tailor the essays to each school – be sure to review each school’s mission statement and any specialties/focuses they seem to have, addressing them when appropriate.
- Take these applications seriously. Many applicants invest significant time and effort in the primary application’s personal statement and then submit hastily written, careless secondary essays. The quality of the secondary essays needs to be on par with that of your personal statement.

GENERAL HELPFUL PERSONAL STATEMENT HINTS & TIPS

- Do not wait until the last minute. Go through several drafts.
- Have ONE central theme to your personal statement.
- Highlight specific, unique accomplishments of which you are proud.
 - Provide details! Show, don’t tell.
- In general, focus on recent experiences and accomplishments (i.e., since beginning college).
- Be careful not to repeat verbatim information found elsewhere in your application.
- Be interesting and engaging.
- Verify that there are no inconsistencies between your personal statement and the rest of your application package (including your secondary applications).
- PROOFREAD. Then proofread again. Then proofread some more. Then have others proofread for you. Then proofread one more time. (You cannot run spell check within the AMCAS application!)
- Do not even think about plagiarizing.

- **BE YOURSELF.** Make sure the personal statement that you submit is:
1) reflective of your personality; and 2) in your own words (not those of your editors).
- Be prepared for the fact that your personal statement and secondary essays will be conversation material for your interviews!