

The Medical School Personal Statement

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Office of Career Services
Harvard College



The Personal Statement

"If we wish to know a man, we must ask, 'What is his story, his real, inmost story?' for each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed continually and unconsciously by, through, and in us—through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least, through our discourse, our spoken narrations. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives, we are each of us unique."

-Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*

Basics: The personal statement

- For the AMCAS (primary) application
- 5300 characters – 1.5 single-spaced pgs
- MD/PhD have two additional essays
 - Reasons for wishing to pursue combined MD/PhD degree (3000 characters)
 - Describe significant research experiences including supervisor, nature of problem studied, contribution to project (10,000 characters)
- Some med schools ask for more essays in secondary applications; some don't.

Basics: Why do they want it?

- To discover the person behind the numbers
- To see what has motivated you to pursue a career in medicine
- To identify common threads through the application
- To see a sample of your writing

Basics: What do you need to do?

- Construct a narrative
- Make sure you as a person—your voice—comes across in the essay
- Make sure it is clear why you are going into medicine

Why medicine?

- How do you know – not simply why do you know – that you want to be a doctor?
- How has your interest in medicine changed and developed over time?
- What makes you think you will love it?
- How did you overcome your doubts?
- Why medicine and not teaching, science, public health, nursing, etc.?

The essay as an opportunity

- What do you want the committee to know that is not apparent elsewhere?
- What will capture their imagination?
- What will make the admissions committee want to meet you?

Other questions to consider

- Have you faced any obstacles in your life (for example, economic, familial, or physical)? How did you handle these?
- How have you been influenced by certain events and people?
- Recall a time when you had a positive impact on another person. How did you and the person change as a result?
- What are your goals? Why are they important to you?
- What were major turning points or decisions in your life?

You: the person

- The tone needs to mirror you
- Make sure you are totally honest and sincere
- Be prepared to talk about your stories in your interview
- If you don't want to talk about it, don't write it

You: your experiences

- Dramatic circumstances are fine; not so dramatic circumstances are fine too!
- Share lessons & reflections rather than detailed descriptions of experiences.
- Reflection can be unique even if opportunities/experiences are not.

Stuck?

- Pretend you are writing to a friend, not an admissions committee.
- Ask a family member or friend which qualities or experiences they think distinguish you from others.
- Tell a story using concrete examples.

Stuck? (cont'd)

- Develop a theme that unites your essay.
- Think of two or three personality characteristics that you feel are your strengths and would help you succeed in medicine: teamwork, leadership, initiative, cooperation, etc. What have you done that demonstrates you have these qualities?
- "Free write" without editing to get started.

Do's

- ☺ Tell a story.
- ☺ Make it interesting. Use specific examples and anecdotes.
- ☺ Provide information, insight, or a perspective that is not included elsewhere in your application.
- ☺ Be clear about your message – no need to begin with quotes or introduction.
- ☺ Describe experiences in terms of what they mean to you. Make sure the reader learns about you, not just the experiences.
- ☺ Use strong action verbs and vivid images.

Do's (cont'd)

- ☺ Be concise. Make sure every sentence *needs* to be there.
- ☺ Illustrate your personality.
- ☺ Describe what you learned in your research, not the details of the specific research project (unless writing the MD/PhD essay).
- ☺ Allow plenty of time to write, revise, reflect, revise, etc. Step away often so you can revisit your essay with fresh eyes.
- ☺ Proofread. Spell checking will will (☹) not catch everything! Then, proofread again and get someone else to do the same.

Don'ts

- ☹ Just list or summarize your activities. This is not a resume.
- ☹ Try to impress the reader with the use of formal or "fancy" language.
- ☹ **Tell** the reader that you are compassionate, motivated, intelligent, curious, dedicated, unique, different than most candidates, etc.
- ☹ Focus only on childhood experiences.
- ☹ Use slang or forced analogies.
- ☹ Lecture the reader – about what's wrong with medicine, what doctors should be like, why medicine is changing, etc.

Don'ts (cont'd)

- ⊗ Make excuses for poor grades.
- ⊗ Begin every sentence or paragraph with "I."
- ⊗ Overwork the essay to the point where you lose your own voice.
- ⊗ Make it your premier creative writing piece.
- ⊗ Use generalizations and clichés.
- ⊗ Solicit the advice of too many people.
- ⊗ Assume you can share everything there is to know about you. This is not possible and will only dilute the impact of your message.
- ⊗ Reference TV shows!

Special Situations

- Explanations of fluctuations in performance
- Major changes in direction
- Hardship affecting record
- Personal medical situation
- Ad Board...

Special Situations (cont'd)

Institutional Action: If you answer "yes" to this question, you must include an explanation. *(Limited to 1325 characters or approximately 1/4 page)*

Felony: If you answer "yes" to this question, you must include an explanation. *(Limited to 1325 characters or approximately 1/4 page)*

Secondary Essays

Examples of questions (more on handout):

- What do you think will be your greatest personal challenge as a physician, and how will you address this?
- How will you contribute to the diversity of your medical school class?
- Are there any special circumstances that we should be aware of?
- Describe your interest in Stethoscope Medical School.
- Tell us about a difficult or challenging situation that you have encountered and how you dealt with it.

Getting Feedback

- People who know you (family, friends) can give feedback.
- Ask them:
 - Do you want to meet this person?
 - Does this sound like me?

Resources

- Pre-med tutor
- Writing center
(<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/undergrad.html>)
- OCS Advisors (limited)
- www.aamc.org
- www.studentdoctor.net *

*read at your own risk or ideally not at all

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Good luck!
