

PREPARING AN EFFECTIVE PERSONAL STATEMENT FOR MEDICAL SCHOOL

What is the Personal Statement?

A brief narrative of your past experiences and future goals and opportunity to:

- Describe the special strengths you offer the field
- Make a positive first impression
- Show why you are a good match for the field
- Present goals and values
- Reveal how your interests in the field evolved

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?

DO'S & DON'TS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PERSONAL STATEMENT:

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.

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 clichéd 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.

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

