WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT

Michael D. Geurin, MD, FAAFP

Clinical Professor of Family Medicine, UW, and Billings WWAMI Track Director
Adjunct Clinical Associate Professor of Clinical Medicine, PNWU
Designated Institutional Official and Director of Research & Scholarly Activity,
Montana Family Medicine Residency at RiverStone Health, Billings, MT

Sept. 25, 2021

And a recovering College English instructor!
Resources for Medical School Applications

- [https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/article/applying-medical-school/](https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/article/applying-medical-school/)
- [https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/applying-medical-school-process/medical-school-admission-requirements/](https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/applying-medical-school-process/medical-school-admission-requirements/)
  - Online database of medical schools that requires purchase to access the content
  - Really good tips that mesh well with this presentation!
What Is Your Personal Statement

• "The med school personal statement is a one-page essay that gives the admissions committee the opportunity to better understand you as a candidate. It is the best opportunity to give a human face to your medical school application. Don’t underestimate the power of this statement to make a strong, positive impression on an admissions committee."

https://www.princetonreview.com/med-school-advice/amcas-application-tips
Content Overview

- Strategies for selecting a topic
- Strategies for developing and organizing content
- Tips for successful drafting
- Tips for effective introductions and conclusions
- Ways to make content more interesting
- Techniques for revising and proofreading your work
• For personal statements, this may be
  – How you decided to pursue medicine as a profession
    • Evolution in your thinking
    • Epiphany moment
  – What you hope to accomplish in medicine
  – What you have learned about yourself or medicine in your encounters with the medical field
    • Perhaps as a patient
    • Perhaps as a volunteer
    • Perhaps in your prior career/field of study
Developing a Topic

• Brainstorming (Listing)

- Internet
- admires
- good for search resources
- read global news
- learn English
- learn foreign language
- violent
- naked pics
- unhealthy info
- Internet games
- meeting new people all over the world
- meeting bad guys
- hurt your brain
- waste time
- be helpful for bid things online

Go Good for years
Developing a Topic

- Brainstorming (Listing)
- Clustering (Creating a Flowchart)
Developing a Topic

• Brainstorming (Listing)
• Clustering (Creating a Flowchart)
• Journaling
Developing a Topic

- Brainstorming (Listing)
- Clustering (Creating a Flowchart)
- Journaling
- Asking Journalist Questions
Journalist Questions

• **Who** will you be in med school/medicine (and how that will benefit the school—what value/perspectives can you add)?

• **What** you are looking for in med school/medicine? Do you have specific training interests?

• **Where** do you hope to go after completing residency—are you interested in rural care, global health, etc.?

• **When** did you know you wanted to be a physician (the epiphany moment)?

• **How** did you get to this point in your pre-medical education (amplify your college admissions personal statement)? What have you learned along the way?
Writer’s Block
Developing a Topic

- Brainstorming (Listing)
- Clustering (Creating a Flowchart)
- Journaling
- Asking Journalist Questions
- Forced Freewriting: 1-2 minutes
Content Organization

- Outlining
- Making a Tree Diagram
- Utilizing Chronology
  - Causes ➔ Symptoms ➔ Diagnosis ➔ Treatment ➔ Prognosis
  - Past Perspective ➔ New Perspective
  - Childhood Dream ➔ Undergrad Experiences
Starting to Draft

- Review prewriting and run with any ideas
- Write a mock abstract/summary
- Pick the part of the content you understand the best or feel most passionate about
- Start with (or avoid) the introduction
- Use blanks or brackets where you lack the words or need more information and keep on writing
Effective Introductions

• Ask a rhetorical question
  – Why would a professional pianist decide to go back to school and become a doctor?

• Relate (or start) a patient/family case
  – Be prepared to discuss it more in your interview!

• Use an inspiring quotation

• Use a surprising statistic or fact

• Define a key word (etymology)
Avoid quoting a bland dictionary definition:

- “Webster’s dictionary defines doctor as ‘a person licensed to practice medicine, as a physician, surgeon, dentist, or veterinarian.’ That is what I am becoming.”
The word *doctor* has been with us in English since around 1300 AD, but the idea is much older. *Doctor* comes from the Latin word *docere*, meaning “to show, to teach, to cause to know.”

Doctors are teachers. I want to teach my patients to be as healthy as possible.
Content: What NOT To Do

• Avoid ending the introduction with a three-prong thesis preview (“In this personal statement, I will tell you how I was a boring child, and then a boring college student, and how that has all made me the boring applicant I have become. First, I was a boring child. . . .”)
  – Overused and uninteresting
  – Scaffolding should be taken down

• Avoid merely repeating what is found in your AMCAS “Work and Activities” section
  – “You can list up to 15 extracurricular experiences on your AMCAS application, which may include clinical, research, or volunteer activities as well as honors, awards, and distinguished publications. Don’t waste valuable real estate by listing unrelated, substandard, or short-lived experiences. You’ll have the opportunity to designate up to 3 experiences as ‘most meaningful,’ which will give you an additional 1,325 characters to explain why.”
What NOT To Do

• Avoid waffling or betraying indecision about profession choice (medicine vs. education vs. law vs. public health, etc.)
  – Exception: you are changing graduate programs or failed out of a graduate program. . . . These require explanation!

• Avoid referring to things you would be uncomfortable discussing in a face-to-face interview
  – Any personal information you place in your application is fair game for discussion

• Be cautious stratégic about disclosing political, religious, or social affiliations
  – Schools look for added value, and run away from liability
  – Advocacy is generally good; leading protests makes people anxious
Content: What to Include

• Medical schools like to see demonstrated commitment to society
  – Volunteering (particularly related to health/healthcare)
  – Involvement in secular community organizations
  – Involvement in religious-affiliated organizations

• Medical schools like to see that you know what you are getting in to
  – Paid work in medical offices/hospitals
  – Shadowing experiences in medical offices/hospitals
  – Close family members who work in healthcare

• Medical schools want to know who you are
  – What inspires you/makes you tick
  – What your strengths are, and how they compensate for any perceived/demonstrated weaknesses
**Effective Conclusions**

- Give a symbolic or powerful fact
- Relate (or complete) a compelling case
- Use an effective quotation
- Echo the introduction (come full circle)
Effective Content

- Provocative questions
- Vivid description
- Figurative language
- Enlightening analogies
Vivid Descriptions

• “My white coat still had the wrinkles in it and hadn’t yet developed the indelible ring-around-the-collar grunge that it has today. I was a second-year medical student, an imposter of the worst sort, sent out to prey on an unsuspecting inpatient to perform one of my first ‘H&P’s. With clammy sweat on my brow and palms, I introduced myself in my best ‘I’m-almost-a-doctor-can’t-you-tell?’ voice and began my interrogation of the ninety-three-year-old man who stared at me over a pile of half-emptied cups and plates, his torso nearly buried in too-short blankets.”
“The genome is a scripture in which is written the past history of plagues. The long struggles of our ancestors with malaria and dysentery are recorded in the patterns of human genetic variation. Your chances of avoiding death from malaria are pre-programmed in your genes, and in the genes of the malaria organism. You send out your team of genes to play the match, and so does the malaria parasite. If their attackers are better than your defenders, they win.”
Analogies

• “There are human analogies for almost everything in nature. Bats use sonar; the heart is a pump; the eye is a camera; natural selection is trial and error; genes are recipes; the brain is made from wires (known as axons) and switches (synapses); the hormonal system uses feedback control like an oil refinery; the immune system is a counter-espionage agency; bodily growth is like economic growth. And so, infinitely, on. Although some of these analogies can mislead, we are at least familiar with the kinds of techniques and technologies that Mother Nature employs to solve her various problems and achieve her ingenious designs. We have reinvented most of them ourselves in technological life.”

Matt Ridley, Genome: The Autobiography of a Species in 23 Chapters
Editing the Draft

• **Allow some time to pass**, so that you see what you actually wrote vs. remembering what you intended to write

• **Print out with triple spacing** for hand editing

• **Have a colleague review the draft** . . . preferably someone adept at grammar and punctuation

• **Read aloud for awkward sections**; these often need attention to word choice, grammar, punctuation or parallelism

• **Proofread backwards** (by word and/or by sentence)

• **Don’t forget any length limits!**
  
  – 5,300 characters (including spaces) for AMCAS applications
  
  – 5,000 characters for TMDSAS (Texas)
  
  – 4,500 (?) characters for AACOMAS (osteopathic)
This Is a Serious Application

• The person you describe in your personal statement should be...
  – Interesting without being bizarre
  – Prepared without being rigid
  – Confident without being cocky
  – Humane without being emotionally vulnerable
  – Humble without being self-deprecating
  – Well-rounded without being unfocused
  – Explanatory without being spinny
THANK YOU
AND ALL THE
BEST!