Health Professional School

Personal Statement Writing Workshop

March 21, 2016
Personal Statement (General Points)

**Purpose:** Your opportunity to shine as a “real person” instead of just another applicant

The essay is NOT a resume. (That information is in the application itself.)

The essay is EXTREMELY IMPORTANT in the overall application process.

**Difficulty:** Even if you are good at writing essays, the personal essay is difficult.

The essay will require multiple revisions so start preparing early.

**Audience:** Medical school admissions committees consist of medical professionals.

You are NOT a medical professional. (Be careful pointing out flaws in healthcare.)

Admissions committees will read hundreds of essays- yours must stand out!
**Evaluate Yourself**

**Self Analysis:** Evaluate how you fulfill the criteria that professional schools look for in an applicant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Stamina</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good Grades in Coursework</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Extracurricular Activities</td>
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<td>Experience in the Field</td>
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<td>Leadership Skills</td>
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<td>Communication Skills</td>
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<td>Appreciation of Diversity</td>
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<td>Commitment to Expected Career</td>
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**Focused Introspection:** Why do I want this career? Do I really know what I am getting into? Do I have the necessary qualities? What do I have to offer?

**Personal Inventory:** List your credentials and experiences that are applicable to health professions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Accomplishments</th>
<th>Hobbies</th>
<th>Sports interests</th>
<th>Personal interests</th>
<th>Other experiences</th>
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<td>Personal experiences</td>
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<td>Professional/clinical interests</td>
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<td>Cross-cultural experiences</td>
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<td>Teaching experiences</td>
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<td>Research experiences</td>
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Evaluate the Health Profession

Characteristics of the Profession: Determine how you feel about your planned health profession.

- Work environment
- Level of responsibility
- Impact on personal life
- Staffing underserved areas
- Degree of independence
- Continuing education

Values and Characteristics of a Health Professional: Do these apply to you?

- Ability to listen
- Dependability
- Commitment to continuing education
- Compassion
- Honesty
- Cooperation as a team player
- Professionalism
- Maturity
- Willingness to accept responsibility
- Self-Confidence
- Flexibility
- Freedom from prejudice
- Ethical behavior
- Resilience
## Writing the Statement

### Essay Types:
Before starting your essay, determine what type of essay is required.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Question</th>
<th>Free Form</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answer the question!</td>
<td>Focus on new information not in application.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cite relevant examples for anything discussed.</td>
<td>Highlight one or two of your strengths.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasize your interest in the health profession.</td>
<td>Address any negative in a positive light.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Describe what you learned from experiences.</td>
<td>Describe what you learned from experiences.</td>
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</table>

### Introduction Ideas:
- Anecdote (relevant story)
- Life changing experience
- An encounter with a health professional

### Writing style:
- Be careful about “creative tactics”: not everyone shares your sense of humor
- Use vivid, active imagery (but make sure the essay still flows well)
- Understand the difference between denotation and connotation
- Do not use slang or contractions
Essay Structure

**Opening statement:** Short declarative sentence (Should grab the reader’s attention instantly)

**General to specific:** Continually narrow the focus

  Provide specific examples

**Topics/Content:** Indicate how you plan to contribute to the profession

  Describe specific experiences AND what you learned from them.

  Highlight special circumstances.

  Keep it positive! (Do not dwell on negatives or assign blame to others.)

**Ending:** Sum up how the essay content relates to your ability to be a health professional.

  Should connect back to the introduction/beginning of the essay.
Polishing the Statement

1. Edit the content: Remove extraneous words and redundant statements. Check that cited examples support the general statements.

2. **Check Grammar and Spelling**

3. Check the length and abide by the guidelines

4. **Check Grammar and Spelling**

5. Assess the authenticity (Is this an accurate representation of you?)

6. **Check Grammar and Spelling**

7. Evaluate the “interest value” (Will your essay stand out from the others?)

8. **Check Grammar and Spelling**

9. Get Feedback (Pre-Health Advisor, English Professor, Roommates, etc.)
Applicant 1 (Scores and Activities)

Coursework: Overall GPA: 3.674
Sci/Math GPA: 3.745

Test Scores:

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<td>GRE</td>
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Activities:

Medical Experience: Hospital Volunteer (1 year, 3 hrs/week)
Volunteer: Habitat for Humanity (1 day)
Leadership: Fraternity Social Chair (1 year)
Applicant 1 (Personal Statement)

I have always been influenced by my parents to strive to be an excellent student. Since I was in grade school they hovered over me when I did my homework and they always assisted me to make sure I did my best. During high school I was encouraged to take part in science and biology clubs because they knew that I would be a physician some day. Through their encouragement and support I was able to compete each year in science fairs and as a senior won the regional science fair. I was disappointed when the judges decided to give the award to someone else when I competed in the state contest. My parents and I believe that our project was superior and was the result of poor judging.

I am very fortunate to have parents that have guided me in my decision to become a physician. As early as grade school I would accompany my parents to the hospital. I was very proud when my parents referred to me as “their future doctor”. During middle school I continued to shadow my parents; my father is a cardiovascular surgeon and mother and ophthalmologist. They are highly respected among the physicians in our community and I enjoy being their son. They are also highly respected by their patients who always tell me how much they appreciate my parent’s care. The respect they enjoy from colleagues and patients is something I aspire to as a physician.

I have excelled at the University of Virginia which is a highly competitive university. I have also excelled in standardized tests including the SAT and MCAT. Both of these achievements bode well for my future as a physician. Also, I have spent a great deal of time learning about medicine by shadowing physicians. Physicians must also have a sense of community which I have experienced by serving as an officer in my fraternity and my involvement with Habitat for Humanity. Habitat for Humanity helped me to realize that not all people live like I do and this was a great lesson in life. My goal is to be a dermatologist and my patients will experience all sorts of problems related to their environment. Witnessing the conditions the Habitat family experienced will help me be more sensitive to my patients and understand better the problems they may be facing in their lives in addition to their medical problems.
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Concerns: No independence (parents “hovered”, “assisted”, and “guided”) No acceptance of responsibility (“poor judging” of science project) Questionable reasons for medical career (gaining “respect”) Stresses importance of standardized tests as marker for becoming good physician
## Applicant 2 (Scores and Activities)

**Coursework:**
- Overall GPA: 3.258
- Sci/Math: 3.294
- Freshman GPA: 2.500
- Sophomore GPA: 3.368
- Junior GPA: 3.889

**Test Scores:**

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**Activities:**
- Medical Experience: Hospital Volunteer (1 yr, 3 hrs/week), Pediatric Clinic (3 yrs)
- Volunteer: Habitat for Humanity (1 yr)
- Leadership: Resident Assistant (1 yr)
- Work Experience: Meal Server, Auto Parts (worked throughout college)
Applicant 2 (Personal Statement)

Physicians have come a long way since the days where treatments of illnesses were based on folk-medicine and included such things as purging or bleeding out the disease. The advances and technology that are available today were not present. As a young person growing up, even though there was a great deal of technology, my family could not afford to visit doctors. Doctors had the knowledge and expertise but my family could not avail ourselves of this. The occasional community free clinic managed most of the chronic diseases, but most of our medical and dental problems went untreated. I first became interested in a career in medicine as a junior in high school when we went to one of these clinics. I saw first hand the rewards that the profession offered but most notably, the challenges that were also present.

During college I would volunteer at night and on Sundays at a pediatric clinic. My experience working at the pediatric clinic and now volunteering at a local VA hospital have taught me the characteristics of a good doctor. Physicians constantly face new situations; a good physician knows how to take challenges and adapt as well as learn from them. There are also times when a physician may not know the cause and cure of a disease; a good physician is humble and is willing to admit that they do not know the answer. Becoming a physician is not an easy course in life; it is very challenging and is a constant learning experience. I have been faced with many challenging situations in life and have had failures.

I have discovered that failures need to be looked at as learning experiences. Physicians must also view challenges and failures as learning experiences; it is important to always keep a positive outlook and realize that such situations bring a better understanding and awareness. The profession has many obstacles; however, it also brings many gratifying moments. These moments and the on-going learning experiences are what interest me in pursuing this profession. Currently, there are approximately 800,000 physicians practicing within the United States, but yet there seems to be a shortage of physicians. As a physician, I would desire to make a difference in those who do not have access to medical treatment. Most physicians work in urban areas as a personal preference.

I believe that the priority of physicians should be the health and well-being of the community. I believe that people who live in rural areas should not have a disadvantage when it comes to health care because of the area where they reside. The health status of these areas should be equivalent to those living in urban areas, where more medical treatment is available. This is not the case, and as a physician, I want to make a difference in health care among those living in rural areas, especially rural areas in Virginia. Physicians in pre-industrial America were concerned with the well-being of their community. They were concerned with income or prestige. This is an important concept that should still be focused on in today's society. Physicians need to provide care for their patients, not only for the patients benefit, but for the community's well-being as well. A physician is faced with many obstacles that take discipline, perseverance, and dedication. In the end, the gratification of making a difference in someone's life makes all the hard work worth while.
Applicant 2 (Personal Statement)

Physicians have come a long way since the days where treatments of illnesses were based on folk-medicine and included such things as purging or bleeding out the disease. The advances and technology that are available today were not present. As a young person growing up, even though there was a great deal of technology, my family could not afford to visit doctors. Doctors had the knowledge and expertise but my family could not avail ourselves of this. The occasional community free clinic managed most of the chronic diseases, but most of our medical and dental problems went untreated. I first became interested in a career in medicine as a junior in high school when we went to one of these clinics. I saw first hand the rewards that the profession offered but most notably, the challenges that were also present.

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Supporting Background Information:

Disadvantaged?: Yes
Explanation: My parents have been divorced since I was 10. I was raised by my mother and 4 other siblings in a federally subsidized housing. I have worked since the age of 13 and continued to work through college to help my family. I also received free meals at school. Being the oldest I also had responsibility for my siblings when my mother was not at home.
Applicant 3 (Numeric Application)

**Coursework:**
- Overall GPA: 3.164
- Sci/Math: 3.033
- Freshman: 3.333
- Sophomore: 3.419
- Junior: 3.333
- Senior: 2.667
- Re-applicant (in graduate school)

**Test Scores:**

**MCAT TEST SCORES**

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**OTHER TEST SCORES**

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**Activities:**

Medical Experience: Anesthesia Tech (6 months)
Volunteer: Habitat for Humanity (2 yrs, 3 hrs/month), Clothing Distribution (1 yr, 2 hrs/month), Church Volunteer (1 yr)
Leadership: Teaching Assistant, Intramural Soccer Captain, Soccer Coach
Research: Cancer Research (2 summers)
Now I had the golden opportunity that I was waiting for. I could get my team back in the game. I stole the ball and raced down the basketball court, anticipating an easy lay up. However, as I leapt toward the basket, I was shoved from behind and knocked off balance. When I landed, an excruciating pain shot through my leg, and I immediately knew that I had been seriously injured. A day later in the hospital, I learned that I had torn my anterior cruciate ligament. After surgery, I spent a year in rehabilitation and physical therapy. I was impressed by the physician's care and empathy, his generous expenditure of time, and his thorough explanation of the repair and rehabilitation process. In retrospect, my accident and my therapy were critical events in my life, sparked a fascination for anatomy and physiology, and confirmed my early dream of a career in medicine, as well as significantly contributing to the shaping of my personal philosophy.

As a physician's son, I frequently went with my dad to the hospital when he made rounds. I was inspired by his passion, commitment, and his ethical standards. In addition, while volunteering at Scott & White Hospital, I had the opportunity to serve the community and experience first hand the joy of helping patients.

On one rotation, I was assigned to the pediatric floor and interacted with terminally ill children. Upon entering the recreation area, I noticed a small, fragile child huddled in a corner experiencing physical and psychological pain. Her name was Sara. I was overcome with compassion and had a strong desire to restore her health, but all I could do was to attempt to lift her spirits. By the end of my rotation, Sara was smiling. Now I understood more fully why my dad chose the medical profession and worked tirelessly as a physician on behalf of patients.

After my freshman and sophomore years in college, I secured employment in the anesthetics department at Scott & White Hospital. There, I made it a point to observe operations of surgery. I was fascinated by every expert movement the surgeons made; everything was calculated and precise in each procedure. This experience further confirmed my desire to pursue my professional dream.

During the summers after my junior and senior years in college, I was awarded and undergraduate research project with M.D. Anderson Cancer Research Center. I was afforded the unique opportunity to truly understand how and why research is essential in medicine. Under the direction of Dr. Dean Tang, the goal of my lab research was to identify and characterize potential cancer stem cells from human tumors, especially prostate cancer. This extraordinary opportunity allowed me to utilize my analytical capabilities, establish pragmatic experimental protocols, reformulate solutions after failure, restructure protocols, and finally evaluate results. Because of this research experience and my small contribution, I now have potential as a research scientist. I hope that I will make a practical difference someday and have an impact the lives of many.

As a swimming instructor at the University of Texas late in my college career, I have learned to communicate effectively with both large groups and individuals. Teaching has enabled me to recognize people's needs, limitations, and potential. This has been a gratifying and enlightening experience. In addition, because my father is an Associate Professor at Scott & White, I have been able to observe many of his residents. I believe that the role of a teaching physician is vital to the medical profession. Because of my positive experience as an instructor of swimming at Texas and my experiences with my father and his residents, I would also like to work at a teaching hospital.

My experiences as a patient, my bond with my father as a medical role model, my volunteer work with terminally ill children, my comprehensive exposure to surgical procedures, my experience in cancer research, my teaching experience, and my interaction with residents have highly motivated me to work toward fulfillment of my dream and aspiration to become a physician, teacher, and researcher. Through my many and rich experiences, I have internalized the values of discipline, academic excellence, humanitarian service, personal generosity, professionalism, medical expertise, sympathy, and compassion. These values reflect my personal philosophy. Only through medicine can I conceive of a life more exciting, more rewarding, and more fulfilling.
Applicant 3 (Personal Statement)

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Application Results

Accepted = 

Wait-listed and then Accepted (same cycle) = 

Rejected = 
Application Results

Accepted = Applicant 2

Lower GPA but significant, consistent improvement over three years
Significant medical experience, volunteer activities, and leadership
Overcame adversity
Good personal statement

Wait-listed and then Accepted (same cycle) = Applicant 3

Lower GPA, somewhat erratic over three years (senior year GPA lowest)
Re-applicant (completing graduate program)
Significant medical experience, volunteer activities, leadership, and research
Very strong personal statement

Rejected = Applicant 1

Average GPA (consistently good) and excellent MCAT
Decent medical experience, but poor record of volunteering
Very poor personal statement
Application Results

**Accepted = Applicant 2**
- Lower GPA but significant, consistent improvement over three years
- Significant medical experience, volunteer activities, and leadership
- Overcame adversity
- Good personal statement

**Wait-listed and then Accepted (same cycle) = Applicant 3**
- Lower GPA, somewhat erratic over three years (senior year GPA lowest)
- Re-applicant (completing graduate program)
- Significant medical experience, volunteer activities, leadership, and research
- Very strong personal statement

**Rejected = Applicant 1**
- Average GPA (consistently good) and excellent MCAT
- Decent medical experience, but poor record of volunteering
- Very poor personal statement

**Note**

The GPAs and MCAT scores in these applications are from _seven years ago_.

Current ranges of competitive GPAs and MCAT scores are much higher:

**Current Competitive Scores**

- GPA ≥ 3.6
- MCAT ≥ 509