



A Primer on Personal Statements

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PurposeMD

Understand the "Why" of your career in medicine



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About Personal Statements

As a part of your residency application, students will generally be required to submit a personal statement along with other elements such as letters of recommendation, CV, MSPE, etc.

The maximum length of the personal statement is 28,000 characters (~5,000 words), BUT you should avoid something that long. If you were a program director, and you had to screen hundreds of applications, you would not want to read something that long. As a general guideline, something around one page, 700 words or less, four to six paragraphs will suffice.

The role of personal statements.

Most residency programs use the personal statements as a factor in their screening process to determine whom to interview. Prior to the interview, programs only have paper/electronic means to determine the fit of the candidate. However, it is often difficult to get a 'sense' of a candidate from a CV. Many candidates who look good on paper turn out to be a bad fit for a program. This is where the personal statement fills the gap. By reading your personal statement, the reader gets a sense of you (who you are, what you care about) through something written in your voice.

So, the personal statement is not a chronological recounting of your professional experience. You do not need to comprehensively restate things from your CV. Rather, it is like a spotlight. It should be focused. It provides the reader with the human context to assess the rest of your application.

It's rarely a "maker," but it can be a "breaker"

Personal statements are rarely enough by themselves to get you the interview, but a poorly written personal statement can cause you to lose the interview even if the rest of your application is solid. The personal statement is not a creative admissions essay for college or med school. It has the tone of a professional communication with a would-be employer. So, avoid taking large risks with literary gimmicks (many readers have seen thousands of these and can easily tell when an applicant is trying to be 'too cute' to cover up for the lack of substance). Instead, be a little conservative. While saying something interesting about yourself, make sure to use a friendly yet professional tone.

Taking your time

Optimally, you'll want to write your personal statement over a period of a few months. You may even want to start six months before you submit your application. This will allow time for the message to mature in your mind and to give time for you to write and refine it through a few iterations.

To begin, you may want to reflect on some prompting questions. (Please see prompting questions on pages 6 and 7.) Reflect on those questions, write down your thoughts, and then leave them for a bit.

After a while, return to them and write a very rough draft of your personal statement. Again, leave it for a while, and then return to it. You will find that each time you return to it, something new will have occurred to you. Continue to refine your statement. Once you feel that your personal statement is about 85% there, share it with a few other people to get their reactions (and to identify any spelling or grammatical mistakes that may have escaped your notice). Continue to refine until the end.

Striking the Right Balance

The name ‘personal statement’ implies a high expectation for self-expression. Some students get drawn into the idea that it is a creative admissions essay, where it’s all about the applicant. On the other hand, some students, who are eager to show that they understand the program/specialty spend too much of the personal statement telling the reader about their knowledge of the program/specialty (and too little about themselves). Of course, the reader already knows plenty about the program/specialty and does not really need to read it in an essay.

Between these two extremes, the student must strike the right balance. He or she must communicate who he or she is while showing that he or she knows the role and context that he or she is applying for. The balance of these two concepts creates a sense of ‘fit.’

In the table below are characteristics of personal statements on the extremes (to be avoided), and the column in the middle represents the correct blend to achieve a sense of fit.

Too Formulaic	Balanced	Too Idiosyncratic
Too much about the program/specialty and too little about the self	Mostly about the self, but making relevant ties to the program/specialty	Too much about personal experience and opinions without regard to the program/specialty
Overly detailed on the program/specialty	Tailored to the program/ specialty in a subtle way that flows with the applicants overall narrative	No tailoring to the program/specialty
Thinking too much on what the program/specialty is looking for	Within what the program/specialty is looking for, what do you (uniquely) bring?	Thinking too much on one’s own perspective and opinion
Reads like a form letter	Overall professional tone with a few instances of literary flair	Overly ‘literary’ tone instead of a professional tone

The sections on “Understanding the Reader’s Perspective” (page 3) and “Communicating Your Message” (page 5) will help you understand your own perspective as well as that of your reader so that you can write a personal statement which strikes the right balance.



Understanding the Reader's Perspective

Have you ever read a dry academic article where, half-way through, you are looking for any excuse to not have to finish it? (Where it is less painful to do your taxes or mow your lawn?) Have you ever had the experience where you were reading a well-written article in the lay press about the same topic and it was a sheer joy to read?

Please empathize with your reader. The reader (e.g. program director) must literally read through hundreds of these. What will make him or her pick you? If you take the time to make your personal statement interesting to read, it will make your candidacy stand out.

Let's say you have to buy a new washing machine because your old one broke down. Your process is to watch 200 commercials, each around 30-seconds long, over the course of two hours about washing machines. At the end of those two hours, which ones will you remember? Very likely, most of them will seem to 'blend together.' However, there will be a few which stand out. The ones which stand out will not be the ones which drone on about their 37 features. The ones which stand out will be ones with one (or two) very simple yet compelling feature(s).

Simple but compelling

When you are writing your personal statement, you are writing it to be simple and compelling. That's why it's not useful to list all your activities. That's why it's not useful for it to be 5 pages long. You need to use your empathy for the reader to edit it to a compelling message. If you want the reader to remember one thing about you, what is that ONE thing?

Then, what is the most compelling way to deliver the message about that ONE thing? It is through a story. Your personal statement is that 30-second commercial about yourself where you convey to the reader that ONE key thing through story.

What they are reading for "between the lines?"

Let's return to the washing machine example again. When you are watching these commercials, you are looking for the cool compelling feature. Yes. However, what if that washer with the cool compelling feature costs \$10,000? Obviously, you are looking for other things too. There are certain foundational criteria that must be satisfied. If those criteria are not addressed, it leaves doubt on the part of the "buyer." So, in going back to the personal statement, the program director is the "buyer" and he or she wants to know a few things.



Avoiding problems down the road

As much as the program would love a candidate with a great CV, every program director knows that candidates that look good on paper may cause problems down the road. Which problems? Here are some common ones:

1. Superficial reasons for choosing the specialty / program – leading to doubt and performance issues later
2. Lacks resourcefulness – needs a lot of attention and hand-holding
3. Can't get along with other people – will bring down the performance of the group

There are three key questions that the reader has in the back of his or her mind. You should be aware of them and within the personal statement, use the opportunity to allay the fears of the reader about these questions:

1. Does this candidate really know what this specialty / program is about?
2. Is this candidate resourceful enough to succeed without too much hand-holding on my part?
3. Will this candidate make people around him or her better? Or will he or she be a drag on the rest of the team?

Notes on understanding the reader's perspective

Communicating Your Message

Less about what you did and more about what you thought and how you felt

There is a lot of 'box-checking' in medical education. Students have had to "check boxes" ever since undergrad to get into medical school. While in medical school, there are more boxes to check. So, it's not surprising that when programs ask students to talk about themselves, students often respond with a regurgitation of the boxes they have checked.

*They may forget what you said
– but they will never forget
how you made them feel.*
~ **Carl W. Buehner**

The boxes you have checked are NOT you.

It takes time to reflect on yourself what you are about. If you were to say ONE thing about yourself, what is that ONE thing? Then with that ONE thing, don't make empty claims. Don't tell me that you are a 'team player.' Tell me a story about where you practiced being a team player. Hopefully the story is dramatic and it had an impact on your life. Don't just tell me about what you did; tell me also about your thoughts and emotions and on how that experience has shaped your identity.

When you tell me about yourself in that way, I begin to understand you as a person.

Honing your core message

Many of the things that applicants will want to say about themselves are rather generic: being hard-working, being a team-player, caring about patients, being curious, yada, yada, yada. Those things, while being a "baseline" of sorts for an acceptable candidate, are not distinctive to you. Other people can easily claim those things as well.

In your personal statement, one key thing you must convey is: what is your "X" factor? What do you bring that other candidates do not? Then, rather than listing generic characteristics, focus on driving home that message using examples, anecdotes, and statements about your values.

In the following two pages are prompting questions for you to consider. Answer any and all of the questions which appeal to you. The answers to some of these questions can serve as the raw material for your personal statement.



Prompts for Your Personal Narrative

- **If you had to describe your unique strengths (“X” factor) in ten words or less, what would it be?**
- **How would other people (classmates, faculty, patients) describe you “at your best?”**
- **What is something that you care deeply about (a value)? How did this value develop relative to your upbringing / background?**
- **Describe a (professional) accomplishment that you are the proudest of?**
- **Describe someone in your life (e.g. a mentor) that had the greatest professional influence on you.**
- **Describe a challenging but meaningful patient encounter.**
- **Describe another patient encounter that really turned you on to this specialty.**

- **How can you care for patients using your unique talents?**

- **What are three things that you will have the most fun doing within this specialty?
(Be specific)**

- **What is an issue within this specialty that fascinates you and that you look forward to becoming more involved with?**

- **What are your career goals?**

- **What are you looking for in your ideal program?**

- **As a member of the program, what do you hope to get, what do you hope to give?**

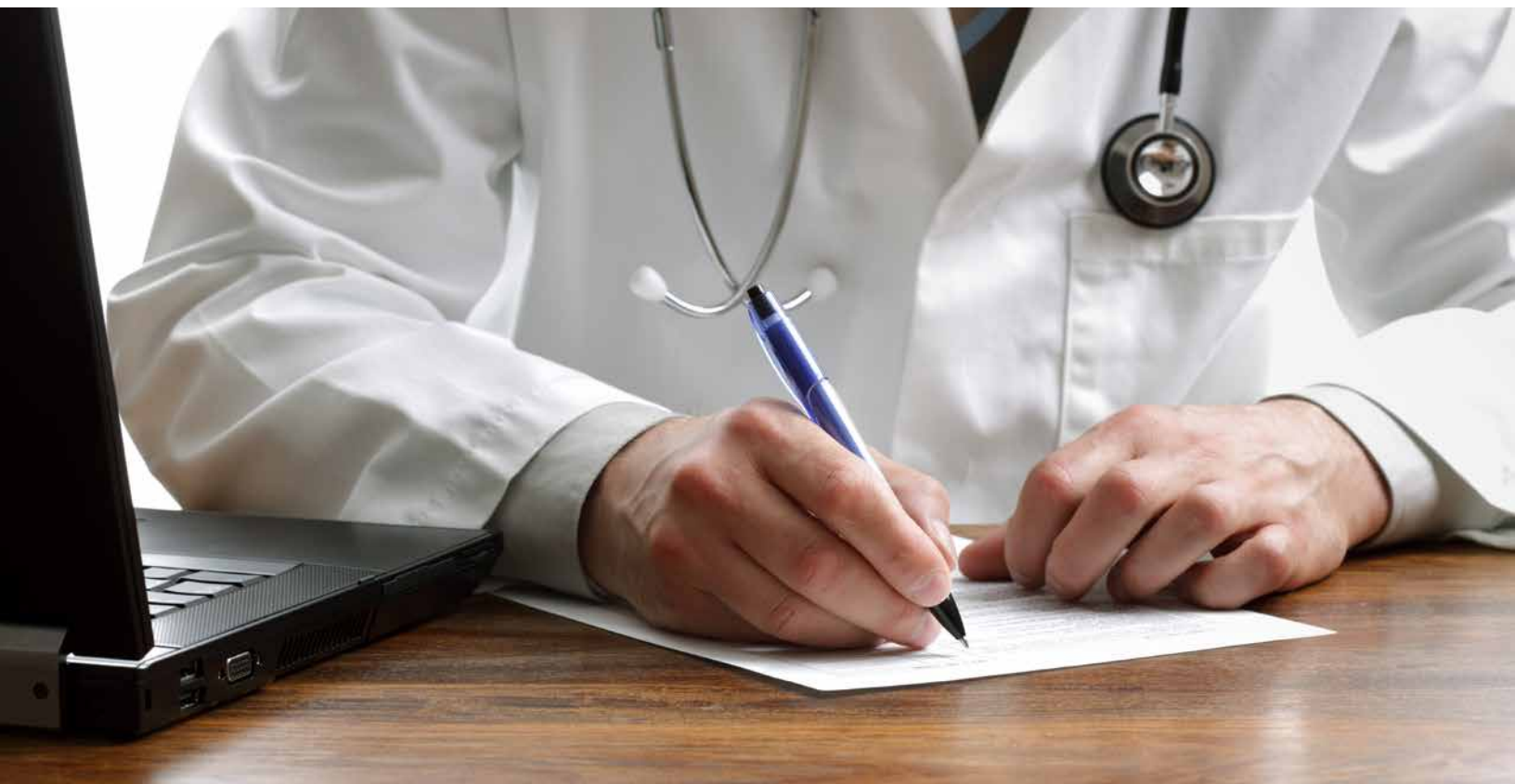


Writing Your Personal Statement

As you are writing your personal statement, the following are some tips for more compelling writing.

Some do's and don'ts

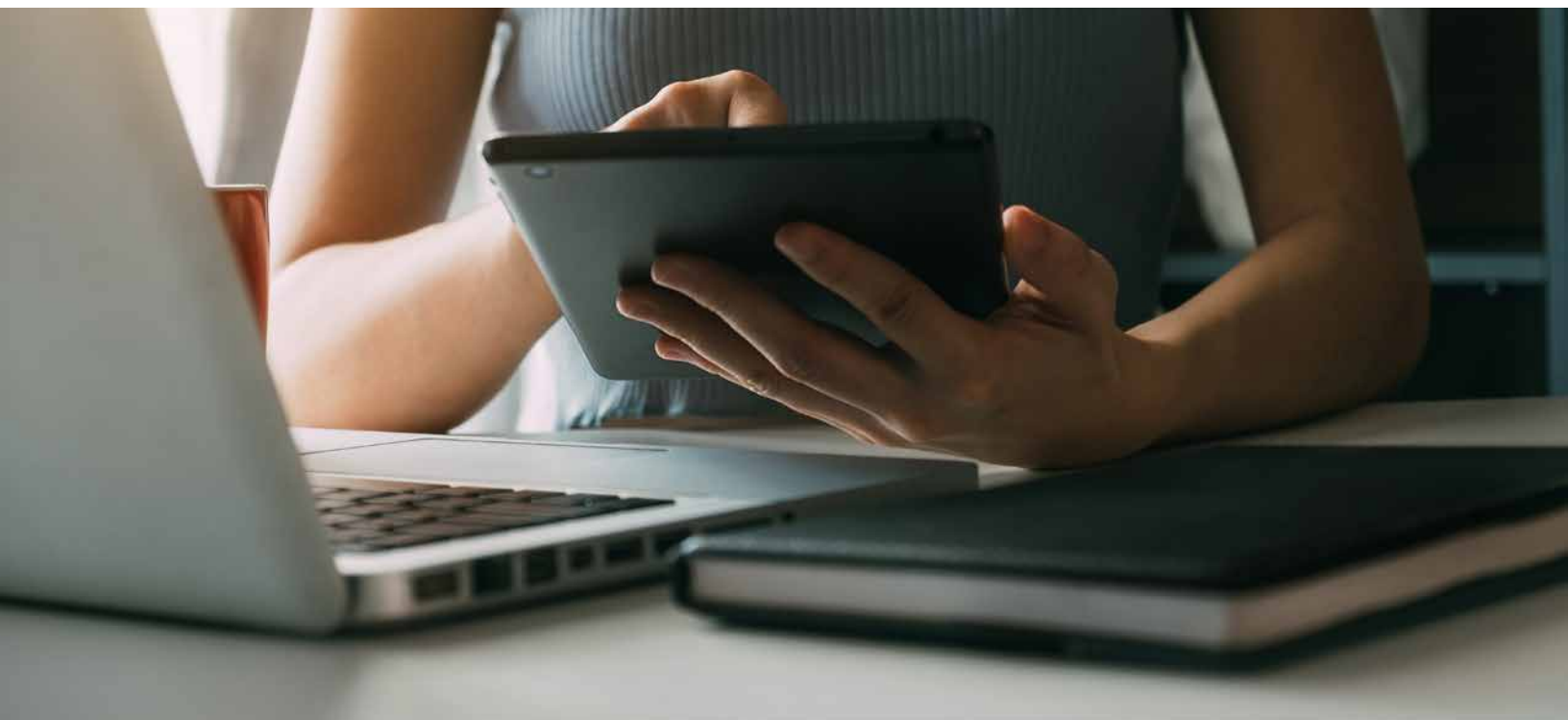
Do	Don't
Make sure things are grammatically correct	Trying to hard to be funny or too informal
Focus on the specialty	Bring up sensitive issues (e.g. religion or politics)
Customize it to the program you are applying to	Lie
Say something definitive about who you are	Expend valuable word count to say something about yourself that someone else can just as easily say about themselves
Give compelling examples or stories to back up your claims	Break patient confidentiality
Focus on the job and not on the perks	Talk negatively about other specialties or healthcare providers
Have other people you trust proof-read for tone, grammar, and spelling	Overly romanticize your specialty choice, show you are grounded and realistic



Making it stick

In the book, "Made to Stick," authors Dan and Chip Heath describes factors which makes something memorable: simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional, stories. You can integrate these tactics while writing your personal statement to make it more compelling and memorable.

- **SIMPLE**
 - Have an overarching theme or message
 - Don't try to say too much
 - **Notes:**
- **CREDIBLE**
 - Cite data and research
 - Cite unique aspects of your background
 - **Notes:**
- **UNEXPECTED**
 - Tell a story where the reader expects one thing, but the outcome was different
 - Pose a question that you don't answer right away until later
 - **Notes:**
- **EMOTIONAL**
 - Describe how you felt
 - Make the "highs" high and make the "lows" low
 - **Notes:**
- **CONCRETE**
 - Describe key physical details in your narrative
 - Use analogies to make things more accessible
 - **Notes:**
- **STORIES**
 - Tell a story
 - Give examples
 - **Notes:**



A Template

The following is a set of prompts to help organize your message. You can use your reflections from pages 6, 7, 9, and 11 to build your personal statement. (You do not have to maintain strict adherence to this order.)

- 1. A catchy introduction**
 - Describe a situation, paint a scene
 - Pose a compelling question
 - Cite a compelling statistic
 - Write something that would trigger the reader's sense of novelty

- 2. What does the reader need to know about you?**
 - What is your "X" factor?
 - What are your values? What are you 'about'?
 - What example / evidence do you have to back up your claim?

- 3. Why this specialty?**
 - Show me you know what this specialty is about
 - What about this specialty is the most exciting for you?
 - What goals do you have professionally?

- 4. Why this program?**
 - Show me you know what this program is about
 - Do you have any connections to the program?
 - Why would this program be a fit for you professionally?
 - What do you want to contribute to the program?

Notes