

## Personal Statement Guide

*Collected from a number of sources and my personal advice.*

### **AMCAS limits you to a total of 5300 characters – start cutting**

This is probably the single most important page you will ever write so it deserves your best effort. Because both the health professional schools and applicants from all over understand this, the expectation is that your statement will be error free and well written. Not only should you run it through a spell checker, but you should have Committee members or others you respect criticize it to catch errors in grammar, spelling (not caught by a spell checker), ambiguities, etc., as well as overall impact.

### **Purpose**

1. To present (and sell) yourself.
2. To demonstrate your communication skills.
3. To serve as a basis for your interview.
4. To show motivation.
5. To demonstrate your understanding of what a career in medicine entails.
6. To explain any irregularities in your academic record.

**Essays have structure.** *They usually consist of several paragraphs:*

- The **INTRODUCTION** sets the stage. If you intend to use a unifying image in your essay, this is where you set it up. If you have a clear, well-articulated statement about your future and goals, don't wait until the very end, express that here. You can always come back to it in the conclusion.
- The **BODY** of the essay consists of several paragraphs that provide more detail about what you have laid out in your introduction. Generally each of these paragraphs develops a discrete thought or aspect related to what you've talked about in your introduction.
- The **CONCLUSION** is where you tie it all up and bring your ideas to closure. Don't leave your audience hanging.

In a good essay you have **UNITY ~ COHERENCE ~ ORGANIZATION**. These are accomplished by:

- A unifying theme that runs through the whole essay.
- Logical flow from one thought to another. Caution: The use of transitional words (because, since, although, however, therefore, etc.) is very important in providing flow and coherence. Make sure you are using them properly and conveying the meaning you intend.
- Sticking to the topic set out in the introduction -- use only related thoughts -- don't introduce stray or unrelated thoughts.

**Basic Types** - Personal statements tend to fall into three basic types but can incorporate elements of more than one. Whichever approach you take, develop a "game" plan.

1. Introspective - This is the best and also most difficult to write. In it, you demonstrate your understanding of the qualities required to be a good medical student and a good physician and evaluate how you think you measure up.
2. Biographical - This explains how you became interested in medicine and what you have been doing to prepare yourself for such a career, both curricularly and cocurricularly. Inevitably, personal statements have some biographical elements, but these are more powerful if combined with an introspective approach. Biographical material can be presented chronologically, which is the easiest approach, or topically, which may be more effective.
3. Inspirational - This is the "Wouldn't it be wonderful to become a doctor and save the world" approach. It is fundamentally naïve and, therefore, may actually do you more harm than good.

### **Motivation**

Your application to medical school is a testimony to your desire to ultimately be a doctor. The admissions committee will look at your essay to see that you've answered the obvious, but not so simple, question "Why?" You must be able to explain your motivation for attending medical school.

*I look for a sustained understanding of why the candidate wants to enter medicine, how they've tested their interest, and how they've prepared for medical school.*

*Touch on your passion to pursue medicine. For many, medicine is akin to a calling, and the evaluator must get a sense that they are hearing and responding to the same motivation.*

You will be offered much advice in the upcoming pages, with plenty of do's and don'ts. In the midst of all of this, whatever you do, do not lose sight of the ultimate goal of the essay-to convince the admissions committee members that you belong at their medical school. Everything we tell you should be used as a means to this end, so step back from the details of this process regularly and remind yourself of the big picture:

*The essay is the way for candidates to make the argument as to why they, among all the highly qualified candidates, should be admitted to medical school and the eventual practice of medicine.*

**Writing/Communication Skills** - Another obvious function of the essay is to showcase your language abilities and writing skills.

*In the essay I want a clear sense that they understand and can communicate well why they are compelling candidates.*

*Especially if an applicant did some or all of the prerequisite coursework in another country, we will look to the essay to ensure strong English language skills.*

At this level, good writing skills are not sought; they are expected. So, while a beautifully written essay isn't going to get you into medical school, a poorly written one could keep you out.

Beyond showcasing your writing abilities and demonstrating your motivation, what else can the essay do for you? Following is more of what the members of the advisory panel said they look for in an essay.

**Soft Skills-** Let the rest of your application, not the personal statement, speak for your hard skills and achievements (such as your academic excellence, your fantastic MCAT scores, your class rank). What admissions officers seek in the essay are some specific soft skills such as sincerity, maturity, empathy, compassion, and motivation. These qualities were rated especially high in the medical community, more so than for any other graduate-level program we studied.

**The following qualities are those mentioned often sought after in the personal statement (listed from most desired):** motivation diversity sensitivity commitment uniqueness communication skills sincerity interest humanitarian beliefs honesty compassion enthusiasm maturity empathy creativity

Because these qualities are not quantifiable, and therefore not easily demonstrated through the usual criteria of grades and numbers, the essay is your first opportunity (and one of your only ones) to showcase them.

A successful essay will demonstrate in one way or another that the writer has the soft skills necessary to be a good doctor. This applicant was very direct in asserting his soft skills.

Motivation, independence, maturity, precisely those qualities my experiences in Eastern Europe instilled, will be essential to a fruitful career.

When qualities are mentioned as directly as this, the applicant must be careful to support the claims with clear evidence gathered from personal experience. More often, applicants let their achievements and experiences speak for themselves, and the qualities that they demonstrate are inferred.

**A Real Person** - This list is not ordered by importance; if it were, this category would be listed first. What admissions officers said they seek more than any specific skill or characteristic mentioned in the personal statement is a real, live human being:

*The members of a medical admissions committee are responsible for choosing the next generation of medical doctors. These are the people who will be healing our children, curing us and our parents, and literally saving lives. Put it in that perspective and the responsibility we feel is enormous. For this reason, we're going to choose to accept someone we feel we know, trust, and like.*

In light of this, then, it might not surprise you that when we asked admissions officers and medical students for their number one piece of advice regarding the essay, we received the same response almost every time. Although it was expressed in many different ways (be honest, be sincere, be unique, be personal, and so on) it all came down to the same point: "Be Yourself!"

*My number one piece of advice is: Be yourself when you write the essay. The medical profession is a lifetime commitment. Let*

*those in the profession know what drives you towards it!*

Unfortunately, achieving this level of communication in writing does not come naturally to everyone, but that does not mean it cannot be learned. Part of what can make this kind of writing seem so difficult is that it is very hard to gauge the impressions you are creating through your writing. Even if you have followed every tip in this course, it is a good idea to have some objective people-preferably those who do not already know you well-read it over when you have finished.

### **Get Personal**

The only way to let the admissions committee see you as an individual is to make your essay personal. When you do this, your essay will automatically be more interesting and engaging, helping it stand out from the hundreds of others the committee will be reviewing that week. *Make it personal. The most boring, dry essays are those that go on about how the applicant loves science and working with people and wants to serve humanity, but offer few personal details that give a sense of what the applicant is like.*

*Personalize your essay as much as possible-generic essays are not only boring to read, they're a waste of time because they don't tell you anything about the applicant that helps you get to know them better.*

**What does it mean to make your essay personal? It means that you drop the formalities and write about something that is truly meaningful to you. It means that you include a story or anecdote taken from your life, using ample detail and colorful imagery to give it life. And it means, above all, being completely honest.**