TIPS FOR WRITING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

Excerpts take from Medical School Personal Statement Secrets by Geoffrey Cook, Founder Essay Edge.com with additional commentary by Dr. Flick

Medical school admissions officers will often emphasize that they don't care what you choose to write about in your essay. They stress this because most writers try too hard to meet the expectations of their imagined readers, discarding all of their own personality in the process. Of course, there's truth in their advice: you should write with the goal of expressing your own values and conveying the qualities most important to you. But you must exercise your creativity with an eye toward the themes and points that will justify your suitability for medicine. After all, your ultimate goal is not just to stand out as a likeable person, but to obtain admission to a medical school.

In addition to the challenge of crafting a fresh take on standard ideas, you face the difficulty of integrating multiple sophisticated themes into a single coherent piece. The themes can be grouped into two basic categories: those that speak to your motivation for becoming a doctor and those that demonstrate the characteristics and abilities that qualify you for the profession.

Be Interesting!! Be Concise!!

Why Medicine?
Because people don't usually make career decisions based on pure reason, it can be difficult to explain why you've chosen the field you have. Moreover, your basic reasons probably look a lot like everyone else's. In this type of essay, you'll have to develop your ideas effectively and insightfully while emphasizing your uniqueness. Medicine requires such a serious commitment that few people stumble across the idea of pursuing it late in life. It's very likely that you have always wanted to be a doctor, and that's not a fact that you should hide. But don't offer your point in such a clichéd, prepackaged way as to make your reader cringe!!! For example, you shouldn't start your essay, "I have always wanted to be a doctor" or "I've always known that medicine was my calling." Better to describe early experiences and then let your interest unfold naturally.

Such as - by describing the direct impact a doctor had on your life or the life of someone close to you can be an effective way to demonstrate what draws you to medicine. A twist on the "patient's perspective" approach is to describe a time when medicine failed to save or heal someone close to you. The purpose of this tactic would not be to rail against the medical profession, of course, but rather to show how a disappointing loss inspired you to join the struggle against disease and sickness.

Remember - telling a story, giving an example allows much more of your personality and passion to radiate through your statement than "listing" reasons or stating "why you really want to be a doctor" - you are striving to show the reader that you "get it" and feel what the practice of medicine is all about - not trying to shove a sale's pitch down their throats of "pick me - pick me"

How Are You Qualified?
The way to prove your qualification is not to list attributes you believe you possess but to discuss concrete experiences that show your abilities and qualities. As always, details are paramount. The rest of your application has already summarized your accomplishments and your activities. Show the reader what you did in concrete terms, and again, highlight your active roles. The experiences that demonstrate your qualification are not necessarily distinct from those that explain your motivation. You shouldn’t plan on dividing the essay into two separate sections for each, but rather organize the structure by topic and extrapolate insights as they develop. It’s important that you think of the essay as an integrated whole, not as a checklist of questions you must answer.

Some degree of clinical experience is usually expected, though it's more essential to the “testing your interest” aspect we discussed in the last section of the course than to your qualifications. The main point you’re trying to convey here is that you will work well with patients and in a clinical setting. Your shadowing experience might overlap this material, but the emphasis here is on what you learned through observation.

Students often get lost in the concept of “clinical experience” - shadowing over a diverse spectrum of situations (hospital, private care (different specialties), indigent and international care) is far more impressive than spending 1,000 hours in the chart room of the local hospital - schools are not expecting students to have performed extensive clinical procedures, etc. but to have least investigated their interests by gaining exposure in the clinical arena to the different types of medicine - how do you know horse back riding is your passion if you have never seen or even been on a horse.

A strong research background helps your case, because the laboratory is such an integral part of the medical school experience. It's not possible to prove your intellectual capability through a short description of your projects, so you should try to convey such intangible qualities as creativity, initiative, and original thinking. Focus on your contribution rather than your research topic. For example, you could describe a situation where you recognized a flaw in a procedure and had the initiative to show your supervisor how efficiency could be improved. No matter how minor your contribution seems, it’s better to focus on some tangible input that you had than to describe the project as a whole. As always, the key is to delineate your active role.

**TOP 10 MEDICAL SCHOOL PERSONAL STATEMENT WRITING TIPS**

**1. Don’t Resort to Cliches.**

Every year, medical school admissions officers read thousands of variations of this sentence: "I want to be a doctor so I can help people." It's undoubtedly true in most instances, yet it inevitably fails because it reveals nothing unique about the individual applicant. If you demonstrate a penchant for helping others by describing specific activities—community service, for example—it will become unnecessary to declare that desire, as it will already be clear. Every doctor helps people, so focus on the specific actions you have taken.

**2. Don’t Bore the Reader. Do Be Interesting.**

Admissions officers have to read hundreds of essays, and they must often skim. Abstract rumination has no place in an application essay. Admissions officers aren't looking for a new way to view the world; they're looking for a new way to view you the applicant. The best way to grip your reader is to begin the essay with a captivating snapshot. Notice how the slightly jarring scene depicted in the “after” creates intrigue and keeps the reader’s interest.

*Before:* I am a compilation of many years of experiences gained from overcoming the relentless
struggles of life.
After: I was six years old, the eldest of six children in the Bronx, when my father was murdered.

Find the “catch” that draws the reader in - remember your favorite books and how they opened with statements that made you want to “read on” to the next page

3. DO Use Personal Detail. Show, Don't Tell! Tell a Story - Give an Example!!

Good essays are concrete and grounded in personal detail. They do not merely assert "I learned my lesson" or that "these lessons are useful both on and off the field." They show it through personal detail. "Show don't tell," means if you want to relate a personal quality, do so through your experiences and do not merely assert it.

Before: If it were not for a strong support system which instilled into me strong family values and morals, I would not be where I am today.

After: Although my grandmother and I didn't have a car or running water, we still lived far more comfortably than did the other families I knew. I learned an important lesson: My grandmother made the most of what little she had, and she was known and respected for her generosity. Even at that age, I recognized the value she placed on maximizing her resources and helping those around her.
The first example is vague and could have been written by anybody. But the second sentence evokes a vivid image of something that actually happened, placing the reader in the experience of the applicant.

4. DO Be Concise. DON'T Be Wordy.

Wordiness not only takes up valuable space, but also confuses the important ideas you're trying to convey. Short sentences are more forceful because they are direct and to the point. Certain phrases, such as "the fact that," are usually unnecessary. Notice how the revised version focuses on active verbs rather than forms of "to be" and adverbs and adjectives.

Before: My recognition of the fact that we had finally completed the research project was a deeply satisfying moment that will forever linger in my memory.

After: Completing the research project at last gave me an enduring sense of fulfillment.

5. DO Address Your Weaknesses but DON’T Dwell on Them. DO NOT Make Excuses

At some point on your application, you will have an opportunity to explain deficiencies in your record, and you should take advantage of it. Be sure to explain them adequately: Staying up late the night before the MCAT is not a legitimate reason for a bad performance, while documented sickness could be. If you lack volunteer hospital experience, you might point out the number of hours you had to work to make college more affordable for your family. The best tactic is to spin the negatives into positives by stressing your attempts to improve; for example, mention your poor first-quarter grades briefly, then describe what you did to bring them up.

6. DO Vary Your Sentences and Use Transitions. Avoid the “I” word - Change Up the Perspective

The best essays contain a variety of sentence lengths mixed within any given paragraph. Also, remember that transition is not limited to words like nevertheless, furthermore or consequently. Good transition flows from the natural thought progression of your argument.

7. DO Use Active Voice Verbs
Passive-voice expressions are verb phrases in which the subject receives the action expressed in the verb. Passive voice employs a form of the word to be, such as was or were. Overuse of the passive voice makes prose seem flat and uninteresting.

Before: The lessons that have prepared me for my career as a doctor were taught to me by my mother.

After: My mother taught me lessons that will prove invaluable in my career as a doctor.

8. DO Seek Multiple Opinions.

Ask your friends and family to keep these questions in mind:

- Does my essay have one central theme?
- Does my introduction engage the reader? Does my conclusion provide closure?
- Do my introduction and conclusion avoid summary?
- Do I use concrete experiences as supporting details?
- Have I used active-voice verbs wherever possible?
- Is my sentence structure varied, or do I use all long or short sentences?
- Are there any cliches such as "cutting edge" or "learned my lesson?"
- Do I use transitions appropriately?
- What about the essay is memorable?
- What's the worst part of the essay?
- What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear?
- What parts of the essay do not support my main argument?
- Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This must be the case.
- What does the essay reveal about my personality?

9. Don't Wander. Do Stay Focused. Remember that many interviews are “blinded” and the interviewer may have only had access to your personal statement - highlight what you believe are your 3-4 most unique attributes and strengths that could provide the interviewer for “springboard” questions to you where you can demonstrate your commitment and the uniqueness of your application - and then conclude with a challenge - you may reflect back to your opening paragraph or theme and then group your final paragraph toward where you go from here - your commitment

- Many applicants try to turn the personal statement into a complete autobiography. Not surprisingly, they find it difficult to pack so much information into such a short essay, and their essays end up sounding more like a list of experiences than a coherent, well-organized thought. Make sure that every sentence in your essay exists solely to support your strengths and your essay's theme(s). You want to create an essay that leaves the reader wanting to learn more about you - so that once they set the essay down and pick it up again in review committee that they are able to recall the unique and engaging aspects of your personal statement.

10. Do Revise, Revise, Revise.

- The first step in an improving any essay is to cut, cut, and cut some more.
- Use a “five paragraph” concept with your first paragraph presenting a “catch” that grabs the reviewers attention - much like a good book. Use the next 3-4 paragraphs to highlight those distinct and unique characteristics and attributes about yourself you wish to
highlight - remember - these DO NOT all have to be clinical/research based and it is actually better if they are not. It is far better to use this opportunity to highlight your commitment and passion for the healthcare field but also your other unique attributes and interests - remember - they are not only looking for good diagnosticians but also applicants that diversity of interests that will enable them to relate to their diverse patient population

SAMPLE ESSAY
His eyesight was almost completely gone, yet there he was on the diamond. I met Jason last summer in Chicago, where I volunteered at a tournament for Beep Baseball, a baseball-like sport for the visually impaired. He was my age—handsome, friendly, and athletic. But Jason was blind. Struck by glaucoma, he had begun to lose his vision in his early teens. By high school, he had become legally blind. My sympathy only intensified when I learned that, had his disease been diagnosed earlier, he almost surely would have retained partial vision. Financially strapped, Jason's family had avoided taking him to a doctor for as long as they could; when he finally visited a physician, it was too late. For years I had planned to work in technology, but my encounters with Jason and others like him convinced me that medicine is my true calling. Actually, growing up I had always planned to become a doctor, but my goals changed as I began to take computer science classes at [COLLEGE NAME]. In the first meeting of my sophomore-year class on Programming in Artificial Intelligence, Professor Larry Birnbaum joked, "You know those movies where killer robots eventually take over the world? Believe them." I did just that, placing my trust in the vast opportunities offered by computer programming. In my first computer course, I created applications that could beat a human in tic-tac-toe, calculate complex mathematical problems, and even converse with humans on a specified topic. Fascinated with the potential of these programs, I embarked on a different path, away from clinical medicine. I saw a world in which computers would change and even replace processes in every industry, and I wanted to join the researchers at the forefront of this revolution.

Five years after that first class, the potential contribution of computer technology still inspires me. The possibilities are astounding. Scientists mapped the human genome years before their original deadline. Nanotechnology promises to revolutionize the way we detect and cure diseases. Still, the more I learn about technology, the more I recognize its inadequacies. Although the "psychologist" program I created faithfully reproduces human responses, I discovered that I would never want to speak with a computer about my problems. Certain interactions simply demand personal contact. As I have tutored underclassmen in math and science, worked with athletes in the Special Olympics, and visited with patients as a volunteer at Northwest Community Hospital, I have realized that the human element in such relationships is irreplaceable. While technology may shape the future of mankind, only humanity can touch individual lives. Jason's story touched mine, confirming my growing sense of the deficiencies in science and technology. Advances in medical knowledge and techniques are useless without parallel progress in healthcare accessibility, widespread education about health issues, and most importantly, strong doctor-patient relationships. The revolutionary treatment methods I imagined myself inventing might never have an impact on patients like Jason. On the other hand, the dedication of just a few volunteers allowed him to play the sport he had always loved. Science could not fix Jason's eyesight, but supportive doctors, volunteers, and friends could help him live a fulfilling life. Spending time with him and others convinced me that, in addition to my research in medical science and technology, I wanted to work directly with those whose ailments cannot currently be cured.

I have thus circled back to my original path towards medicine, with no regrets about the scenic route that led me here. Indeed, I am confident that I will make good use of my computer science skills as I research potential advancements in medical technology. This summer, I began work as a research assistant to Dr. Chi-Hung Chang at Northwestern's Buehler Center on Aging. With Dr. Chang, I am developing a computer program that determines the "quality of life" of terminally ill patients. By compiling physician diagnostics and patient responses to questionnaires, the system assesses the value of given treatments as well as the efficacy of specific pharmaceuticals.
Through this project, we hope to understand and improve the current care of the terminally ill. After watching Dr. Chang and other doctors at the medical research facility, I can now declare with confidence that I want to follow their example in my own career, combining clinical practice and research. My work on the "quality of life" evaluation project gave me a perfect opportunity to fulfill this dual goal, and I look forward to a lifetime spent on similar pursuits. Yet I will never forget that the seeds of my current ambition arose not in the laboratory or at the health center, but on a baseball diamond filled with people playing a game they likely thought they would never play again. In my own career as a physician, I will strive to serve my patients not only as a healer, but also as a friend, supporting them in their toughest moments, and as a mentor, guiding them to live healthy lifestyles. Robots may assist in my endeavors, but they will never possess the compassion of my fellow physicians and me.

SECONDARIES

Unlike the AMCAS application, secondary applications will have specific questions. Be certain your essays answer the questions they are addressing. Don't use canned answers. While you can cut and paste, take the time to answer each question — not just the questions asked on the first application you worked on.

Approaches to Common Secondary Questions

Why do you want to attend this school?

In answering this question, show that you have researched the school and its programs. Discuss the program's distinctive attraction for you. If you are interested in a particular specialty and this school is especially strong in that area, discuss your interest in that field and the special opportunities the school provides. Perhaps mention the work of a particular professor whom you admire. Briefly write about the advantages of the school's location and its appeal, but don't make the accidents of geography the main focus of this essay.

Where do you hope to be in ten years?

To further bring out your experiences and add pieces to the jigsaw puzzle that is you, tie your future to your past with this school's program: Show how your aspirations stem from past experience and then discuss how the school's program will enable you to achieve your goals. Use this essay to demonstrate your knowledge of the medical profession and that you have given some thought about your future. Show that you have realistic goals while discussing your anticipated career path.

What clinical experiences influenced your decision to go into medicine?
View this question as a great opportunity to fill in some gaps in that picture you are trying to create. If you discussed the most important aspect of your clinical experience in your AMCAS essay, for this question you can discuss some other aspects of that experience while reminding your reader briefly of the points made in the AMCAS essay. Alternatively, you can discuss a volunteer experience that you didn't have room to mention in the AMCAS essay and reinforce some of the points you made there using different anecdotes and examples. As always use specifics, but remember to reflect on those incidents so the reader will know why you considered them important enough to include.

**10 Secrets of Good Writing**

1. Express yourself in positive language. Say what is, not what is not.

2. Use transitions between paragraphs. Transitions tie one paragraph to the next.
   - A transition can be a word, like later, furthermore, additionally, or moreover; a phrase like After this incident...; or an entire sentence.
   - If you are writing about Topic A and now want to discuss Topic B, you can begin the new paragraph with a transition such as "Like (or unlike) Topic A, Topic B..."

3. Vary your sentence structure. It's boring to see subject, verb, object all the time. Mix simple, complex, and compound sentences.

4. Understand the words you write. You write to communicate, not to impress the admissions staff with your vocabulary. When you choose a word that means something other than what you intend, you neither communicate nor impress. You do convey the wrong message or convince the admissions officer that you are inarticulate.

5. Look up synonyms in a thesaurus when you use the same word repeatedly. After the DELETE key, the thesaurus is your best friend. As long as you follow Tip 4, using one will make your writing more interesting.

6. Be succinct. Compare:
   - During my sophomore and junior years, there was significant development of my maturity and markedly improved self-discipline towards school work.
   - During my sophomore and junior years, I matured and my self-discipline improved tremendously.
   The first example takes many more words to give the same information. The admissions officers are swamped; they do not want to spend more time than necessary reading your essay. Say what you have to say in as few words as possible. Tips 7, 8, and 9 will help you to implement this suggestion.

7. Make every word count. Do not repeat yourself. Each sentence and every word should
state something new.

8. Avoid qualifiers such as rather, quite, somewhat, probably, possibly, etc.
   • You might improve your writing somewhat if you sometimes try to follow this suggestion.
   The example contains nonsense. Deleting unnecessary qualifiers will strengthen your writing 1000%. Equivocating reveals a lack of confidence.
   If you do not believe what you write, why should the admissions officer?

9. Use the active voice. Compare:
   • The application was sent by the student. (Passive voice)
   • The student sent the application. (Active voice)
   They both communicate the same information. The active voice, however, is more concise; it specifies who is performing the action and what is the object. The passive voice is wordier and frequently less clear.

10. Read and reread Elements of Style by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White. Containing basic rules of grammar, punctuation, composition, and style, this indispensable classic is available in paperback and is only eighty-five pages long.

For Non-Science Majors- how do you write about yourself

What Do You Care About?
You probably chose your undergraduate major for several reasons - career opportunities, high grades, inspiring professors - but hopefully the top reason was your genuine interest in the subject. You need to convey this interest in your personal statement. Medical schools want students with the potential to become passionate, dedicated physicians. Following your heart into art or physics can demonstrate that you have these raw materials. To write a compelling personal statement, however, you need to do more than state your love for the Louvre or Einstein. Dig deeply into your passion and explain - with specific examples - how you expressed it. These details will show the Admissions Committee that you're a multidimensional human being with the breadth and depth to learn on different levels and relate to your patients, while contributing to the medical school classroom.

So What Did You Study Again?
Every major subject imparts a unique set of skills. Your job now is translating these into ones that are relevant to the medical profession. You know that patient interactions are important, so explain how reporting for the college newspaper honed your empathetic and listening skills. You know that it's essential to work closely with your classmates and colleagues, so write about the mentorship you provided while directing a one-act play (or tutoring mathematics). You've heard about the importance of memorizing and assimilating facts in medical school, so describe your facility for memorizing Keats and Shelley (or the periodic table). In each case, select specific examples that demonstrate your strengths and make your essay come alive. Regardless of your major, your personal statement should emphasize the qualities that will make you a good medical student and
physician.

**And Why Did You Want To Be A Doctor?**
Even after pursuing your other passions, you still want to be a doctor. It's particularly important for applicants who strayed from the normal pre-med track to explain this decision in honest, heartfelt terms that go beyond a basic desire to "help people." Just as important, you need to share your understanding of what practicing medicine will be like, based on your interactions with physicians. What do you love about the profession? Knowing the challenges and difficulties, why is this still your career goal? Again, provide specific supporting examples. Your realistic expectations and first-hand observations will reflect your maturity and commitment to succeed as a physician.

**How to write about your research (please do not give all the details of your project - but rather highlight how it has enriched you)**

**What's Your Research About . Briefly?**
If you decide that research is a unique and defining experience, how can you best express this to the Admissions Committee? You know your subject matter inside and out, but not everybody needs - or wants - that much detail. Treat your personal statement as a personal introduction, not an in-depth technical description of your work (again, you can do that in your secondary’s and interviews). Briefly outline the goals of your research project and, more importantly, describe your role in it by using specific examples that draw the reader into the story. Use ordinary language and be sure to ask your liberal arts friends to read it. If it makes sense to them, you've succeeded.

**More Than Just Numbers**
Teamwork, communication, initiative, mentoring - these are just some of the qualities that medical schools look for in their students. As you identify what your research has taught you, give equal time to interpersonal skills like these, along with specific examples of how you've used them. This will combat the stereotype of "science nerd" while showing the Admissions Committee that you've got what it takes for med school.

**Why Medical School?**
Given your research background, you probably want to explain how it fits into your future. You aren't expected to have all the answers at this point, but you should explain why you want to be a doctor in honest, heartfelt terms that go beyond a basic desire to "help people," and implicitly answer the unasked question: why aren't you going into pure research?
Just as important, you need to share your understanding of what practicing medicine will be like, based on your interactions with physicians. What do you love about the profession? Have you been inspired by doctors who balanced research and patient care? Knowing the challenges and difficulties, why is this still your career goal? Again, provide specific supporting examples. Your realistic expectations and first-hand observations will reflect your maturity and commitment to succeed as a physician.
Tips for the Older Applicants

"You're going back to medical school? What would you do that for? Are you crazy?"
Hopefully most people won't react so strongly when you share your news, but the question is probably still on their minds. And similar reservations may just pop into the heads of admissions committee members when they review your file. Here are some ways to show them that it's never too late for you to become a doctor.

The Big Question
Whether explicit or not, the big question on the admissions committee's mind is: "Why, when the vast majority of people are advancing established careers, raising their families, and building their nest eggs, would you embark on many years of grueling medical training?"
As a returning student who chose not to pursue the traditional pre-med/medical school path, you must be prepared to answer this question-your personal statement can't tiptoe around it. Hopefully you've already given this matter a great deal of thought; if not, step back and think before proceeding. This introspection will serve you well while writing your personal statement, not to mention as you begin your training to become a doctor.

What's Wrong With Your Job Now?
There are probably several reasons you want to change careers. Address these in a positive way that emphasizes the aspects you seek in medicine. Instead of saying you hate sitting in a cubicle all day selling stocks, explain how working as an ER clerk made you realize how much you missed personal human contact. Instead of complaining about being your firm's sole accountant, describe how working with volunteers at the local hospital gave you a taste for teamwork. And don't hesitate to discuss what you really like about your current career. In writing about both the positive and negative aspects of your job, focus on the events and decisions that have brought you back to medicine.

Getting Specific
Med school applicants often write about why they want to be a doctor. Mundane essays about helping people in the abstract or facing a medical condition can become extraordinary when infused with your personality - both the big events and the nuances that make you who you are. The following advice applies to everyone writing a personal statement:

• **Write a focused essay** that goes beyond your GPA and MCAT scores.
• **Select specific examples** that demonstrate your strengths and make your essay come alive.
• **Draw the reader into the story** using anecdotes to illustrate your story and bring out your unique experiences and perspectives.

However, as a non-traditional student, you have the benefit of extra experiences and maturity. Review your personal skills inventory-chances are that what has helped you in your career to date can also help you in medical school. Whether writing about the communication skills you learned as a lawyer, the focus you acquired as an air traffic controller, or the patience you developed as a researcher, illustrating your assets in a personal and specific way will highlight your abilities and demonstrate what perspectives
and life experiences you can bring to medical school.

**Have You Got What It Takes?**
The admissions committee may also have concerns about your ability to survive medical school. Have you been exposed to the medical field through volunteer work? Do you have the science background to understand your coursework? Do you have personal responsibilities that will distract you from medical school? Most importantly, do you have the motivation to compete with younger students?

While you don't need to answer all these questions in your personal statement (you can flesh them out more in your [secondaries](#)), you can preempt these criticisms by emphasizing that, more than anything else, medicine is what you really want. Using firsthand experiences, describe how you've learned what a medical career involves and are willing to make sacrifices to achieve it. If you have other obligations, detail your plan to meet them while you're in medical school. Prove that you have the energy and motivation to succeed by relating other challenges you've faced. Again, supporting your claims with concrete examples gives the admissions committee a better introduction to you and all your strengths.