Preparing for the Match
Personal Statement

Tips for Preparing Your Personal Statement

A part of nearly every application process is the preparation of a personal or autobiographical statement. Generally speaking, the application forms for residency positions will request a personal statement. As in the case of a CV, faculty members who write your letters of recommendation and the Associate Dean for Student Affairs will ask for this information even if your applications do not. The importance of your personal statement and its interpretation by every program director and residency selection chairman will vary. Some individuals will use these essays as background to the rest of the application; others will use them to assess an applicant's intelligence, personality, character, aspirations, and professionalism.

A personal statement serves to compliment and supplement your CV with a description of your qualifications and strengths in narrative form. Like a CV, it is written for a specific purpose or position. The goal is to eloquently convey how and why you are qualified for the position to which you are applying. In the case of a residency position, you want to make clear the basis of your interest in that specialty and, if possible, that particular program.

Highlight items in your CV if they help to remind your reader of your experiences that make you well prepared for the position. However, do not simply re-hash your CV in prose form and call it your personal statement. Expand on the important activities so that your reader may appreciate the breadth and depth of your involvement in them.

Writing a personal statement also gives you the opportunity to describe yourself, your background, significant personal experiences in your life (if they are relevant), and your hopes and expectations about your future career. The best essays tell the reader what a superior applicant you are without explicitly stating it. For example, telling a story about yourself is a good way to accomplish this because it allows the reader to draw his or her own conclusions about you. In addition, the ability to put down on paper clear, realistic, and carefully considered goals will leave the reader with a strong impression of your maturity, self-awareness, and character.

The importance of effective writing skills cannot be overemphasized. The quality of your writing in the preparation of a personal statement is at least as important as the content. Unfortunately, not only are good writing skills allowed to deteriorate during medical school, in some sense, they are deliberately undermined in the interest of learning to hastily write histories and physicals. For the moment, forget everything you know about writing H & P's.

Start writing and rewriting your personal statement very early in the process so that you have time to perfect it. Be sure that you have as many other people as possible help you edit your personal statement. We have hired Teresa Manning as a resource for assisting with your personal statement.

Here are some pointers for writing an interesting and effective personal statement:

* Start early and consider it a draft so you have time to rewrite your statement multiple times.
* Remember your purpose in the personal statement is to make them want you. Your cv gives your "actions"; your personal statement should convey your "contemplations or reflections". Try and convince them you are a superior applicant without explicitly stating it.
* Use plain language. The goal is to engage the reader. If you use flowery language or pretentious words, the reader is more involved in the language and not the story.

* Tell a story and let the reader draw conclusions about you. Resist the phrase, “I am passionate about…” Let the story make that clear.

* Write a focused essay covering the basics, 4-5 paragraphs and < one page long.

* Write in full sentences and tend toward shorter sentences. One thought/one sentence; One topic/one paragraph.

* Use correct grammar and spelling – always run a spellcheck or better yet let a good proofreader read it.

* Avoid abbreviations and acronyms.

* Avoid repetitive sentence structure.

* Write with a fresh presentation in order to spark some interest for the reader.

* Identify your specialty early.

* Own up to red flags and describe how you’ve grown. Don’t make excuses.

* Do not use the pronoun "I" too much.

* Be honest and consistent with the rest of your application.

* Too long is worse than too short.

To ensure your statement is well written, have others read and edit it with you. Remember, the key to good writing is rewriting. You may also want a crash course in good writing skills, so consider reading The Elements of Style by Strunk and White.