

### SUGGESTIONS FOR AN EFFECTIVE PERSONAL ESSAY

Your essays are a very important component of the application process, whether part of your AMCAS application, your non-AMCAS or secondary applications, or one of the other health professions applications.

**Please proofread carefully. Comments may not be added, deleted, altered, corrected, returned, or substituted in any way after they are submitted to AMCAS. Typographical or grammatical errors will not be corrected by AMCAS under any circumstances. If the application materials are submitted without the Personal Comments, they cannot be added at a later date.**

Do not refer by name to any medical schools in the Personal Comments. Such references cannot be deleted if you later choose to forward your materials to additional schools.

#### **WHAT TO SAY:**

First and last, what you say should be error-free. Type your essay directly into the box on the AMCAS application. It is not possible to cut and paste from other sources. The characters turn to garble if you attempt to do this. The AMCAS application does not have spell check. Be prepared to have several people read your essay who are good writers. Ask them for feedback. Are the points you are trying to make clear? Plan your time to allow a few days between revisions. Everything reads differently after you have put time between the writing and the reading.

#### **TOPICS TO CONSIDER:**

There are five standard topics for the Personal Comments page, according to *"Write for Success,"* a book written by members of the National Association of Advisors for the Health Professions\*. The topics are 1) your motivation for a career as a physician, 2) the influence of your family/early experiences on your life, 3) the influence of extracurricular work/volunteer activities on your life, 4) your long-term goals, and 5) your personal philosophy. It is also suggested that irregularities in your academic record may need to be explained in this section (Do not utilize the whole section for this purpose, however, and do not make excuses--just explain).

In considering which topic best fits you, think about where you have something meaningful to say. It is not realistic to think that you can comment on each area. In attempting to do so, you will probably leave the reader with nothing to remember about you. Your goal in selecting the best topic for you, and in writing about it is to create an impression that you will be an interesting applicant to interview. When you have identified an area, think about anecdotal information or stories that support what you are stating. These stories will personalize your essay, and leave the reader with something specific to remember about you.

✓ *A few pointers to get through the first draft.*

Make a list of everything the committees should know. You might list qualities you believe you possess, experience you have had in working with people, your accomplishments and contributions. But before you organize your ideas - simply get them down on paper. After making your list, organize the items into groups that fit together. Then, prioritize your list - you may not have space for everything. Now, you're ready to write your personal statement.

Some people find it easier to tackle the body first, completing the introduction and conclusion after they collect thoughts on paper. The introduction and conclusion should be brief - a simple phrase or sentence that provides a concrete beginning and end. Some people even omit a conclusion. Have two people read your essay. One reader should be someone who knows you personally; if you have left out pertinent information, he or she can point it out to you. The second person should be someone who doesn't know you well; anything confusing to someone only casually acquainted with you may also be unclear to an admissions committee member.

Although there is no one right way to write the essay, you may wish to describe your reasons for wanting to enter a particular field and your accomplishments or experiences that might contribute to your succeeding. Rather than saying, "I am compassionate," "mature," or something similar, cite a particular experience or situation which reveals that quality. Be specific when discussing your motives for wanting to get into health professional school. Many applicants cite their love of people and their interest in science as primary motives. Be more creative - try to avoid these overused phrases.

You may also include in your statement who you worked for and how, where, when, and exactly what degree of responsibility you assumed in paid, volunteer, clinical, or research activities. This information often appears elsewhere on the application, so mention it again *only* to elaborate, revealing new information about yourself.

Try not to "laundry-list" activities, particularly clinical experience. Admissions committee members usually are health professionals who know how care is delivered and what is involved in routing procedures, assignments, and so forth. Present the basic ideas of your duties, but don't waste precious space on a list that adds little information that is specific to you. Feel free to include any awards you've received or publications you have been credited with as a result of research or other work you've done.

*Briefly* include extracurricular activities such as a sport, artistic, or musical endeavors, providing you demonstrate their relevance to your personal statement and your professional growth. Admissions committees favorably view such activities since success in these areas is often the result of dedication, perseverance, discipline, and relating to other people.

When discussing your experience in healthcare or community service, use the bulk of the allotted space to expand on activities you undertook during your college years. Although high school and childhood experiences may show how long you have been interested in a particular goal, they should only be included if they are relevant and any comments about them should be brief.

✓ *Some pointers for polishing your essay*

*The order of your experiences:* Although convenient for most writers and readers, chronological ordering is not necessary. It is vital, however, to provide the reader with time reference points, so he or she does not have to sort out that information.

*Statements only you can make:* Avoid generalizations or third-person comments on facts that anyone could state. Instead, give an illustration to support your thoughts.

*Example:* It is important to be a well-organized person.

*Better:* While working as an orderly 40 hours a week at the University of California, Davis Medical Center, I saw that I had to prioritize my tasks, making sure the patients came first. I also had to work more efficiently, anticipating the needs of the floor nurses, for instance. I experienced first-hand physically and emotionally demanding duties required of a surgical resident.

*Oversentimentality:* Avoid gush and mush! The following example should get the point across: I have wanted to be a veterinarian since I was 10 years old when our family dog, Petey, lay dying after being run over by a car. I knew then that I wanted to be in a position to do something to help sick and injured animals rather than to stand by helplessly. For this reason I chose to study veterinary medicine.

*Comment:* Avoid this kind of statement altogether. While the story might be true, it detracts from the professional image you're trying to portray. An emotional appeal to the reader is not convincing evidence of a well-reasoned decision to enter a particular profession.

*Negatives to positives:* Turn any detrimental aspects of your background into pluses. Avoid sounding as if you are making excuses for your record.

*Example:* I would have made better grades in my science courses during my first year, but my personal problems made it impossible for me to concentrate on my studies.

*Better:* Although my grades during my first year at college suffered during my father's serious illness, I gained valuable insight into my feelings about terminal illness. I also gained a strong sense of the needs of the patient and the family during these times.

*Setting the tone for your statement:* Strive for an objective, professional tone. Avoid sentences or phrases that lend a chatty flavor to your essay. You are writing for professionals, so be professional in your choice of words.

The overall content of your personal statement must be succinct and informative. Be careful to avoid statements that may antagonize a reader. Steer clear of strong opinions, political statements, religious issues, and other controversial topics, for you will face many personality types sitting on the admissions committees. Proofread your final draft for any trace of a topic that might provoke disagreement, doubt, or hostility. It is fine to have strong convictions on issues; however, your initial application to professional school is not the appropriate place for such disclosures.

### ✓ *General hints for effective personal statements*

- Precisely follow the application's directions for content and format.
- Avoid slang, overused phrases, and words that are too chatty or controversial for formal writing.
- Proof your essay carefully for sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and dangling phrases (or ideas).
- Be especially careful to avoid introducing an important idea late in your statement; you won't have ample space to properly discuss it.
- Vary your sentence structure in order to keep the reader interested. Avoid a series of paragraphs which begin with *I*, or paragraphs that contain too many *I*'s.
- Don't try to be clever or humorous unless you are *sure* you can pull it off with finesse; application to health professional school is serious business.
- Use the active voice: "I transported patients to and from the operating rooms...," not "I was employed by UC Davis Med Center to assist..." You are writing a *personal* statement; put the spotlight on you, rather than on someone or something else.
- Use active, descriptive verbs: observed, assisted, prepared..., rather than: was, are, had been....
- A good paragraph addresses one major idea. Strive for this construction. Don't pad paragraphs to fill up empty space.
- Be concise; never use three words when one will do.
- Spell out long names of places and institutions the first time they appear in your statement, with its abbreviation immediately after for example, University of California, Davis Medical Center (UCDMC).
- Check for typing errors, misspelled or incorrectly hyphenated words, grammar, and punctuation. It is always a good idea to have someone else proof your work.

### ✓ *Personal statement checklist*

- Have you written your essay the way you would say it?
- Have you portrayed a realistic picture of *you*?
- Have you pointed out your strong points as well as addressed any issues of difficulty you have encountered?
- What special circumstances prevailed during your undergraduate education? Have you explained them?
- Have you followed each negative point with a positive statement of your abilities? You may want to include brief accounts of situations or projects you have effectively handled.
- Have you detailed any health-related community service or scientific and academic achievements?
- Have you made your readers want to keep on reading?
- Without overdoing it, have you let the human element enter your essay? Remember the power of sincerity. Have you let your personality show, or do you sound like a textbook or encyclopedia?
- Have you kept in mind the people who will read your essay? Your audience is made up of professionals, and you should not try to tell them how they should act or what they should do.
- Is your essay easy to read? Short paragraphs and sentences make the reading move faster.

- Visual attractiveness is also important. On the final draft, have you checked for neatness, spelling, punctuation, and correct grammar?
- Is your essay clear, complete, concise, and correct?

We are happy to read your personal statement, but make three requests: 1) please do not give us your first or second draft; really put some work into it before you ask for feedback; 2) do not ask that both Dr. Kan and I read your essay, 3) please drop it off to any of the Administrative Assistants in the Office of Pre-Professional Advising, or send as an e-mail attachment to one of the advisers, 4) the essay will be read independently from an appointment so that the impression delivered by the essay is not confused by your presence.

Best of luck,

Mary Catherine Savage  
Director, Pre-Professional Advising

\*Write for Success, Preparing a Successful Professional School Application by Evelyn W. Jackson, Ph.D., and Harold R. Bardo, Ph.D., is published by the National Association of Advisors for the Health Professions, Inc. It is available for sale for \$5.00 at NAAHP, P.O. Box 1518, Champaign, IL 61824-1518.