



Pearls & Pitfalls

MEDICAL ADVISING

Strategic Medical Advising for future physicians by physicians

Personal Statement Writing Resource Guide

While your GPA and MCAT score are crucial for acceptance to medical school, another important factor is your Personal Statement (PS). Your PS is one of the few areas of your application where you showcase your qualities, insights, and experiences in your own voice. Even though the prompt is: “*use the space provided to explain why you want to go to medical school,*” you want to ensure your PS answers the following questions:

1. Why do you want to be a *physician*? (And not another career in medicine, research, social work, advocacy work)
2. Why will *you* be a successful medical student and physician?

This resource guide will provide insight into what makes a personal statement successful (the pearls) as well as illuminate common mistakes (the pitfalls) to avoid.

The high-yield version is below:

Pearls

- Utilize vignettes, anecdotes, and very specific stories to illustrate the competencies you want to emphasize
- Construct a clear theme or thesis statement that is then carried throughout the statement
- Use names in your stories; you can change them for privacy
- Strive to utilize formal vocabulary while also maintaining your authentic voice
- Transition well – this may be one of the toughest things to do, which is why outlining your statement first is massively beneficial
- Put yourself in the mind of the reader – these are practicing physicians who are volunteering their time to read applications and be part of admissions committees
- Be transparent in your writing rather than opaque and theoretical
- Use spell-check!
- Insightful reflections of your experiences are necessary
- Adhere to the character count limit (5300 characters AMCAS/AACOMAS and 5,000 TMDSAS)

Pitfalls

- Crafting a timeline and simply reiterating your resume or CV
- Being overly negative about medicine, physicians, or experiences. While there are certainly some places in the application to discuss hardships, it’s important to remember to discuss the hardships and then focus on your growth through them, rather than the hardship on its own

- Using your personal statement as a platform to sell religious or political beliefs
- Discussing shadowing experiences without talking about what you have done with those same skills – the doctor you shadowed already made it through medical school, the admissions committee doesn't care what they did, they want to know what you can do
- Using colloquial, conversational language including slang, abbreviations, contractions, and idioms
- Making sentences too long and convoluted
- Using "I" too much
- The savior complex
- The phrase, "medicine is not only X, but also Y and Z" or any iteration of that

Structure and How to Approach the Personal Statement

Writing – and especially writing a Personal Statement - is uniquely, well, personal. Each person values experiences differently and prioritizes varied competencies in a multitude of ways. It's important to showcase your unique stories, competencies, insights, and skills.

That said, there is a standardized structure we recommend you follow, and that structure is the 4- or 5-Paragraph Essay where:

- **First Paragraph** – Hook followed by an introduction and ending with a thesis statement
- **Body Paragraphs (can have 2 or 3)** – Vignette about a specific experience highlighting 1-3 of the AAMC Core Competencies (these will ideally be different in each body paragraph)
- **Final Paragraph** – Conclusion

Breaking each of those down a bit further:

First Paragraph

A strong opening in a PS can have incredible impact. It sets up the rest of your statement and can be the difference between your PS being read or just scanned. Multiple different hook types exist:

Common Hook Types:

- Anecdote or vignette
- Question
- Fact
- Quote
- Simile or metaphor
- Surprising word or phrase
- Declarative statements

The most successful hooks for a PS are typically quotes, surprising words or phrases, or a declarative sentence that then leads into a longer anecdote as the main story of your introductory paragraph. Below are some examples of each:

Quotes:

“First, do no harm.”

“Stay here.”

“If you keep fainting at the sight of blood, you’ll never be able to be a doctor.”

Declarative Statements:

“Before my cancer diagnosis, I had never thought about dying.”

“The day I failed my AP Biology exam was the day I knew I wanted to be a doctor.”

Surprising Word or Phrase:

“Failure.”

“Myocardial infarction.”

“Chaos.”

Regardless of what type of hook you choose, it should be vivid, concise, and specific. It should “reel in” readers and allow them to connect with your story and your PS.

From your hook, you’ll move into the body of your introductory paragraph where you tell a story that sets up the remainder of your statement. This story can be the catalyst for why you chose medicine, it can describe a particular strength or competency, or it can be something you feel exclusively represents you.

Your 1st paragraph should end with a thesis or theme statement. A thesis or theme statement is the main message you are supporting with your body paragraphs and ideally includes your reason for wanting to go to medical school, inspiration or vision for future practice, and at least some of the skills you have. That’s obviously a tall order. Here are a few examples of successful theme/thesis statements:

“Living with Tourette’s was the catalyst for my passion in medicine and my subsequent experiences of service, research, and patient care solidified my desire to be an empathetic, compassionate, and kind leader in the field of medicine.”

“I aspire to be a physician who treats each patient as an individual, bringing comfort, expertise, and understanding to those navigating the most vulnerable parts of their lives.”

“My morning with Dr. Smith clarified my purpose: to become a physician who holds tension and grows from it, a capacity I have been building in a variety of contexts including on the field hockey pitch and in the streets of Langa, South Africa.”

Body Paragraphs

Each body paragraph should describe a distinct experience utilizing a vignette that showcases anywhere from one to three of the AAMC Core Competencies. Then, provide your insights into how that specific story or experience makes you a stronger candidate to be a physician or how those skills will serve you in your future practice. Ideally, your vignette and insights tie into your thesis/theme statement.

Here is an example of a strong body paragraph for a statement with a theme of “staying here”:

“I first put this philosophy into practice when I was 12 years old. My best friend, “Abi,” attempted suicide. We spoke regularly while she recovered in a psychiatric hospital. When Abi returned and her hair-pulling worsened, we sat in the dark as she played video games, a bonnet draped over her head. I held back tears, fearing for her safety, but knew the best I could do was ease her isolation and comfort her during such vulnerable moments. While painful, I cherish the raw purity of these moments and the deep, lasting bond we forged. Abi’s crisis taught me that each person carries their own invisible burdens, motivating me to treat others with patience and nuance, and informing how I will treat patients as a physician. Abi’s struggle to find effective psychiatric treatment, and an overwhelming curiosity about the brain, inspired me to study neuroscience in college. There, I led the mental health advocacy group, Active Minds. In collaboration with other leaders, I established an annual suicide awareness event, displaying the stories of hundreds of individuals impacted by suicide on campus. We recruited community members to participate – including counselors, fraternities, and sports teams – to send a message: our community cares. My team and I distributed information about how to seek help and identify warning signs. As hundreds of students visited, I was moved by our collective impact – I could not have done this alone. If we helped just one person survive

through suicidal ideation, we succeeded. Leading a team dedicated to staying here for our community brought me joy and hope, and I look forward to collaborating with medical colleagues to improve patients' well-being.”

Conclusion

Here is where you repeat your thesis/theme using different verbiage, reiterate your why medicine and why you, and you can potentially tie back to your hook.

Brainstorm and Outline

Now that you have a sense for the optimal structure of the statement, to set yourself up for the most success, we recommend you brainstorm and then outline your PS prior to actually writing.

Start by asking yourself the following questions:

- What inspires me about medicine?
- What personal characteristics am I exceptionally proud of?
- Which experiences showcase those characteristics?
- What specific stories/vignettes do I absolutely want to include?

Then, you can draft your framework or outline:

- Paragraph 1 – Introduction
 - Hook
 - Story
 - Thesis
- Paragraph 2 – Body Paragraph 1
 - Experience 2 with vignette
 - Competencies to highlight
 - How to connect back to theme/thesis
- Paragraph 3 – Body Paragraph 2
 - Experience 2 with vignette
 - Competencies to highlight
 - How to connect back to theme/thesis
- (Optional) Paragraph 4 – Body Paragraph 3
 - If you have space for a third body paragraph, Experience 3 with vignette
 - Competencies to highlight
 - How to connect back to theme/thesis
- Paragraph 4 or 5 – Conclusion
 - Reiterate previous examples, bring it together, and reflect back on hook if you can

As you can see, you may have 2 or 3 body paragraphs depending on how in-depth you decide to go with each story.

Once you feel confident in your framework, start writing!

Audience

After figuring out what to write, it's best to think about how it should be written and who will be reading. Although AI might start doing some of the heavy lifting in reading applications, traditionally – and I suspect for a little while longer – applications are read by admissions committee members who are most often made up of physicians, medical students, and medical school administrators. All these people have basic medical knowledge.

With the audience in mind, it's best to avoid generic or well-established platitudes, for example:

“Patients’ health dramatically impacts what their days look like, and ultimately what their lives look like.”

Similarly, overstating your experiences can be misinterpreted or questioned, for example:

“Babysitting was immensely rewarding because it was the first time I had someone else’s life in my hands.”

It’s excellent you feel that way, and babysitting is undoubtedly important. However, think about how that might read to an Emergency Department physician who cracked open a patient’s chest that morning.

Finally, talking negatively about the profession or a specific physician is typically an avenue I recommend you avoid, for example:

“The nursing staff completely disregarded every question and Dr. Smith dismissed my concerns. Mistrust in medicine is valid.”

While your experience may absolutely be true, I recommend focusing instead on your growth and how you overcame difficult situations, rather than focusing on the current downfalls.

Tone

The personal statement is a piece of formal writing. While you can certainly make it authentic to you, remember again who will be reading this: admissions committee members, most often physicians. Your writing should be clear, concise, transparent, and efficient with proper grammar and spelling.

Show vs Tell

Humans remember stories much better than they remember facts. One of your main goals with your PS (and, truthfully, your Activities List and in Interviews) is to be memorable. What does it mean to show vs tell? First, a few definitions:

- **Show** – utilizes specific vignettes with characters, action, conflict, obstacles, suspense, and/or dialogue
- **Tell** – utilizes description, summaries, or conclusions of events

For example:

- **Tell** – “I grew up in a culturally diverse neighborhood.”
- **Show** – “One of my favorite memories from growing up was in my grade school lunchroom. We had these long tables with benches and every day, we would slide into those tables and rip open our brown paper sack lunches (or my favorite Batman inspired lunch box). Instead of swapping peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for oreos, we swapped chicken tikka masala for fish tacos or lasagna for shepherd’s pie. I recognized then how cool it was that we had so many different cultures to learn from, but I think what resonates more now is that even despite those differences, we shared so many similarities. And that’s what I take with me into the future: an appreciation for cultural differences and an understanding that we share the same values.”

Option one told you I grew up in a culturally diverse neighborhood, while option two showed you how and why that experience impacted me.

Your goal is to story tell – it’s what makes your writing more memorable, authentic, and unique.

Grammar

Use strong verbs and avoid passive voice. Try to avoid the verb “to be”. Some examples include:

Weak	Strong
The bleeding was manageable after pressure from my hand was applied.	I reduced bleeding by applying pressure.
I was very interested in orthopedics after I saw what my mentor did.	My mentor’s confidence and bed-side manner catalyzed my interest in orthopedics.
My decision was integral to the team’s commitment.	My decision anchored the team’s commitment.