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**COMMENTARY - UNSOLICITED**

# Creating a high-quality personal statement for residency application: A guide for medical students and mentors

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2022, a total of 50,830 applicants applied to residency programs in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The majority of the application are data driven, including Step 1 and 2 scores, preclinical and clinical grades, and the Medical Student Performance Evaluation (MSPE or “Dean's Letter”). While there is some flexibility in choosing who writes one's letters of recommendation, there are caps on the number allowed and the contents are usually unknown to the applicant. Therefore, a high-quality personal statement adds subjectivity and provides flexibility to frame an applicant in the strongest light. Prior research reveals that the personal statement has not always been valued universally.<sup>2,3</sup> However, the personal statement may be gaining importance with the recently increased focus on holistic review as well as the transition of USMLE Step 1 to pass/fail and the increasing prevalence of pass/fail grading in U.S. medical schools.<sup>4-7</sup> This is relevant as objective metrics inconsistently predict a student's ability to practice medicine and succeed in residency<sup>8,9</sup> and may present a potential for racial and other forms of bias in applicant selection.<sup>10</sup>

While the objective aspects of the application emphasize comparison based on standard measures, the subjective narrative is curated and individualized by the applicant. Moreover, the National Residency Matching Program 2021 Program Director survey data suggest that personal statements influenced some applicants' likelihood of receiving an interview offer, especially when the application was near a program's self-directed objective cutoff metric; however, its impact on rank list position was less influential.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is in the candidate's interest to craft a statement that engages the reviewer. The primary goal of the personal statement must be honest

and reflective and be able to tell the story of the applicant (e.g., the influence of their background, key current personal interests, and future goals). Linear and crisp writing makes a personal story easier to read. Despite the stakes, there are few published resources guiding applicants on how to write an effective personal statement.<sup>12</sup>

In this paper, we provide recommendations for creating a high-quality personal statement. The authors have served as advisors to medical students, residents, fellows, and faculty for over 35 years across four separate major academic institutions. They have held core faculty roles, medical school, residency program, or fellowship leadership positions and have served on resident selection and interview committees and in the dean's office. The information compiled here was based on consensus of opinion as well as relevant literature where available. While the primary audience of this article is medical students, the principles may also be valuable for their mentors.

## GENERAL GUIDELINES

The personal statement provides context to your personal and professional experiences and ambitions. It should not be a line-by-line recap of your entire application. Rather, it should highlight aspects which deserve greater attention and detail than are provided in your curriculum vitae.<sup>13</sup> Resist the urge to exaggerate truth, but do not undersell your accomplishments. Stating what you learned from experiences can strike a balance. The personal statement offers a prime opportunity to discuss gaps in training, motivation to pursue a particular field, notable extracurricular activities, general career plans, and concerns with your application. Controversial topics, such as social or political issues, may occasionally be included after

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careful consideration on how to frame your message and language. A trusted specialty-specific advisor or mentor can help determine which key points are strategic to address.

Most importantly, your personal statement should be unique and reflect your personal journey and not be at risk of being mistaken for a different applicant or plagiarized from a published work. We recommend that you craft your personal statement directly from your voice and through your lens. While it is prudent to consult a proofreader to check spelling and grammar, it is unacceptable to hire a writer to construct your statement.

Before writing your personal statement, we recommend engaging in self-reflection. Focus on the crossroads of your path and application that you want to highlight. These form the central points of your essay and may stimulate conversation during your interview. Your trusted network (mentors, significant others, siblings, parents, and close friends) can help early to identify significant traits and experiences. Anything written in a personal statement is available for discussion during the interview, including some topics that are frequently disallowed. Be prepared to discuss what you disclose. [Table 1](#) summarizes general pearls and pitfalls for the personal statement.

## WRITING STRATEGICALLY

Writing can be a challenge but following a few basic writing strategies can simplify the task. Creating an outline helps adhere to purposeful clarity and flow. The flow should be linear so that the application reviewer can easily follow the discussion without having to decipher the relevance of content or the meaning of vague analogies. The ability to compose clear, easily readable prose will reflect favorably on your communication skills.

Writing with brevity and paying attention to the word count yields readable, short, and sharp sentences. For many specialties, a one-page personal statement is the norm; however, ERAS (Electronic Residency Application Service) does have a cap of 28,000 characters (approximately 5 pages).<sup>12</sup> Your mentor can advise on the preferred length for your intended specialty. Use simple words that convey your meaning to enhance comprehension, and avoid overly colorful language and unnecessary adverbs and adjectives. Minimize the temptation to provide extraneous details, especially when trying to set the scene of a clinical environment, patient encounter, or historic event (e.g., a family member with a medical encounter). You should be the focus of your personal statement.

After creating this first draft, several strategies can be used to improve it. Waiting a few days to edit the statement allows you to reread it from a fresh perspective. Trusted allies may offer valuable insights and assess for flow, context, and comprehension. Mentors can evaluate your statement from the lens of a reviewer. Listening to the statement being read aloud can help identify errors. It is common to need several revisions before settling on your ideal personal statement. As a last step, be sure to check the document for spelling and grammar. [Table 2](#) provides resources that will help with the technical craft of writing.

## COMPONENTS OF A PERSONAL STATEMENT

There is no rigid template for a personal statement. Its design and development should be sculpted to describe your unique experiences and ambitions, while being mindful of the storytelling and writing principles outlined above. To that end, no singular format or framework will work for every student. The goal is not to capture the reviewer's or programs's exact preferences, because there is too

**TABLE 1** Pearls and pitfalls for the personal statement

Pearls—DO:	Pitfalls—DO NOT:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate gentle creativity to keep the attention of the application reviewer.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow creativity to become a distraction to the focus of the statement.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share how you will contribute and enhance the specialty.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe the operational details or practice environment of the field.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure a well-written, error-free statement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Submit a statement with spelling and grammar errors, inaccurate dates.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain a positive light to unfortunate situations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe events, people, or specialties using a negative perspective.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assume responsibility for actions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blame others for your own personal errors or choices.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address and explain weaknesses in your application.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review weaknesses without mention of lessons learned and growth.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider using a carefully selected quote, adage, or passage within a statement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insert a long quote, adage, or passage without context, clarity, or relevance.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refer to your application to find details and inspiration.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recreate your entire application.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarify a complex situation or topic using crisp wordage.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use lengthy paragraphs with redundant information.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add brief anecdotes related to family, patients, or personal events.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on other individuals or events with unnecessary details.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write a personal statement that is tailored to your intended specialty.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write a personal statement that is vague or does not address your interest in your intended specialty.</li> </ul>

much variability to predict what is desired.<sup>2</sup> The primary goal of the personal statement is to write clearly about your journey so that reviewers understand who you are. In this section, we provide examples of components to consider including in your personal statement. We do not expect that each of these components will be included in everyone's personal statement. Instead, each author should decide which components best represent their desired message. We understand the temptation to be creative with your writing; however, we recommend caution. A lively statement, specifically in the opening, runs the risk of being cliché or distracting. Table 3 offers suggestions of how to structure the description of your experiences.

### Motivation for pursuing medicine overall (consider including, if desired)

The decision to pursue the field of medicine is significant and worthy of discussion. Often students open with a brief description of

an educational or clinical encounter, a relative's journey as a patient, or even a personal illness. You may briefly state your reasons for becoming a physician (e.g., enjoyment of clinical medicine, desire to improve health care delivery). No matter the influence that inspired you to pursue medicine, reviewers will appreciate your authenticity.

### Motivation for selected residency field (included by many applicants<sup>14,15</sup>)

Describe why you are applying to your specialty and highlight personal traits and experiences that make you an ideal fit. Mentors in your desired specialty can discuss the strengths, weaknesses, and future of the field and can assess your compatibility. Avoid superficial phrasing such as "I am applying to emergency medicine because I am interested in helping people." While this answer is honorable, it lacks a detailed understanding of the nuanced aspects of the field and could apply to any student and specialty. There is no need to

**TABLE 2** Writing resources

Resource	Author/host	Medium	Learning value
<i>On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction</i>	William Zinsser	Book	Basic principles of writing
<i>Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life</i>	Annie Lamont	Book	How-to guidebook of writing
<i>The Elements of Style</i>	Strunk and White	Book	Principal requirements of simple writing
<i>Mastering the Sentence</i>	Lorelei Lingard	Article	Development of strong sentences
<a href="https://www.grammarly.com/blog/category/handbook/">https://www.grammarly.com/blog/category/handbook/</a>	Grammarly	Blog	Learn basic grammar rules
<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/smarter-living/how-to-edit-your-own-writing.html?">https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/smarter-living/how-to-edit-your-own-writing.html?</a>	Harry Guinness	Newspaper	Edit your own writing
<a href="https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl">https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl</a>	Mignon Fogarty	Podcast	Basic grammar tips

**TABLE 3** Approach to describing experiences in personal statement

Writing point	Rationale	Example
Topic of experience	Succinctly state the specific experience you are going to describe.	My experience volunteering for the needle exchange clinic exposed how patients with addiction face neglect.
Context of choosing project	What made you decide to pick this experience?	Watching my relative struggle with substance use disorder informed me of the need for better services for this population.
Description of experiences	Clarify your exact role in the process.	I was responsible for scheduling student volunteers for shifts and training sessions.
Metrics and quantitative outcomes	This demonstrates your impact.	I organized 40 different 3-hour training sessions for volunteers.
Skills obtained	Highlight the objective skills you have gained.	I became familiar with scheduling software and creating feedback forms.
Self-reflection	Share what you learned about yourself.	I learned the importance of supporting a team and being present to teach and answer questions.
Implications for career	Inform the reader how this experience will shape your career.	This experience has motivated me to pursue a fellowship and career in addiction medicine and seek mentors and service opportunities during residency.
Lessons learned	What lesson about this experience surprised you?	I learned that government funding is difficult to obtain but I gained valuable experience in the art of grant-writing.
Next steps	You have completed this experience, now what?	I must learn more about grant writing so that I can better fund the clinics I run in the future.

describe the specialty to the readers—they are living it daily and want to learn why you will succeed within the specialty's framework.

### **Tentative plans for residency and career (included by strongest applicants)**

If you have tentative plans for residency, possible fellowship, and your subsequent career path, you can include them and any supporting evidence. For instance, “Based on my research thesis studying cardiac biomarkers, I plan to focus on early signs of cardiac disease. I will pursue a fellowship in population health, obtain a Master of Public Health degree, and later work in an academic setting.” You may also link these ambitions, whether clinical or nonclinical, back to why you pursued medicine or the specific discipline. Selection committees value your ability to create a global plan, but they also understand that it may change during residency and will not be disappointed if you revise your path as you discover new opportunities during your training.

### **Brief context of academic experiences (consider including, if applicable)**

The variety of applicants' experiences is as varied as the applicants themselves. It is important to clarify your motivation for engaging in an activity, the depth of your role, and how you improved as a result of your participation. For example, the experiences of a student who is listed as an author on a publication may vary from data entry to principal investigator. An honest reflection of your role and lessons learned is far better than hyperbole. Describe your decision making behind a project and how your skills improved or how it influenced your personal mission as a result. Detailed descriptions are not necessary. Instead, focus on the key components of one or two influential experiences. You may be expected to elucidate the details during your interview.

### **Relevance of extracurricular activities and prior employment (consider including, if applicable)**

Most applicants have a long list of activities to report, and many may not be well understood by the selections committee. The personal statement gives you an opportunity to frame selected experiences. Highlight your important role in an activity or why the activity endorses your potential success in your specialty. There is a significant distinction between a student who created a student-run clinic (e.g., generated the idea, sought approval, built a team, gathered supplies, scheduled students and faculty) and a student who staffed the clinic twice during medical school. Similarly, your role in a previous job, whether it was career focused or casual, can shed light on your skills (e.g., to highlight management skills, you could recount your experience as a residence hall assistant in college or your role as a team leader in industry).

### **Special considerations (consider including, if applicable)**

The following are selected special considerations for writing your personal statement. They can carry a higher level of sensitivity, so be mindful of word choice. We want to emphasize the importance of discussing your approach with a trusted advisor or mentor. Be prepared to discuss any topics mentioned in the statement during your interview. While this may seem daunting at first, it is an opportunity to directly answer a question that the selection committee may have while reviewing your application. Reading your thoughtful explanation may allay their fears about the event in question and spur their decision to take a chance on extending an interview invitation. No matter the issue, be sure to demonstrate personal and professional growth and how, if at all, the concern enhanced your ability to become a physician.

#### **Leave of absence**

If you took a formal leave from medical school, we suggest you acknowledge it in your application. While ERAS has a designated section for leave of absences, consider also mentioning the absence in the broader context of the personal statement. You are not obligated to provide details. You are free to state, “I took 3 months off for a familial obligation.” However, further details can help the reviewer contextualize the absence: “This allowed me to spend the necessary time addressing the issue without compromising my training. Upon my return from leave, I fulfilled the expectations of my medical school.” It is important that your reason for the leave of absence is viewed by the school in the same fashion. If there is any conflict in the purpose of the leave, speak with your medical school leadership to discuss and resolve any disconnect.

#### **Medical history**

You are not mandated to disclose medical conditions. However, if the condition precludes you from performing your duties completely or partially, it is in your best interest to assess whether the program is supportive of providing the least restrictive accommodations for you to participate fully in the training program. While the Americans with Disabilities Act and Rehabilitation Act requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations, it does not require that you disclose your disability until they are needed. Early disclosure gives employers ample lead time to put accommodations into place but may also lead to bias.<sup>16,17</sup> We recommend you discuss with your support system when and whether to disclose a disability and whether this decision will cause relief or worry for you and your potential employer.

#### **Shelf exam/board scores/grades**

Standardized test scores may influence students' interview opportunities and ability to match in residency.<sup>11</sup> It is prudent to discuss low

scores or failures. A brief but clear description of the likely cause, remediation process, and subsequent successful outcome is needed. Any additional positive data points can be mentioned. For example, “I have since passed all of my shelf exams and my Step 2 score was in the Xth percentile.”

### Concerning evaluation

Clerkship evaluations on the MSPE may contain negative comments that might be detrimental to the application. You are generally allowed to review your MSPE prior to finalization. If a detrimental comment is found, you should discuss evaluation concerns with your mentor as soon as possible to plan how to mitigate any negativity. Some negative comments are truthful and constructive and will remain in the MSPE. If the comment remains in the MSPE, the personal statement is available to explain the circumstances clearly and concisely and without casting blame on others. It is important to share the most important stage of processing feedback: self-reflection and identifying areas of growth.<sup>18,19</sup> It is reasonable to direct the reader to subsequent instances of how the initial concern later was cited as a strength.

### Limited access to extracurricular activities

Statements often highlight select activities so the reviewer can focus on what you perceive to be the most influential activities. However, not all students have access to the same experiences. There is no clear quantitative marker for how many extracurricular activities such as research, volunteering, or leadership roles one should obtain. Resources can vary from one institution to another, and individuals may not have time to engage in copious activities if they have other financial or family obligations during medical school. The personal statement is an opportunity to briefly explain any limitations with obtaining extracurricular activities.

### Social and political factors

Often our personal identity is closely entwined with our societal and political experiences. It is an individual choice how to tell your perspective through your personal lens and whether to disclose your preferences. Incorporating personal identifiers, such as your gender, race, age, ability, sexual orientation, parenting status, religion, or political affiliation, informs the reader on aspects of your life that you feel have influenced your journey.<sup>6,7</sup> Revealing these can run the risk of unfair or discriminatory judgment but can also demonstrate your comfort with yourself and positively support the reasons you will shine as a resident physician.<sup>12</sup> Depending on your passion and involvement in a particular topic, this can be an opportune segue to explain your interest and future ambitions. Be prepared to discuss any of these disclosures during your interview. Consulting with your

mentor is a good way to gauge the impact this decision may have on your application.

## CONCLUSION

Writing a personal statement can be a challenging task. A thoughtful, organized approach will help you create a meaningful personal statement that enhances your application. Streamline the writing to convey your message concisely. The best personal statements are clear and brief and contain specificity to reflect and explain your unique perspective. This is your opportunity to highlight why you are the ideal candidate for a residency in your chosen field. While this guide cannot guarantee an interview invitation or a match into a desired program, we hope this resource will help ensure that your personal statements can showcase your best possible self.

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