

Deciding on Your Fifteen

How to Think About Your Fifteen

Medical schools care about more than just your GPA and test scores. They also want to see that you are a well-rounded individual, capable of connecting with others beyond medicine. Because personal qualities such as compassion, communication, and perseverance are not taught in the classroom, you should use your list of fifteen to highlight qualities you have developed through service and leadership experiences.

For each activity, highlight a different quality that you have developed. It is better to write about fifteen different qualities—highlighting a different quality in each activity—than writing about the same three qualities throughout all fifteen experiences.

Ideally, you should have fifteen solid experiences to discuss. If not, do not include superficial experiences. It is better to have fewer high-quality activities that you can talk about in detail than many activities that you were not actually invested in. If you wouldn't be able to talk in-depth in an interview setting about this experience, it's best not to use it. Additionally, the experiences you choose to list should not be high school accomplishments. Instead, focus on activities that are more current. Future activities may be included, but medical schools will be more concerned with what you have done, not so much with what you plan to do.

Activities to Include in Your Fifteen

Note: This list is not inclusive. There are many more activities you can mention that would also contribute to your application.

Medical and Clinical Work: These experiences show that you have thought a lot about being a doctor and are familiar with the environment you would work in and the roles you would fill.

- Shadowing a healthcare professional
- Working in a medical office
- Volunteering in rehabilitation facilities
- Volunteering in a nursing home

Medical Related Community Service: These activities are important because they reflect your interest in the medical field and your desire to serve others.

- Volunteering with the disabled
- Volunteering as an EMT
- Volunteering at a hospital or clinic
- Volunteering with hospice

Volunteering and Community Service: These experiences show your commitment to a life of service and that you are willing to give to your community without receiving something in return.

- Working at a soup kitchen
- Teaching after school programs
- Participating in Y-Serve
- Participating in Helping Hands

Leadership Experience: These activities show that you know how to lead a team, problem solve, and take initiative.

- Fulfilling a managerial position at work
- Working as a teacher's assistant
- Organizing an event
- Serving in church callings

Experience with Underserved and Different Cultures: These experiences show that you can adapt to varying situations. The more you show that you can understand and take part in different cultures and environments the better.

- Working with organizations that help low-income populations
- Working as a medical translator
- Serving a mission
- Serving refugees
- Going on a study abroad

Research: These experiences will show that you are not only compassionate towards others but also that you understand the science behind what you are doing.

- Participating in summer research opportunities
- Publishing your research in a journal
- Working in a professor's lab

Writing Your Fifteen

When writing your fifteen answer the following questions:

Why was this experience meaningful?

How did you contribute to the experience?

What did you learn from this experience?

Why more than *What*: Admissions officers don't want to hear *what* you did but rather *why* you chose to participate in the activity. It is good to explain your responsibilities, but make sure the focus is not on what you did, but why you wanted to participate in this experience.

Don't: I volunteered at a hospital for five months. I helped by taking patients to and from the waiting room, sitting with them while the doctor asked about medical history, and escorting them out when they were discharged.

Do: Working at the hospital was a very rewarding experience. While helping patients to and from the waiting room, I came to understand the importance of treating patients as individuals. I also learned how to write down information quickly and accurately—even in stressful situations. As I discharged patients, I was able to learn how they felt about their hospital stay, and what I could do to improve it in the future. Interacting with patients, even in small ways, helped me to become a better listener and communicator.

Be Specific not General: Write about people and moments specifically instead of generally. Readers will be more interested in your application if you write about a specific story rather than a broad experience that covers universal ideas.

Don't: Caring for patients has been a wonderful experience. I have learned so much and have developed useful qualities that will help me be a better healthcare provider in the future.

Do: While volunteering at the clinic, I was tasked with helping patients. One child came in with severe pain in her ankle. I gently ran my fingers along her leg, foot, and toes. She winced. I could see the puffiness in her ankle, signaling a likely broken bone. She relaxed as I reassured her that the doctor would be able to help her. She even smiled when I told her she could pick out the color for her cast. Seeing the fear in her eyes be replaced by trust helped me understand how important it is to treat patients as individuals. In the future, I will focus on being compassionate healthcare provider.

Focus on You: Make sure each of your stories focus on *you* and what you learned, not the wonderful doctor, not the impoverished people in Guatemala, and not the patients—but *you*. This focus highlights your potential and is a key factor in getting into medical schools. Of course, you will need to mention all of these people, but make sure to tell the story through your eyes and not theirs.

Don't: Antonio lived in a one-room home with a dirt floor. He worked hard every day to make ends meet. He even had to walk three miles to fill up a bucket of water in a stream, so he could have drinking water. He was overjoyed when we were able to construct a well right outside his home.

Do: Living in Peru opened my eyes to the hardships people face around the world. I was able to better individual lives by giving basic necessities. Walking three miles to find a spring, I filled up buckets of water to help families who didn't have access to running water. I realized how lucky I am to have clean, accessible water. This experience instilled my desire to want to help others who are less fortunate.