

Personal Statements: Prehealth Applicants

How to Think About the Personal Statement

- Standardized tests and GPA are gatekeepers—the personal statement is what gets you noticed. Medical and dental schools want to know if you are going to add something to the class, if you are going to bring a different perspective from anyone else, and if you are going to stick with it.
- Don't worry about what you *think* schools will be looking for—they have already seen it all. Instead, write about *you*. You can focus on your background, interesting hobbies, unusual experiences—whatever brings you to life and makes you more than just a number. For example, one student wrote about his weekend hobby of being a bareback bronco rider; another student wrote about his high school experiment that resulted in him living with hundreds of caged mice.
- The key is not to just write about the experience itself; instead, tell them why the experience makes you unique and interesting.

Getting Started

Format: Length depends on what you are applying for. AAMCAS (allopathic): 5300 characters including spaces and punctuation; AACOMAS (osteopathic): 4500; TMDSAS (Texas med & dent): 4500; AADSAS (dental): 4500; all other schools vary. You do not need a title.

Theme: How do your stories all tie together? Your theme can be as general as overcoming challenges or facing new experiences, or it can be as specific as mastering the piano or running a marathon.

Introduction: You don't need a formal introduction. However, be aware of cliché attention getters (e.g. “I found myself in the hospital” or “the cool wind blew on my face”).

Body: You have two basic options:

- Tell a series of short experiences. Around 2 to 4 is usually a good number.
- Tell one experience, but use different aspects of that experience to show different characteristics or traits.

Style:

- *Show*, don't *tell*. Instead of *telling* how much you like to help other people, *show* them. For example, use a story about the friendship you developed with a child who has a disability. (But make sure the focus stays on you—not on the child).
- This is not a résumé. Don't talk about your daily duties at your job as a research assistant—instead pick a certain experience and turn it into a story. For example, if you are a TA, don't just talk about how you grade papers and teach labs. Rather, zero in on a specific incident or a challenge that you had to overcome.
- So what? Don't just write about your cool stories. Make sure that you explain why your stories matter or how they changed you. What will the reader learn about you from this story? What lessons did you learn or what qualities did you develop?

Transitions: Connect your stories so that the reader understands your sequencing. Some examples of transitions between paragraphs are “I continued to develop my passion for dance as I . . .” or “Another time in my life that I had to deal with this problem was when I . . .”

Conclusion: Write a 3–5 sentence conclusion considering the following:

- Application to Medicine/Dentistry: How does your theme tie into medicine or dentistry?
- Why Medicine/Dentistry? In 1–3 sentences, tell the reader why you want to go to medical or dental school.

Polish

- Expect to go through many drafts before getting to a final version—probably more drafts than you think. Don't get discouraged—this is part of the process!
- Your personal statement should have no glaring typos or grammatical errors. Doctors/Dentists are paid to pay attention to detail. Show them you already can.
- The Preprofessional editor is available to read as many drafts as you write and can help with all steps of the process, from brainstorming to checking your grammar and punctuation. However, to truly use this resource, do not come in for the first time an hour before you plan to submit it.
- Friends and family members can also be great resources. However, remember that personal statement advice is subjective. Everyone will have an opinion what you should write about, and those opinions may not agree with each other. Take these opinions with a grain of salt and come into the Preprofessional Office to find out the most current and accurate information.

Personal Statement Don'ts

- Don't be afraid to talk about yourself—this is a personal statement! Make sure that your stories are focused on you and not on other people. Remember this is not a formal essay, so don't worry about the use of "I," and passive voice. Also, avoid using terms like "firstly" and "in conclusion."
- Don't play down your experiences. Err on the side of being too boastful. Our office can help you tone it down if it's too much.
- Don't regurgitate your résumé or summarize your life.
- Don't quote people—it usually ends up just being annoying and ineffective. Members of the admissions committee are very educated, and trying to quote others often comes off as you trying (unsuccessfully) to impress or teach.
- Don't focus on the negatives. It's good to talk about overcoming challenges, but make sure you are focusing on the *overcoming* rather than the challenge itself.
- Don't act like a doctor. You aren't one yet, but you will be! Also avoid criticizing other professions.
- Don't philosophize. Make sure that each paragraph highlights a personal quality or experience.
- Don't over exaggerate your experiences. Your injury as an athlete or your two-week family vacation to Guatemala probably aren't the main reasons why you want to become a doctor. Instead, be genuine.
- Don't stick in the filler line at the end that says, "And that is why I want to go to _____ school."

The Mission

- Don't mention your mission just to mention your mission. It's great to talk about it, but make sure that you are telling a specific story or experience. Make sure the focus stays on you. Instead of telling a story about a poor family's situation, talk about how seeing this kind of poverty for the first time affected you.
- Admissions committees *do* already know quite a bit about missions! You don't need to overview that you went to bed at 10:30 and got up at 6:30 and that you didn't talk to your family for two years.
- Use "proselytizing," not "proselyting."
- Unique is better. One dean dismissed an applicant's story about being held at gunpoint in Brazil simply because "what missionary in Brazil hasn't had that experience?"

Common Grammar Mistakes

- Watch out for there/their/they're, it's/its, loose/lose, lead/led, effect/affect, you're/your, then/than.
- You only need *one* space after each period, not two.
- Avoid "very," "a lot," "really," and other forms of hyperbole. Be specific instead!
- Use vivid language and imagery.
- When possible, use strong verbs instead of excessive adverbs (e.g. instead of "walked slowly," use "trudged") or auxiliary verbs (e.g. instead of "I would work," use "I worked").
- Always, always, always proofread!
- The Preprofessional editor can check your essay for grammar and punctuation errors. You can email the editor at ppaeditor@byu.edu.