

Personal Statements, Work & Activities and Secondary Applications for Medical School/Health Professions Programs

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Spring 2024

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What we'll cover today

- Personal Statement: the basics
 - What all statements should address
 - Different styles and structures
 - Do's and Don'ts
 - Process suggestions
- Work & Activities Section
- Secondary Applications
- Q&A

How to Think about the Statement

- Imagine the statement as part of the larger whole of your application
 - What is your Narrative?
 - The statement can help set you apart as you share your journey
- What can it say about you that your letters, transcript, or work/activities cannot?
 - The statement gives a committee a compelling snapshot of who you are and perhaps why you want to be a doctor (or other type of health professional).
- A piece of writing for a non-specialist audience.
 - Don't get bogged down in too many details about your research, for example, if you choose to discuss it.

Statement Should Address

- Why am I interested in this field?
- How have my experiences led me to this decision?
 - Can be less formal
- How am I prepared for this career?
 - Usually more formal
- Topics to consider:
 - Events in your life (+/-); People; Academics/College; Extracurricular Activities; Skills and Talents; Values; Other ideas

Communication Test

- To some extent, the statement is a test of your communication skills and writing ability. It's the chance to tell your story.
 - In a large pool of applicants, how do you distinguish yourself?
- A good personal statement shows the admissions committee that you can use language to present thoughts and connect with people.
 - Both important parts of being a health professional.
- Qualities to consider portraying (not an inclusive list):
 - Maturity; Compassion and Empathy; Leadership; Self-Reflection; Realistic Perspective; Individuality; Resilience; Commitment

Examples of “Styles”

- “Straight-shooter”
- “Storyteller”
- “Daredevil”
- Alternate spins on the above
- Like most things, there is a spectrum of options
- Be true to YOUR writing style

“Straight-shooter”

Format

- Introduces self
- Summarizes interest in medicine
- Highlights relevant experience
- Closes

Pros and Cons

- Clean and professional
- No gimmicks
- Humility
- Possibly aligns with stronger applicants (but not necessarily)
- Boring?

“Storyteller”

Format

- Introduces anecdote
 - Stories involve choice and action
- Explains origin of anecdote
- Highlights experiences
- Relevance of anecdote to medicine/health professions
- Closes

Pros and Cons

- Compelling
- Genuine
- Provocative
- Reflective
- Messy
- Gimmicky

“Daredevil”/Alternative

Possible Formats

- Poetry/Haiku
- Other “weird” stuff
- Extended metaphor
- Extended story
- Traditional content with a non-traditional structure
- Cynical commentary

Pros and Cons

- Interesting, compelling, and provocative
- Memorable
- Gimmicks galore
- Masking a boring experience?
- Right fit for medicine?
- Other issues?

Advice in a Series of Clichés

- On the content: *“Show, don’t tell.”*
- On Grammar: *“Dot your i’s and cross your t’s.”*
- On structure: *“Cleanliness is the closest thing to godliness.”*
- On gimmicks: *“Everything that glitters is not gold.”*
- On spirit: *“Do you.”*

Showing vs. Telling

- One of the most common pieces of advice in writing, but people often find it confusing or vague.
- To tell something is to state it outright, in a very general way.
- To show something is to give readers specific details that will make it vivid for them.
- Sometimes, of course, you might tell and then show.

Examples

- Telling: Camp was fun, and I enjoyed it.
- Showing: Camp had so many activities that I couldn't get enough of things like archery, swimming, and canoeing. And I made new friends every day.

- Telling: I helped people when I volunteered at the nursing home. I learned empathy there.
- Showing: Every day at the nursing home, I would help a woman named Doris use the record player. Watching her temporarily forget her pain whenever her favorite Frank Sinatra albums came on made me realize how important it is to reach people on a human level when you are trying to care for them.

Do's

- Give yourself plenty of time to write it
- Give it a theme or thesis at the beginning... and come back to it
- Use concrete examples of life experiences to distinguish yourself
- Write about what excites you
- Begin with an attention-grabbing lead and get to the point early
- Use clear, direct, concise writing that describes your experience
- Form conclusions that explain the value and meaning of your experience
 - What you learned about yourself and your field
 - Your future goals
 - Your future plans

Some “Pet Peeves” of Readers (can vary person-to-person)

- No, you were not born to be a health professional. Nurture, not nature, got you here
- On faith: Mentioning your faith is fine, but you should have decided on this career for yourself
- On international experiences: Were you actually there for more than a weekend? Ethics surrounding what you did?
- The experience that made you want to be a physician should have lasted longer than a day
- “Medicine is my passion.”

But wait, there's a few more “pet peeves”

- Do not write an essay form of your CV/resume (remember: limited space).
- Do not *force* experiences into your statement
- Humor can be dangerous and subjective
- You've never been a health professional before, so try to sound humble about your decision
- Quoting famous people
- Grandiosity: “I am special and will cure cancer”
- Stilted language – don't use words you're not comfortable with
- Informal language – this isn't a text message
- No links!
- Popular media as career inspiration (did Grey's Anatomy really start you on your path to medicine?)

Starting Suggestions

- Personal Statement page on OCS website (includes an exercise)
 - <https://ocs.yale.edu/resources/writing-the-personal-statement-for-health-professions-applications/>
- Give yourself plenty of time.
 - Set the draft aside for awhile and then revisit it with fresh eyes.
- Revise, revise, revise. Not just editing but rewriting.
- Solicit feedback: Professionals who know writing, people you know, and people who don't know you well.
 - With feedback, take what you like and leave the rest (many opinions)
 - Remember: it's your statement and you have to feel comfortable with it

Work & Activities Section

- For AMCAS work & activities section you have up to 15 entries
 - You have 700 characters to describe each one
 - Designate three as “most significant” and receive additional 1300 characters
- For the entries:
 - Describe the activity
 - Your role in the activity
 - Learning outcomes/contributions based on AAMC competencies
 - Can also share appropriate anecdotes if space allows

Example (good)

- Name: FOOT: First Year Outdoor Orientation
- Experience Description: FOOT is a backpacking orientation program for incoming first-years. I love outdoor adventures and the collective problem-solving they bring. As a leader I supported the students' physical trials and served as a mentor for this difficult transition in their lives. Growing as a decision-maker and leader I prioritized their safety and comfort. As a co-leader, I reinforced my understanding of partnership: sharing responsibilities and being honest, thoughtful and transparent about challenges. As first-aid co-head I ensured the safety of leaders and students by coordinating Wilderness First-Aid and CPR training, first-aid kits and advocating administration for comprehensive COVID protocols.

Example (okay)

- Organization Name: Echo Hose Ambulance
- Experience Description: As an EMT, I am granted access to patients' homes on some of the worst days of their lives, which has built a unique appreciation of the trust placed in healthcare providers and our responsibility to act ethically to maintain that trust. In the uncertainty of the pandemic, patients often looked to us for reassurance and comfort. I have also learned about the importance of community outreach, such as providing standby at the 4th of July fireworks and other community events. Our efforts are often rewarded by the passers-by who express their gratitude. I aim to apply the empathy, understanding, and dedication to service I developed in the field to my patient care as a physician.

Example (needs improvement)

- Name: HAVEN Free Clinic
- Experience Description: As a patient's first point of contact, I had a vital role in setting the tone for the rest of their visit. Even simple acts could make a big difference in care. Having shown up 2 hours early by accident, "Maria" asked if there was a way to keep better track of her appointments. In Spanish, I walked her through setting up MyChart on her phone. The next week, she showed up at the right time and thanked me for my help. I also learned about barriers to care and ways to address them, by helping patients access our various services beyond primary and reproductive care, such as medical debt assistance, social services, transportation, and medication delivery.

Secondary Applications Tips

- Understand the Prompt
 - Make sure you fully understand the prompt. Pay close attention to specific questions and the themes the prompt is addressing.
- Showcase Your Fit
 - Tailor each essay to the medical school to which you're applying by highlighting aspects of your background, experiences, and goals that align with their mission, values and program offerings.
- Address Weaknesses Appropriately
 - If a prompt asks about challenges or weaknesses, be honest and transparent, but also emphasize what you've learned from those experiences and how you've grown as a result.

Secondary Tips (con't)

- Focus on Impact and Growth
 - Discuss not only what you've done but also the impact it has had on you and others. Reflect on how your experiences have shaped your personal and professional growth and influenced your aspirations for medicine.
- Stay Organized and Cohesive
 - Essays are typically 200-300 words so it's important to write in a clear and logical manner to get your point across.



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Med School Info Sessions: <https://ocs.yale.edu/events/>

THANK YOU AND HAPPY WRITING

