Continuing Education
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **BOULDER**

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PERSONAL STATEMENT WRITING TIPS

CONSIDER ADDRESSING THE FOLLOWING TOPICS IN YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

1. What led you to become interested in a career in healthcare in the first place?
2. Of all of the healthcare careers, what are the unique elements of the one you've chosen that makes it the best fit for you?
3. How have your clinical experiences:
    - Confirmed your commitment to a career focused on effective, compassionate care of sick and injured patients?
    - Informed your guiding principles for patient care. (Your own experiences with direct patient interaction are most important, but you also may (briefly) cite the examples set by the clinicians you've shadowed.)
4. What are some of the impactful non-clinical experiences that have informed your personal strengths, values, and motivations?
    - If you are changing careers, what were the aspects of your former career that you found fulfilling? (Of course, it is most relevant to cite the aspects that will translate to a career as a clinician.) Yet, what was missing? (Be brief on this point.)
5. Why are you excited about the science of the human body? The reader should understand why you are drawn toward a clinical career that requires a master's or doctoral-level education in the sciences.
6. What is the impact you hope to make in your future work as a clinician? You should convey how you hope to do better than simply becoming a competent clinician: What needs do you hope to address? What you say here should follow naturally from the experiences listed in your application. Potential topics could include:
    - The personal approach you intend to take to patient care
    - A strong interest in caring for patients in a special population (such as pediatric or geriatric patients, people with physical or developmental disabilities, people in underserved rural or urban communities, etc.)
    - Conducting research in your field and/or serving on the teaching faculty of an academic institution
7. If you have overcome personal hardships, challenges, or obstacles that may have influenced your educational pursuits, or if you had significant fluctuations in your academic record, briefly acknowledge them to provide context. (You may be given additional space to provide more details in a separate section of the application.) This topic should not be a primary focus of the essay.

HOW TO ADDRESS THESE TOPICS

- As you get started, do some soul-searching: *Why* are you motivated to pursue this career? Which of your experiences have confirmed both how and why you want to do this work? (In addition to introspection, consider stepping out of your own perspective by speaking to loved ones and trusted mentors: Ask them why *they* think you are a good fit for this career.)
- Although it's important to orient the reader by explaining how you first became interested in a career in healthcare (in general) and this particular career (specifically), these topics should take up no more than about ¼ of your essay.
- The bulk of your personal statement should be devoted to discussing a few of the most meaningful experiences you've had on the pre-health path:
    - What are the top 3 to 4 common themes or motivations that have guided your choice of activities over the years?
    - How have your experiences shaped your values and your personal development?
    - How have your clinical experiences informed your career choice?
- In your essay, share a series of illustrative **anecdotes** that convey your motivations. Anecdotes help the reader get a sense of who you are as a real person. Making use of anecdotes and providing specific examples is also an effective way to convey your personal characteristics, values, and motivations without giving the impression that you are bragging.
    - Often, the most effective anecdotes are ones that describe situations that would have appeared mundane to an outside observer but were deeply meaningful to you. Share a few specific experiences that embody the essence of why—or how—you are motivated to do this work.
    - When choosing which anecdotes to share, it is generally more compelling to bring up stories from activities in which you had a high level of competence, rather than stories from one of your first experiences in a given role.
    - Use descriptive language that contains sensory detail. You may want to include inner thoughts and emotions.
    - The anecdotes that you choose to share help the reader to understand your motivations for going into this specific clinical career, your approach to engaging with others, and/or your competencies.
    - For anecdotes involving a patient, give them a name (but make it a short name). To indicate that the name is an alias, use quotation marks around their name the first time you use it.
    - Pro Tip: Throughout your pre-health preparation, write down or record anecdotes from your patient interaction experiences at the end of clinical days.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- AAMC Advisor Corner: Crafting Your Personal Statement
- *The Premed Playbook: Guide to the Medical School Personal Statement*, by Dr. Ryan Gray. Detailed suggestions and examples.
- *Writing Guidelines: Medical School Personal Statements*, Ohio Wesleyan University (free download): 73 pages of advice!

ADDITIONAL TIPS

- Most people will write and revise 10+ drafts before they are happy with the final product. As you work on your essay, ask for feedback from other people:
    - Does the "voice" in the essay sound like you?
    - Is it clear why you want to pursue this specific clinical path?
    - Ask your readers to summarize the main takeaways they gained from the essay . . . does their list match what you were hoping to convey?
- General Rule: If you find yourself making a general statement that any other applicant could make, that is your signal to develop that thought further so that you share your personal, specific reflections on your experiences.
- Aim to present a thoughtful, heartfelt reflection on your experiences, *not* a sales pitch. Do NOT blandly write, "X experience allowed me to develop Y attribute." Rather, share anecdotes and examples that convey those traits implicitly.
- Convey how you have *changed* and *grown* as a result of your experiences over time.
- If you have been involved in research, be sure to discuss the *intellectually satisfying* aspects of doing research. The schools do not care which lab techniques you learned. They are interested in your intellectual engagement.
- If you mention another person who has inspired you, do so in a concise manner. Refer to their example only as a way to lead into a discussion about subsequent experiences you've had.
- When describing your interactions with patients, focus on *the patient's experience*, not on the gratitude they may have expressed or the interest they may have taken in your career path. In other words, give the patient a voice in the anecdote.
- The personal statement should *not* be a chronological narrative of the activities you will be listing in your application. That's what the *Experiences* section of the application is for.
- Do not assume that a reader will have read the *Experiences* section of your application first. They may read the Personal Statement first. Thus, when referring to any activity, put it into context for the reader. That said, do not use up valuable space in the personal statement by reiterating detailed information that you will provide in the *Experiences* section.
- Proofread carefully. An essay full of spelling errors and grammatical mistakes is unprofessional and indicates a lack of attention to detail.

TOPICS TO AVOID

Each of the following topics tends to be quite common in personal statements in applications for the health professions. We recommend avoiding these topics so that your essay does not end up sounding similar to many other essays:

- Beginning the essay with a statement indicating that you have/haven't always known that you want to be a healthcare professional.
- Describing the "eye-opening" or chaotic experience of an international medical relief trip or in an Emergency Department. (The chaos of a setting is not the point. The point is what you learned from the experience about authentic, compassionate service to others.)
- Referring to Paul Farmer or a TV show
- Including a famous quotation. Admissions committees want to hear your words, not those of someone else.

LOGISTICAL TIPS

- The professional school application will not allow for any special formatting. Thus, prepare your essay in a word processing app using "Clear Formatting." After copying-and-pasting into your application, double-check that the formatting is still okay.
- You will not be able to use indents, so use standard block paragraph formatting. (That is, hit "enter" an extra time after each paragraph, leaving blank line between paragraphs.) To save characters, use only one space between sentences.

CHARACTER LIMITS

AACOMAS: 5300 characters
AACPMAS: 4500 characters
AADSAS: 4500 characters
AMCAS: 5300 characters
CASPA: 5000 characters
OPTOMCAS: 4500 characters
OTCAS: 7500 characters
PharmCAS: 4500 characters
PTCAS: 4500 characters (prompt changes annually)
TMDSAS: 5000 characters
VMCAS: 3000 characters
CASAA: 4500 characters