

Writing the Primary Essay for Medical School
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Introduction

Writing the primary application for a health professions school (medical, dental, veterinary) is perhaps the hardest part of the application process. No one likes to write about themselves! Why? Because it is difficult to see in yourself traits and characteristics that have become part of who you are. Others may be able to see these better than you. So how do you find a good technique or template?

You begin by understanding the purpose of the primary essay in medical school admissions. This starts by reading the prompts that you are presented in the primary application (AMCAS, AACOMAS, AADSAS, VMCAS, etc.) in the primary essay section. As you consider what to write for your personal statement essay as part of your medical school application, consider the following guidelines that are provided in the AMCAS application.

From the AMCAS application.

Use the space provided to explain why you want to go to medical school. The available space for your response is 5300 characters, or approximately one full page. You will receive an error message if you exceed the available space. For additional assistance, click "help" on the tool bar at the top of the screen.

Some questions you may want to consider while drafting this essay are:

- Why have you selected the field of medicine?
- What motivates you to learn more about medicine?
- What do you want medical schools to know about you that hasn't been disclosed in another section of the application?

In addition, you may wish to include information such as:

- Special hardships, challenges or obstacles that may have influenced your educational pursuits
- Commentary on significant fluctuations in your academic record which are not explained elsewhere in your application

Types of Essays to Avoid

I generally read about 300 personal essays each application cycle. As a member of the Admissions Committee for Duke School of Medicine, I also get to read essays written by applicants from other colleges and universities. There are generally three types of essays to avoid.

1. The Written Resume Essay

This essay is taken from a regular chronological resume of the applicant and then put into prose. You can identify it readily because the essay shows no passion or excitement. It is just an expanded list of activities and why these make the applicant a great candidate for medical school. The activities are not woven together into a coherent essay. Another theme that is typical of a “resume essay” is the “helping people” theme. The writer seems to think that this is sufficient motivation and the most important aspect of the essay.

2. The Illness Essay

Everyone has experienced illness either themselves or with a close relative and this essay is about how this “illness” motivated the applicant to pursue medicine as a career. There is nothing wrong with the initial motivation for medicine coming from an illness, but the interest should be validated by further experiences and activities that connect to this initial interest. This could be a research experience with, for example, diabetes or sickle cell disease. You may have started a student group focused on the disease. For example, two years ago a Duke student started a local chapter of the Autism Foundation of North Carolina.

3. I Want to Help People Essay

The important thing to remember about being a physician or any other health care provider is that it is a “serving” profession. Altruism is a strong motivation for most people, so making this the thesis of your essay is not going to impress or differentiate you from other applicants. You must go beyond this impulse to show how much you care for people. It is better to actually document how you have served in various situations and to explain how these experiences have led to the development of important humanistic characteristics that are so critical in health care. Stating that you want to help people does not mean that you have the necessary interpersonal skill to do so.

Elements of a Good Essay

Although your personal essay is only one aspect of your total application package, it carries a fair amount of weight because it reveals who you are and how well you can communicate your message. Put yourself in the place of an admissions committee member who is charged with reading 100 applications over the weekend. The person will either be reading your application and essay on the computer screen or they will print out a hard copy. The reviewer is looking for 3 things:

1. Can you communicate your message?
2. How did you distinguish yourself from other candidates?
3. Did you show any passion for medicine?

Included on the Blackboard site are three essays written by Duke students. They have been selected as examples of good writing and compelling stories about their intellectual journey to medicine. All have given me permission to use their essays for the benefit of other Duke students. So be sure to read these essays and ask yourself the question after reading them, “Is this a person who I would like to have as my physician or dentist?”

A draft of your essay will be read by the person interviewing you for the writing of the committee letter. At the end of the interview, they will give you a critique of your essay. Use their suggestions to improve the essay. If you want a second opinion, email me your essay after you have revised the essay and I will give you my feedback. I will be brutally honest with you about the essay. Our goal as advisors is to have you write such an outstanding essay that the admissions committee member will want to invite you for an interview to meet you in person. ds