

Tutoring a Medical School Personal Statement

Purpose: To convince the admissions committee to admit the writer to medical school.

Audience: The members of the admissions committee who will determine whether the writer will be admitted to their program.

Content: The American Medical College Application Service requires a one page, 5,300 character essay in which applicants should discuss the following:

- 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 is not disclosed in another section of the application?
- Describe special hardships, challenges, or obstacles that may have influenced your educational pursuits
- Provide commentary on significant fluctuations in your academic record that are not explained elsewhere in your application

<http://www.aamc.org/students/amcas/start.htm>

Mechanics

Grammar and style are important. No matter how good our writer's test scores, no matter how high his/her undergraduate GPA, the first personal impression the audience has of our writer is conveyed through the Personal Statement. No medical school applicant would go to the admissions interview dressed casually (generally, they all—male and female—wear black suits and white shirts), so be sure that the applicant doesn't look sloppy and unprofessional in the Personal Statement.

Telling the story

Many web discussions of "How to Write a Medical School Personal Statement" suggest that the writer "tell a story." Be careful with this...not everyone has an interesting story to tell, and not many have the writing chops to do it without embarrassing themselves. You will see this story approach attempted in statements when you tutor, and sometimes the two of you can make it work. However, if a theme in the Personal Statement develops away from the story, don't hesitate to suggest that your writer focus on developing the theme rather than the story.

Developing a theme for the Personal Statement

Due to the brevity of the Personal Statement, a unifying theme will pull together otherwise seemingly disparate facts and ideas. Some writers will enter the Writing Center with a theme in place, but when you see a statement that seems to be a glorified list of accomplishments and exploits loosely strung together with coordinating conjunctions and prepositional phrases, it's time to start asking questions to develop a theme. This theme will be unique to your student writer, and will develop a connection between that writer's experiences and his/her desire to go to medical school.

Selling the writer to the program

Another internet suggestion is "This is the chance to sell yourself." As writers, we often feel uncomfortable with this notion; after all, we've been taught that bragging is wrong and obnoxious, and sometimes we're not certain that we're all that much of a bargain.

It has helped me to think of the Personal Statement as a kind of Writer's Statement that accompanies the medical school application. The Personal Statement does not merely recount your writer's deeds of derring-do with medical school as the Holy Grail: its focus is not the transcripts and test scores and reference letters provided, but *the narrative behind how those things came to be*.

Your goal as tutor, then, is to help the writer articulate what s/he has experienced as a student and as a person, and how those experiences will bring unique and important qualities to the program. As you read through the draft, you may begin to recognize some of these qualities before your writer (in fact, I find that I almost always see wondrous and exciting things on the page, my writer just needs prompting to develop them.)

With that in mind, some questions you might ask to help your writer delve toward a theme are:

1. Is there a common factor behind your educational/life successes to this point?
2. Has one person or a group of persons taught you something that has been a determining factor in your successes?
3. Can you describe a hardship or an advantage that has shaped your successes?