

Step 4: Writing a Personal Statement

There are six tasks to accomplish in fourth year:

Step 1: Write your CV. Document what you have done thus far.

Step 2: Choose a career. Choose wisely: this decision is for the rest of your life.

Step 3: Schedule your fourth year based upon your career.

Step 4: Write a personal statement

Step 5: Complete ERAS

Step 6: Interview and choose a residency.

Step 7: Squeeze the last juice from this orange you call medical school (See Step 3)

Step 8: Clean up details: i.e., take step II of the boards. (See Step 3)

Step 9: The Match

This chapter will focus upon some general principles on how to make your personal statement personal.

I. INTRODUCTION:

The personal statement is an opportunity to present important personal features not reflected on your CV and letters of recommendation. Unlike the personal statement you wrote to get into medical school, however, it does not carry the same weight in the program's decision for your acceptance. It is not inconsequential, however; a good personal statement can set you up for a great interview and it may ensure that you match to a program that values the type of person you are.

In short, the personal statement is like the short program in Olympic ice-skating: a great performance will not win the medal, but a bad performance will knock you out of contention.

There are five rules to a great personal statement:

1. **Do not be offensive.** Do not try to be too clever or artistic. There is a time and place for this, but the personal statement is not it. It is too subject to misinterpretation. The consequences of being misunderstood can be significant.
2. **Show commitment.** Convey that you are committed to your career choice (even if you still have doubts). No residency director wants someone who might flake out at any minute.
3. **Show direction.** Convey that you have spent some time thinking about what you want to do in your career, and that you have insight into what it will require. You do not have to have a definitive plan, but you do want to convey that you have thought about the options, and this one seems to be the best for you.

4. **Subtly introduce your admiral personal attributes.** This chapter will show you how to boast without being boastful.
5. **Use the personal statement to set up a great interview.**

II. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

A. **Be conservative in your personal statement.** It is ok to be clever and artistic, but this is not the place to risk being misunderstood.

B. **Good writing is as important as good content.**

1. Spend ample time with grammar and spelling checks.
2. Ask the following people to read your personal statement.
 - a. **Someone who knows you.** Ask them to evaluate the statement with this criteria: “Does this sound like you?”
 - b. **Someone who knows grammar.** Do not choose a classmate unless they are an accomplished editor or writer. This person does not need to be a physician, but they do need to know writing.
 - c. **The program director** or someone on the residency admissions committee for the type of residency to which you are applying. They can help you with attributes they are looking for in their residents.
3. Exclude anything that your reviewers find questionable or confusing. **Now is not the time for free speech. Be conservative.** You can free speak in the interview where you have the opportunity to defend any misinterpretation.
4. **Spell check.** Silly errors suggest glibness or a lack of attention to detail. Neither is good.

C. **Do not waste time discussing why you want to be a doctor:** you already are. Focus instead on the career to which you are applying. Integrate the qualities you respect in a physician, and hope to emulate, into the discussion of your specific career as a radiologist.

D. **Start early.** A great residency personal statement is focused on your talents, your career decision, and why the two fit together. It will be hard for you to write your personal statement until you have decided upon a career. Once you have made this decision, however, write it early. You want to allow enough time to make the changes your reviewers have suggested to you.

III. A METHOD

Stay focused on the goal of the statement: You want to link **your talents** with **your career decision**. In doing so, you want to show **why the two are a nice fit**.

A. Paragraph 1: Why did **you** choose **this profession**.

1. **The first paragraph must be about you.** It does not have to be flambuoant, but it **should be interesting**. Avoid the usual throat-clearing exercise of

describing where you were born and what you have done since. Get straight to the point: **What about you makes for a nice fit with your profession.**

a. Start with a declarative sentence that captures **why** you have chosen your residency. Begin with something you enjoy or something about you.

Samples:

i. Internal medicine: “I enjoy solving problems.”

ii. Surgery: “I enjoy using my hands; I like the satisfaction that comes with instituting interventions that result in definitive improvement.”

iii. Section VII lists some of the attributes that physicians from different specialties evoke for why they chose their profession.

b. Focus on **you**, not on the profession

i. Average: “Surgery requires people who are good with their hands.” This is about surgery, not you.

ii. Better: “I enjoy working with my hands.” This is about you.

3. Follow this with a personal anecdote or a concrete example for how you came to the conclusion that you value this attribute.

B. Paragraph 2-3. Use the next paragraphs to expand upon what it is that inspires you to be a part of your chosen specialty. If you think hard enough, you will remember some defining moment in which it became apparent that you wanted to be a surgeon or a psychiatrist. There may also be a personal event during which you realized that you were attracted to some attribute. Now you realize that your chosen profession embodies that attribute. Whatever the event, remember that it must be about you.

C. Paragraph 3: What are your strong points.

A. Now is the time to boast a bit. This does not make you an egoist. If you do not tell us about your special characteristics, we will never know of them.

B. Strategies to do this without sounding arrogant:

1. **State how much you respect and value the characteristics of the profession you are choosing.** The implicit connection is that you embody what you value. Example, “I respect and value the empathy and bedside manner that is required of the internist.” This also conveys a sense of insight into the profession.

2. “I want to continue to develop...” **Note a few attributes you value and how you hope to continue to strengthen these attributes during your residency.** State how you pride yourself on developing these traits, the struggle to do so, and how you want a program that supports your efforts to continue to develop them. By recognizing that you could always be better, you relieve yourself of arrogance. Example, “I want to continue the progress I have made in improving my dexterity and procedural skills.”

3. **List specific events that “taught you lessons.”** Implicit in this is that the lesson learned has endowed upon you that characteristic. “Participating in my summer externship in Guana taught me the importance of being part of a medical team.”

C. A good paragraph three suggests self-awareness, insight, and the ability to learn from life's lessons. It establishes you as the person who makes decisions in your life, not someone else's agenda.

D. Paragraphs 4: What do you want to do once you are in the profession.

1. Show that you have thought about what you want to do (clinical practice, research, etc.). Show that you have some insight into the profession, and that you have thought about how your career might take shape.

2. Communicate what you want from your residency. What are your long-term goals? Examples: clinical care, specialization, research, teaching.

E. Final paragraph. Tie all of the components together. What you enjoy about your profession, your strengths, how you can contribute to the profession, and your **enthusiasm** to do so.

IV. Pitfalls:

A. Do not be too artistic or clever. Remember, be conservative.

B. Do not tell them why you want to be a doctor: you already are. Focus on why you want to be an otolaryngologist.

C. Do not tell the surgeon why he should be a surgeon. This is not your time to recruit the surgeon into surgery: he is convinced of the profession's merits. Tell them why you want to be a surgeon and what about you (your strengths and attributes) makes for a great surgeon.

D. Do not qualify your statements. Confidence and self-awareness are important; both are communicated in how you say things. An example of what not to say, "I feel like I am intelligent, though I know I am no better than anyone else." This makes you sound ashamed to be intelligent, or even worse, that you are no more intelligent than anyone else. Now is not the time to be overly humble. If you do not believe in you, do not count on other to believe in you either.

E. Do not describe why you did not choose other professions. This is a waste of time; your pediatric program director does not care why you turned down emergency medicine. She wants to know why you chose pediatrics.

F. Do not waste time listing specific characteristics about the program you are looking for. This is not a personal ad. An example of what not to do, "I am looking for a medium sized residency in a large city. I prefer an academic center in the southeast." Use these preferences to choose which residencies to which you apply. There is no need to restate these requirements here. If you applied to their program, they know you are interested in their type of program.

G. Do not apologize for the profession. Example, “Although some people think that dermatologists make too much money, I think...”

F. Watch out for statements that have multiple interpretations. Example, “I am challenged...” (this makes you sound retarded).

G. Avoid clichés and overused scenarios.

H. Avoid exaggerated words and phrases (i.e., always, never, for as long as I can remember). Applicants use these words to convey sincerity and authenticity. Because they are so unbelievable, they suggest just the opposite. Have you seriously “always wanted to be a surgeon?”

I. Do not make your personal statement into a prose version of your CV. There are only two reasons past accomplishments should be discussed in the personal statement:

1. The lessons/insight you have learned from the experience
2. The intangible characteristics (teamwork, organizational abilities, etc.) you have developed because the experience.

J. Do not be too idealistic. Idealism is great, but if it is excessive it suggests that you are naïve.

K. Do not be too specific in your career plans. Your program will enjoy the idea that they have developed you. No one wants the resident who is rigid in his plans. (i.e., “I want to be a cardiologist who specializes in ablation of the left atrium.”)

L. Do not criticize other professions or physicians. Again, this illustrates how little you know about how difficult this profession is.

V. Setting up a good interview.

A. The personal statement is unlikely to influence the program’s decision to accept you.

B. By making your personal statement unique and personal, you give the interviewer something to talk about when you arrive for the interview.

VI. Grammatical Tips

Residency directors are used to reading the medical literature. The medical literature makes use of short declarative sentences to efficiently communicate information. It is terse, not eloquent. You are not afforded the luxury of using lengthy transitional phrases or prosaic descriptive language. With that said, it is important that you use your own style; this is, after all, your personal statement.

A. Avoid long, drawn-out sentences

B. Use short declarative sentences.

C. One thought per sentence.

D. Each paragraph should begin with a sentence that captures the focus of that paragraph.

