



Guidelines and Resources to Help You Write a Strong Personal Statement

What is the purpose of a personal statement?

The purpose of the personal statement is to provide the residency program director with a window into your character, strengths, and aspirations: insight that cannot be readily gleaned from other sources of information, such as your CV, transcripts, letters of recommendation, clerkship evaluations, board scores, and MSPE. It is an opportunity to make a case for why you are the best choice for their program. In practical terms, the purpose of the statement is to get an interview, not clinch the residency position.

How important is the personal statement to your residency application?

The relative weight given to the personal statement varies among specialties and residency programs. Results of a 2016 NRMP program director survey¹ showed that, for all specialties combined, the top six factors used to select applicants for an interview were: USMLE/COMLEX Step 1 score, letters of recommendation in the specialty, MSPE, USMLE/COMLEX Step 2 score, grades in required clerkship, and **personal statement**. In contrast, when ranking applicants for the Match, the top factors cited were; interactions with faculty during interview and visit, interpersonal skills, interactions with house staff during interview and visit, feedback from current residents and USMLE/COMLEX Step 1 score. On an importance scale of 0 to 5, with 5 being most important, for all specialties combined, the personal statement was rated at 3.6 for both selecting candidates to interview and ranking. Though it can be difficult to know exactly what to do based on these results, when thinking about the importance of your personal statement, remember this cautionary note, *A great personal statement might help an application, but a bad one will kill it.*

Take Away

Don't underestimate the impact of your personal statement! Take the time to write a good one.

Should you discuss your academic deficiencies?

Residency program directors don't expect applicants to be perfect, but they do value honesty and evidence of personal insight and growth. Failed courses, failed board exams, and educational gaps show up in official documents, as do lapses in professionalism; they will be noticed. Because of this, it is wise to be forthcoming; "tell but don't dwell." Ideally, your personal story should dovetail with the rest of your statement and describe how you grew from overcoming the obstacle. For example, if you are talking about overcoming adversity in your life, you could discuss your academic problem as another bump in the road. If you are applying for a highly competitive specialty, you could discuss your other important attributes and how your revised approach to studying and learning will lend itself to success in that career.

Here's an example of one way to do this:

When I did not pass my boards, I analyzed my learning style and realized that I was not correlating material from various courses. By realizing how seemingly different concepts related to each other, I was able to improve my study skills and develop a more substantial knowledge base. This allowed me to improve my score significantly. Moreover, integrative thinking is essential to being a dermatologist, and by retooling my approach to learning, I believe I am better equipped to excel in this specialty.

Decisions regarding what should or shouldn't be discussed in a personal statement are not always clear-cut. A general rule-of-thumb is to address anything that might preclude you from consideration as a viable candidate, such as board failures, multiple course failures, extended educational gaps, and documented lapses in professionalism. Other issues such as low class rank, failure of a single course, or short-term gaps that do not result in delayed graduation probably should not be addressed in a personal statement; although, they may come up in an interview and you should be prepared to discuss them. If you are uncertain as to whether you should include something, please discuss with a career guidance advisor.

Formatting

- ✓ Include Name and ID Number
- ✓ Length: Approximately one (1) page with one-inch margins all around and 12pt font.
- ✓ Structure: Opening paragraph, body (2-4 paragraphs), and closing paragraph.

Recommended Timeline “Begin early and revise often”

Writing your PS could take longer than you dreamed possible.

- ✓ Pre-Draft “Brainstorming” Stage: July – December of 3rd year
- ✓ Draft “Composing” Stage: December – June of 3rd year
- ✓ Final “Polishing” Stage: July of 4th year

Tips for Writing A Strong Personal Statement

Pre-draft Stage: Brainstorming Simply let the ideas flow; don’t censor or judge what you write. Stream of consciousness is fine. Consider the following questions to help develop the “image” you want to present. Create a short “pitch.”

1. List 5 strengths / personal skills / attributes you bring to your chosen specialty/residency.
2. What have been your most valuable experiences, goals, and accomplishments since entering medical school?
3. What are you most passionate about? What 3 things are you most proud of?
4. Which course work or clinical experiences have you enjoyed most and why? How have they influenced you?
5. What is unique about you and your experiences?
6. How have you overcome your weaknesses and challenges in life?
7. What do you hope to get out of your chosen career? What are your professional goals and aspirations?
8. Why do you want to be a (insert specialty) physician? Be specific. What does being a ‘good physician’ in this specialty mean to you? Why will patients choose you as their physician?
9. What outside interests do you have? How might these be applicable to your chosen specialty?
10. What contributions can you make to this specialty and the residency program?

Draft Stage: Composing Begin with an outline to ensure your statement includes all of your main points. Even a rudimentary outline can break the “spell” of the blank page. Though there is no “one right way” to write a personal statement, the overall narrative should provide answers to the basic questions: Why this specialty? Why you? Why this residency program? Your approach to answering these questions can take many forms, but should be an honest reflection of who you are.

Opening Statement / Paragraph—You may find it easier to write this last. Write a concise, compelling opening statement that conveys something important about you. It need not be long, emotional, clever, or awe inspiring. It should be interesting and informative. Avoid clichés and corny language. It’s useful to have a theme that you refer to throughout your statement—something that ties the narrative together.

Body—Compose a 3-paragraph narrative. Let your personality shine. Tell your story so reviewers want to meet you. Be specific, direct, and concise. Make every word count. Vary your sentence structure and length to create a compelling writing style. Use short transitions to make your story flow.

- ***Why did you choose this particular specialty? What personal experiences or characteristics draw you to the specialty? Why are you a good fit?*** Expound on your desire to be in the specialty. Do not try to prove it is “right for you” by simply listing personal attributes. Instead, discuss concrete experiences that demonstrate your interest.
- ***What makes you a great candidate for their program? / What do you have to offer? / What are your strengths?*** Show—don’t tell. Provide concrete examples that pertain to your goals, abilities, and achievements.
 - ***Compare this***, “I have a strong work ethic, and work well with others.”
 - ***To this***, “I’m very determined and hard-working. When I initiated a service project through our pre-med honor society, I was very excited. What I didn’t realize was how many obstacles would arise. I persisted, and by doing x and y, I was able to achieve our goal of z.”

- **What are you looking for in a residency program? / Why did you apply to this program?** Describe the attributes you are looking for in a residency program. Explain what this program offers that is special, unique, or desirable: rural, urban, inner city, diverse patient population, research opportunities, emphasis on education / academics, skills labs, lots of hands-on experience, patient-centered care, collegial, supportive environment, fast paced?
- You may want to write a customized statement for each program or for any that are really unique.
- Closing Paragraph / Statement**—Return to the theme of the opening statement and summarize / reinforce the main points made in the “body” of your statement. **Be assertive; let them know you want the job.**

Final Stage: Polishing Proofread multiple times, read aloud to ensure “flow,” go through the checklist below, get feedback from several people, and put on any finishing touches before submitting to ERAS. Submit to ac.guidance@hc.msu.edu **in word only** for feedback.

Checklist

- Have you checked for spelling and grammar?
- Have you avoided the common mistakes (see next page)?
- Does the opening statement provide a personal insight that grabs the reader’s attention?
- Does the body of your statement include specific examples to illustrate your main points; does it “show rather than tell”?
- Does your narrative have smooth transitions / flow?
- Have you avoided overly flowery, gushy / effusive language?
- Have you eliminated clichés / corny statements?
- Have you deleted redundancies and reduced excessive wordiness?
- Have you made a compelling case for yourself?
- Does your closing statement sound like the last sentence?

Common Mistakes

Mistake #1: More appropriate for an Application to Medical School—Avoid discussing your reasons for getting into medicine or why you want to be a doctor. By your 4th year of medical school, it is assumed that you have a passion for medicine and are motivated to be a physician. You need to explain why you’re applying to a residency program in a specific specialty and why they should hire you!

Mistake #2: Teaches the Program Director about the Specialty—PDs already know about their specialty. Your job is to teach them about *you*. You don’t have to show-off how much you know about the specialty, you need to sell yourself. Talk about the salient aspects of the specialty in the context of explaining why you are a good fit.

Mistake #3: Overly Effusive or Cliché—Gushy, flowery language and trite, cliché expressions come across as immature and are definite turn-offs. For example, if applying to Pediatrics, don’t say, “I love children and am extremely passionate about helping them on their journey to becoming self-actualized, healthy adults.”

Mistake #4: Too Long—Program Directors don’t have time to read long statements. Keep your statement close to one page with 1-inch margins and 12pt font. Be concise by avoiding redundancy, extraneous detail, and other types of excessive wordiness. Write in “active voice.”

Mistake #5: Too Vague or Generic—Make sure your statement reflects your interests and attributes. Use specific, personal examples to illustrate your points.

Mistake #6: Reads Like a Creative Writing Assignment —Your statement needs to persuade a PD to interview you, which means that in addition to getting their attention with clever writing, you need to *keep* their attention with compelling information about you. Don’t be cutesy or obscure and make sure your stories, metaphors, and analogies are relevant, clear, and don’t overreach.

Important “Do’s and Don’ts”

DO start early and revise, revise, revise

DO use powerful adjectives and support with short, illustrative examples: *adaptable, ambitious, capable, cooperative, diligent, efficient, flexible, selfless, and thoughtful*

DO radiate confidence, not arrogance; avoid self-congratulatory statements

DON’T rehash your CV

DON’T use abbreviations

DON’T call yourself humble when you’re touting your volunteer work

DON’T overuse “I” statements, which may be interpreted as poor writing skills

DON’T claim attributes you do not possess; *the same person who wrote the Personal Statement must show up for the interview*

DON’T overuse these adjectives: *awesome, great, really, very*, etc.

DON’T make negative statements and comments about the shortcomings of a different specialty

DON’T mention lifestyle (e.g., time-off) and financial reasons for choosing a specialty

DON’T be afraid to start over or ask for help

Where to Get Help

Office of Academic and Career Guidance / Student Services
Michigan State University College of Osteopathic Medicine
A130 East Fee Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824
Phone: 517-884-3893
Email: ac.guidance@hc.msu.edu

***For feedback send in
WORD format only***

There are many different styles and approaches to completion of a curriculum vitae or personal statement. The advice provided represents the viewpoint of one individual; other opinions may be valid. The review of any document by an employee of MSU COM in no way guarantees placement in any workplace or residency program. The final determination of what information to include or omit is your responsibility. In addition, it is your responsibility to ensure the content provided within these documents is an accurate representation of your skills, experiences and abilities.

For feedback and guidance on your personal statement, send a completed draft *in word only* to ac.guidance@hc.msu.edu

Additional Resources

- [Personal Statement Requirements for Otolaryngology Residency Programs](#)
- [The DO: Personal Statement Do’s and Don’ts: Avoiding Cliché’s and \[How to Write a Compelling Personal Statement\]\(#\)](#)
- [Grammatical Rules for Writing Personal Statements](#)
- [Plagiarism Checker](#)
- [Medical School Personal Statement Secrets](#) is written for application to medical school, but has good general tips for how to write a compelling personal statement. Just keep in mind that the audience and purpose are different for residency statements.
- StudentDoc.com’s “[Writing Personal Statements for Residency Programs](#)”
- USMLE Web [Sample Personal Statements](#)
- The Student Doctor Network. (June 23, 2007) “Before You Write Your Personal Statement, Read This.” <http://www.studentdoctor.net/2007/06/before-you-write-your-personal-statement-read-this/>

Cited references

1. National Resident Matching Program (2016). Results of the 2014 NRMP Program Director Survey. <http://www.nrmp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/NRMP-2016-Program-Director-Survey.pdf>