WRITING RESOURCE GUIDE: MEDICAL SCHOOL APPLICATION

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Table
Of Contents

MEDSCHOOLCOACH

Writing in Medical School Applications	PAGE

Getting Started
with Writing

Introduction

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As a physician, good writing is an essential skill that can have a significant impact on patient care, medical research, and the overall success of your career. From writing patient notes and medical histories to research articles and grant proposals, writing is a crucial aspect of the medical profession.

Clear and concise writing is particularly important when it comes to medical documentation. Physicians must accurately convey medical information in a way that is understandable to other healthcare professionals, insurance companies, and legal authorities. Poor writing can lead to misunderstandings and errors in patient care, misinterpretation of medical data, and even legal issues.

Speaking of patient care, physicians need to be able to explain complex medical concepts in plain language so that patients with varying levels of health literacy can understand the information and become better partners in their healthcare. Patients rely on their doctors to provide them with clear information about their medical conditions and possible treatment plans. More importantly, trust between the physician and patient is built through clear communication. If physicians are unable to communicate effectively with their patients, they may miss important details that could lead to negative health outcomes. Knowing how to write for different audiences is a skill that not only benefits the documentation process, it translates into better communication skills all around.

In addition to patient care, physicians are often involved in conducting clinical trials and publishing research articles. Well-written research papers are more likely to be accepted by reputable journals, increasing the visibility and impact of the research. Conversely, poor writing can result in a paper being rejected, even if the research itself is of high quality. The same can be said for writing grant proposals to obtain research funding as they must clearly communicate the purpose, methods, and expected outcomes of the research to potential funding agencies. A poorly written proposal is unlikely to be considered, regardless of the importance or innovation of the research.

Finally, good writing skills are essential for advancing one's career in the medical profession. Clear and concise writing can help physicians stand out in a crowded field and improve their chances of being selected for prestigious positions or leadership roles.

"Getting Started in Writing" contains articles that will guide you through the essentials of the writing process, editing, and proper grammar. First, you will learn how to organize and develop ideas, considering important elements such as audience, tone, and structure. Next, you will understand how to leverage grammar and syntax to enhance clarity and conciseness. There is also an article on how to overcome writer's block, should that moment come. After you work through some drafts and nail down your content, there are several articles on productive editing and proofreading methods. The skills developed from these articles will aid you in your journey to becoming a physician and beyond.

Contending with Biases
- Jennifer Wyatt-Speegle

So often, critical thinkers from all disciplines believe that objectivity is the ultimate goal in research and practice, that to produce sound scholarship is to be unaffected by outside influences and to eliminate any and all biases. It's understandable that people avoid claiming any **bias**. Typically, the word carries a negative connotation due to people associating bias with **explicit bias**, which is when the person is conscious of their biases and may even use these biases to hurt others. However, there is another form of bias called **implicit bias** and can also be known as your "perspective" or "worldview." Implicit bias, while unintentional, impacts your judgments and behaviors and can cause you to have certain preferences. These are not, inherently, a bad thing. In fact, it's a way for the brain to understand the world around us and connect with our family, friends, and community. These implicit biases are shaped by our environments, social circles, education, socioeconomic status, health, political leanings, religious beliefs, and geographic location, among other influences. Those influences guide us to our true passions and even lead you down the path of medicine (personal statements are designed to encourage you to discuss those influences). To put it bluntly, everyone is biased!

That being said, as a critical thinker, you should not "rest on your laurels" when it comes to addressing your implicit biases or the ones you encounter in others. Rather, it is vital that you maintain balance. That means you question and acknowledge your implicit biases, listen to worldviews that challenge your own, and learn and respect lifeways and knowledge unfamiliar to you. If you can practice these behaviors, you can harness your biases to accomplish meaningful actions that help many people.

Below is more information on how to balance your biases in your writing.
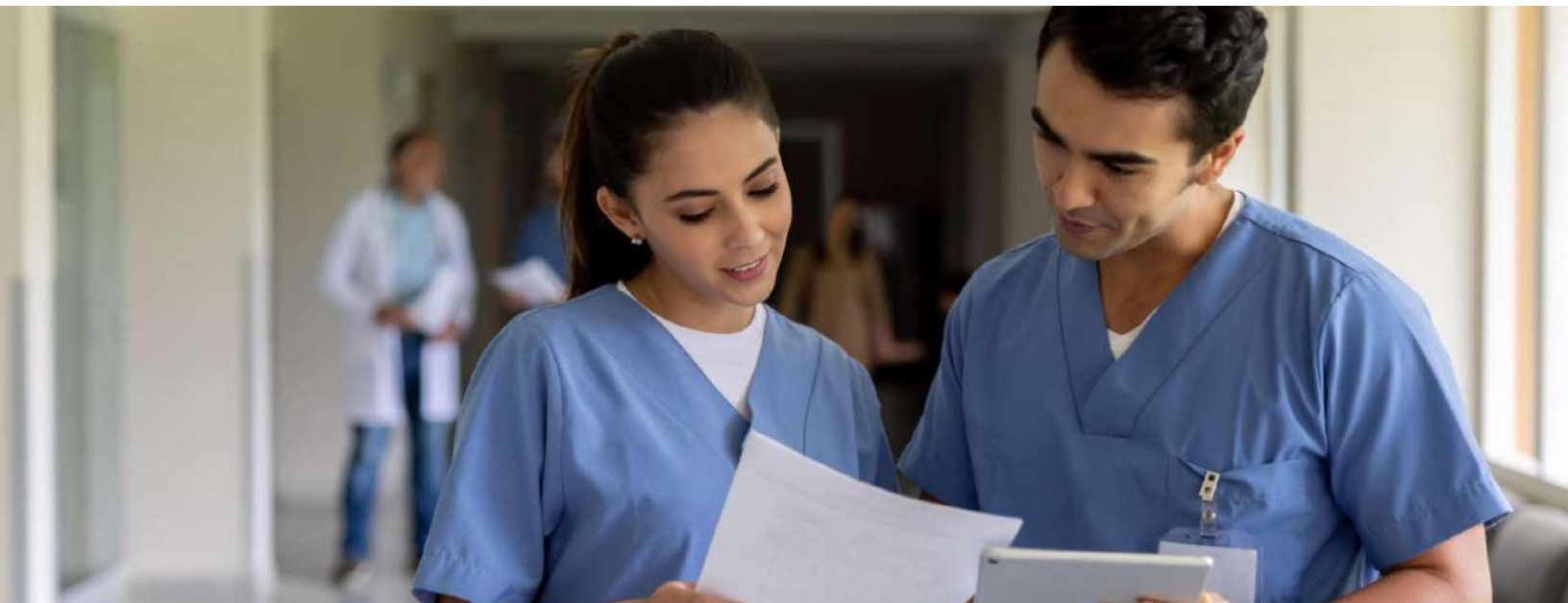
Question Your Biases

It can be hard to see your biases because you have lived with them so long. Also, many of the influences that support these biases exist around you daily, making your perspectives seem more universal than they are. While it can be difficult, you need to understand the biases you hold before you can construct persuasive messages that do not seem outlandish or make unreasonable assumptions about your readers and the situations you discuss in your work.

Start understanding your own biases by asking yourself:

- What are my core values and beliefs? These can include (but are not limited to) your perspectives large and small on:

  - religion
  - wealth
  - race/ethnicity/nationality
  - gender
  - education
  - healthcare
  - raising children
  - your hometown/geographic region
  - family traditions and structures
  - food
  - hygiene
  - clothing

- How do my core values/beliefs limit me? What judgments or decisions have they enabled?

- What assumptions have you made about specific groups of people (religious, political, cultural, etc.), places, or things?

  - These can include assumptions like "Pink is a girl's color and blue is a boy's color" or "All Mexicans like spicy food."

  - Ask yourself, *why do I make these assumptions? Is it possible that other people may have experiences that conflict with the assumption I have made? Where did I learn this assumption?*

Remember, your answers to these questions can reflect poorly on you. It also does not mean that you do not embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion. But, if you find you are not happy with what you are discovering about yourself when answering these questions, take that as a learning moment and move forward with the changes you would like to make. These changes can include the next two tips on managing your biases.

Acknowledge and Value Worldviews Different from Your Own

One of the best ways to expose your own implicit biases and become more open-minded is to learn from people whose worldviews differ from yours. When it comes to the human experience, there can be many "truths" as opposed to a single "truth." You may see this in scholarly research when several researchers approach one topic through distinct methods and arrive at different conclusions. Of course, these differences can be related and can even corroborate. The point is, findings or perspectives can be valid despite the differences that exist or how they may challenge one another.

That being said, not every perspective or opinion you come across is going to be based on verified facts. If you are "on the fence" about information you are being told, you can ask questions and give them the benefit of the doubt until you can learn more.

Even if you come from a place where you have familiarity with a particular perspective or worldview, asking questions can prevent you from making unfair assumptions, especially when you feel your perspectives and worldviews are being challenged. It can be easy to become uncomfortable or even feel defensive when challenged. However, it's important to remember that hearing another person's perspective does not automatically invalidate yours. In fact, understanding and respecting other worldviews is a strength that will increase your success as a future physician. If you can showcase that in your writing, the better you will be for it.

Learn and Respect Lifeways and Knowledge Unfamiliar to You

One of the more popular ways future physicians engage with people who hold drastically different worldviews and lifeways is to travel abroad, especially on a medical mission trip and the like. This gives students the chance to build hard and soft skills related to medicine. It also nicely checks off that DEI box, right? Not necessarily. These experiences can be life changing, but, if you are not careful, they can also engage your implicit biases. If you are not ready to challenge them, then you will probably miss out on some of the key lessons of the trip.

Engaging with people who differ from you must come from a place of humility and respect. By that, I mean you need to understand that you are not necessarily introducing new knowledge or services they were not aware of. You should also respect the fact that the communities you engage with have knowledge to share and, like you, have created lifeways to help them adapt to the resources that are available to them.

Let's continue with the medical mission trip example to demonstrate ways you can challenge your implicit biases. Below are common statements made from students who have reflected on their experiences during their trip. Next to each sample statement, there will be an explanation as to why it demonstrates implicit bias. Then, there will be a revised statement that is more conscious of presenting a balanced view.

Example #1

> "These people didn't know how to eat healthy or take care of themselves."

Are you sure about that? There are many reasons why people make decisions that could negatively impact their health. More often, it's not due to a lack of knowledge but a lack of resources and access. Even if the statement was more or less true, is it really showing the entire picture? Is there a way the statement could be revised to focus on the actual issues?

Instead, you could say,

> "After noticing the community's eating and hygiene habits, I did some research and asked my patients about how this pattern had developed so I could understand their choices better."

Example #2

> "It was my first time visiting a third world country and helping the underserved."

Sometimes, language can reveal implicit bias. The phrase "third world country" connotes that the country is "backwards" or even "lazy" (not to mention the phrase originated from labeling countries broadly according to their political alignment during the Cold War). Even the frequently used alternative, "developing country," implies a sort of hierarchy between countries, with Western and Global North countries typically at the top or thought of as the standard. Using these phrases obscures the very real histories as to why these countries may not have all the resources they need and the very real advancements they have developed. Also, these are phrases that Westerners have created to refer to non-Western countries. Rather than use these basic phrases, simply refer to the places you are discussing by name. You could also be more specific about the issues you are referring to when talking about a community.

Similarly, using the phrase "the underserved" oversimplifies an entire community and reduces them to a single attribute, one they would probably not prefer. It's also not a phrase these communities use to refer to themselves. Instead, use the names the community uses. If you are unsure what the name is, do some research or ask someone from the community.

Using specific names and detailing the issues shows respect and that you have a deeper understanding of the complexities in topics you are discussing. You could say,

> "It was my first time visiting Ecuador and helping people who do not have access to resources for diabetes care due to their remote location."

Example #3

"Our medical mission trip saved the community."

When on a medical mission trip, it can be easy to get caught up in all the good work being done. However, it's important to stop and think about why you are really there and the scope of your impact. Often, medical mission trips and similar endeavors address more immediate needs and do not involve any long-term solutions. While the work is important at that moment, at the end of the day, the community will continue to face the challenges you came to help with, and they're going to do it alone.

To that end, what has the community done to work toward solutions? I doubt it's nothing. Typically, when communities face severe hardship due to issues beyond their control, they collectively find workarounds and solutions that help them cope and meet as many of their needs as possible. This can come in many forms. So, when you arrive in a community on a medical mission trip, try to learn and understand how they have managed under the circumstances all this time and how you can leverage their knowledge and work with them. This can lead to some longer-term solutions and prevent you from making statements that sound like saviorism. Instead, you could say,

"On our medical mission trip, my team worked with the local community to understand their needs and learn what solutions they had already implemented. This enabled us to have a great impact."

Final Thoughts

Checking your implicit biases can help you write more compelling arguments (including ones where you are trying to convince someone to admit you to medical school!) as well as demonstrate your diplomacy and depth when discussing important issues. Beyond writing, these strategies can help you in daily conversations, creating a more inclusive environment that creates viable solutions.

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Audience, Tone, and Purpose – Jackie Fowler

In our daily lives, audience is a clear and concrete concept, but connecting it to writing is more abstract and harder to define. While writers have a general idea of what an audience is, it's still elusive enough to create anxiety while writing. People define audience in its most basic sense as, "Those who assemble at some public event"—a concert, an artistic performance, or a film, for example; in these cases, the audience is physical, present, and observable. For writers, however, audience is an intangible group of people that may or may not read their words. It's no wonder then that writers and writing teachers have difficulty expressing the concept clearly to new and emerging writers.

As with any abstract idea, an illustration may help clarify the concept. Imagine, for a moment, a boy in high school whose father owns a fire-engine red Ferrari, which is the envy of all the boy's friends. The father, however, treats it with near reverence. He rarely takes it for a drive, keeps it covered in the heated garage, and cleans and polishes it at least once a week—just for fun. The fire-engine red Ferrari is the father's proudest, most cared-for toy.

One night, however, the boy concocts a scheme with a friend to cruise through town in the Ferrari. Their other friends have all been put on notice to watch for him. So, once the father is asleep, the boys sneak into the garage, uncover the Ferrari, and push it into the street and down the block. When the car is well clear of the house, they jump in, rev up the engine, and spend the better part of two hours joyriding through town to the cheers of their friends. When they return, they cut the engine at the end of the block, roll the car back into the garage, polish it clean, and quietly close the garage door.

The next morning, another friend joins them, and the two boys tell the story of hijacking the fire-engine red Ferrari with exaggerated gestures, overly detailed snippets, foul language, loud voices, and laughter. With each crescendo, the story becomes more exciting, and because of all the back-slapping, they tell it again and again and again. Until the father shows up.

"**Do you have something to tell me?**" the father asks.

The boy's two friends look at each other and make a hasty getaway before the father repeats the question.

"**What do you mean?**" the boy stammers.

"**I know you took the car,**" the father says and waits.

The boy confesses by telling the story about the fire-engine red Ferrari, but this time, the story is short with little detail. His voice is flat; there is no joy, no laughter, absolutely no foul language, and few gestures. He casts his eyes down toward his feet and nervously wrings his hands. Although he's telling the same exact story, it feels and sounds very different. It's also much shorter and less interesting, and the father leaves frustrated and angry.

When the boy's mother enters the room, the story changes again.

"**Why did you do it?**" she asks.

The boy begins to cry as he retells the story of the fire-engine red Ferrari. Every few seconds, he pauses to sob a little harder and looks up to see the effect the crying has on his mother. There are few details, and the only gesture is when he wipes the tears from his eyes. But the boy does something a bit different in this version of the story; he adds a few lines about how his father must love the car more than his own son. He punctuates the lines with more sobs. The telling of the story has, once again, changed dramatically. So, why did the story change so noticeably from telling to telling? The story changed based on who was listening: his audience.

Audience

Audience in writing, then, is a projected population of readers, and it's up to writers to imagine the population into existence. For example, writing something destined for a professor with the power to pass or fail the writer would require something formal and academic, whereas a note to a friend would be more informal and sprinkled with slang.

In linguistics, the adaptation in the retelling of events based on the listener (or, in writing, the reader) is called code-switching. People do it all the time and with very little thought, especially when speaking. Because people speak more than they write, code-switching is a bit more natural for a speaker. People communicate differently with their friends than they do with their religious leaders; they converse more formally with their teachers than with their siblings. And, in general, they do it without much thinking. However, writers need to practice code-switching so it becomes more natural when they adapt the written word for their intended audience.

Tone

Tone is closely related to code-switching. Once writers identify their potential readers (audience), they make choices about the words they use and the level of formality and humor in their writing. This sets the mood; in other words, how the writer chooses to write will determine how the reader feels about the writing. Writers, therefore, will manipulate the words they choose and the structural choices they make to evoke an emotional reaction from readers.

In the Ferrari example above, the tone used by the boy was much different when he spoke to his friends than when he spoke to his father or mother. The choices he made—whether to use foul language, whether to laugh or cry, whether to use detail—changed the way the audience felt about the story. Tone, then, is a series of choices by writers to purposely evoke an emotional response from their readers.

Purpose

Finally, when writers sit down to write, they need to consider their purpose. Simply put, they need to be clear about their intentions. Purpose is related to tone because choosing a purpose impacts the choices writers make. While there are broad categories for purpose—to inform, to persuade, and to entertain—most writers find they use a combination of some or all of them in each piece of writing. One, however, is usually more prevalent.

For example, in this piece of writing, my purpose as the writer is to inform a potential audience of writers. I chose academic language with few instances of slang and no instances of foul language, and this choice set the tone—or mood—of the writing. Thus, audience, tone, and purpose are all interconnected. Writers must have an idea of who will read their words (audience) to establish whether the words are primarily to inform, to persuade, or to entertain (purpose). The choices they make in vocabulary and structure will impact how successful their words are in setting the correct mood for readers (tone).

Final Thoughts

All three concepts require writers to be purposeful about their choices. With time and practice, these concepts will become more natural to writers and easier to effect.

Organizing Essay
Paragraphs – Amy Fredrickson

Have you ever received a comment in the margins of an essay that said your paragraphs are disorganized? Have you wondered what exactly disorganized means and how to fix it? Cohesive organization is a key aspect of good writing. This resource will help you write organized paragraphs for every writing assignment.

Section 1 : The Academic Essay Paragraph

What is organization?
Organization is all about putting yourself in your readers' shoes: does your reader understand why one sentence follows another? Many writers get "stuck" in their own heads and struggle to recognize how a transition from one sentence to another makes sense to them but may not make sense to a reader.

What is the traditional organization of an academic paragraph?
There are certain expectations readers will have of your paragraphs in academic writing. Paragraphs in this context should have a topic sentence, supporting details, and a concluding sentence. Let's unpack each of these.

- A **topic sentence** is the first sentence of a paragraph. It tells your readers what the main focus of the paragraph will be. Each paragraph should only have **one** main focus.

- **Supporting details** are the sentences that make up the "meat" of the paragraph. These sentences provide details (such as facts, anecdotes, and background information) that support the topic of the paragraph.

- A **concluding sentence** is the final sentence of the paragraph. This sentence should link the topic of the paragraph to the next paragraph. You can think of concluding sentences as transition sentences.

Organization tool #1

Here's an outlining tool you can use to ensure your paragraphs check all the necessary boxes and maintain organization:

Topic sentence: (what is the one main idea that this paragraph will focus on?)

Supporting detail #1 (what information supports this main idea?)
....

Supporting detail #2 (what information supports this main idea?)
....

Supporting detail #3 (what information supports this main idea?)

Concluding sentence: (what is the next main idea I'm going to discuss? How does it relate to the main idea of this paragraph? How can I make this connection explicit for my readers?)

Section 2 : Transitions and the Known-New Pattern

So, you have the structure down, but how do you make sure every sentence in your paragraph transitions smoothly? There are two main tools you have at your disposal to help: transition words and phrases as well as a sentence-linking tool called the "known-new pattern."

What are transitions?

Transitions are words and phrases that explicitly tell your readers how two ideas connect.

When should I use a transition?

Deciding when to use a transition comes back to seeing things from your readers' perspectives. Will the reader struggle to understand the connection between two ideas without a transition? If so, make sure to include one. Transitions also introduce the function of a sentence. For example, "in sum" indicates that the sentence that follows functions as a conclusion. You can think of transitions as signposts for your readers, guiding them through your writing.

Organization Tool #2

The chart below includes some of the most common categories of transitions (types of relationships between ideas) and good transitions to use for each category.

Category of Transition	Transition Words and Phrases
Contrast	while, unlike, yet, despite, whereas, however, alternatively, even so, on the contrary
Cause and effect	as a result, as such, therefore, thus, consequently, due to, hence, since
Addition	also, furthermore, moreover, besides, in addition to, along with, as well as
Chronology and sequence	after, before, then, next, finally, initially, first, second, third, meanwhile
Example	to illustrate, for example, for instance, to highlight, such as, to demonstrate
Conclusion	in sum, to conclude, overall, essentially, given these ideas, ultimately
Emphasis	notably, clearly, evidently, indeed, importantly, to underscore the merits of . . .

What is the known-new pattern?

The known-new pattern is a tool writers use to visualize how their sentences fit together, much like puzzle pieces. This writing tool establishes the information that the readers know will occupy the first part of the sentence (referred to as the subject), while new information will occupy the second part of the sentence (known as the predicate). You can see that by maintaining this pattern throughout your paragraphs, your writing will unfold clearly and cohesively for readers.

What does the known-new pattern look like?

Here is an example of this writing tool in action. Imagine I am writing a paragraph about antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Known information in this example is underlined, and new information is in bolded font.

Antibiotic-resistant bacteria have become a major public health issue, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are urging Americans to pay attention to this emerging crisis. The CDC reports that **more than 35,000 Americans die from contracting infections from antibiotic-resistant bacteria**. Some of the most dangerous bacteria that demonstrate multidrug resistance include **E. coli, C. difficile, and C. auris**. To effectively combat antibiotic-resistant bacteria, it is **imperative for molecular biologists to isolate the mutations that enable these bacteria to evade antibiotics**. Scientists have already isolated two genes with mutations directly related to drug resistance, **rpoB and katG**.

Notice how cohesive this paragraph is? The known-new pattern is ensuring that the writer does not add any unexpected information that will leave readers scratching their heads.

Organization Tool #3

This blueprint features a fill-in-the-blank worksheet you can use to follow the known-new pattern in your own writing.

[topic/idea the reader knows based on previous sentences/explanation in your writing] + [verb] + [new information about this topic/idea].

———————— + ———— + ————————————

———————— + ———— + ————————————

———————— + ———— + ————————————

———————— + ———— + ————————————

———————— + ———— + ————————————

Conclusion

When writing, ask yourself: do readers understand how all my ideas connect? Readers aren't in your head with you, so what makes perfect sense to you may stump your audience. Remember, ensuring your writing is organized is all about putting yourself in your readers' shoes.

Development
in Writing – Amy Fredrickson

Have you ever been told to develop your writing in more detail? Have you wondered what exactly this means and how much development is enough? This resource provides an introduction to development, why it's important, and how to accomplish this task in all of your writing assignments.

What is Development?

Development in academic writing refers to the explanation of main points so that readers understand your ideas fully. If you are writing in a persuasive genre (like an argumentative essay), you can think of development as providing enough explanation so that your readers are sufficiently persuaded of your main argument. As with many writing skills, this requires thinking about your audience and purpose: what your readers already know and what points, based on the purpose of your writing and your main topic, will require the most emphasis and discussion.

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What Should I Be Developing, Exactly?

Most academic writing genres have a basic underlying structure: a main goal (what the essay is trying to accomplish overall), main ideas that build toward this goal, and supporting details that—you guessed it—develop your essay.

So, let's say you are writing an essay for your American history class about the Revolutionary War. You could sketch out your writing like this:

- **Main goal: [This is the purpose of your essay].**

    a. To write an informative essay about the main causes of the Revolutionary War.

- **Main ideas: [These are going to help you achieve your main goal].** I will focus on four main causes of the Revolutionary War as my main ideas:

    1. The Stamp Act
    2. The Tea Act
    3. The Boston Massacre
    4. The growing popularity of Enlightenment thinking

- **Supporting details: [Each of your main ideas will require supporting details].** This is where your development is mainly taking place. To demonstrate this, let's focus on the fourth main point listed above (as an example) and review the core steps to developing supporting details.

    a. To explain why the growing popularity of Enlightenment thinking was one of the main causes of the Revolutionary War, I will need to first evaluate what my intended audience knows about this topic. I am writing to an audience whom I do not expect to know anything about Enlightenment thinking or why it caused the Revolutionary War, so I will need to start from the beginning.

    b. Having evaluated my audience to determine the extent of development my main point will require, I can start listing what supporting details I will need to include to effectively develop my writing and achieve my main goal:

        - Define Enlightenment thinking, including major ideas, thinkers, and dates.

        - Explain how the leaders of the Revolutionary War specifically demonstrated Enlightenment thinking in their writings or speeches (include a description of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and quotes from the Declaration of Independence that highlight Enlightenment ideals).

        - Conclude with a description of why Enlightenment thinking caused the American Revolution.

    Here, I have effectively mapped out how I am going to develop my main point enough so that my audience, who has little knowledge about this topic, has sufficient explanation to understand my main point.

Revising Essays to Include More Development

Writers often receive comments asking them to develop their ideas in more detail. If you receive feedback like this in the margins of your essay, what should you do?

Similar to the example above, you will first evaluate your audience to get a sense of the extent of development required. For example, let's return to the previous scenario. Say you wrote this sentence in your essay on the causes of the American Revolution and received feedback requesting more development:

"Enlightenment thinking was a major philosophy that emerged during the 1700s."

Understanding that your audience is not likely to know the specifics of Enlightenment thinking, you will need to include more description of Enlightenment thinking (development!).

To help you brainstorm specific aspects of development, you can use a writing tool known as **six-pronged questioning**. To use this tool, write down the idea/topic you need to develop and ask yourself the following prompting questions:

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- Why?
- How?
- When?

Here's an example of what this tool looks like in action:

Topic you need to develop: Enlightenment

- **Who?** John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire
- **What?** Enlightenment thinking emphasized the importance of reason and evidence, supported the separation of Church and state, and challenged religious dogma, centering instead on a human-first ideology that focused on the here and now.
- **Where?** Enlightenment thinking had major roots in France, England, and eventually the United States.
- **Why?** Enlightenment thinking was a response to the injustices of absolute monarchs across Europe and centuries of ideological domination by the Church. It also emerged from the Scientific Revolution.
- **How?** Enlightenment thinking was largely spread via essays and efforts to implement Enlightenment ideologies into political systems.
- **When?** The Age of Enlightenment is usually marked as having occurred from about 1715 to 1789.

Through using the six-pronged questioning tool, you have generated a lot of content to aid development. You can then incorporate these ideas into your essay in a cohesive way.

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Conclusion

In academic writing, it's important to understand what development is, what aspects of an essay require development, how to determine the extent of development needed based on the intended audience, and what writing tools are available to develop ideas in more depth. Developing your writing will ensure your audience fully understands your topic and what you are trying to accomplish.
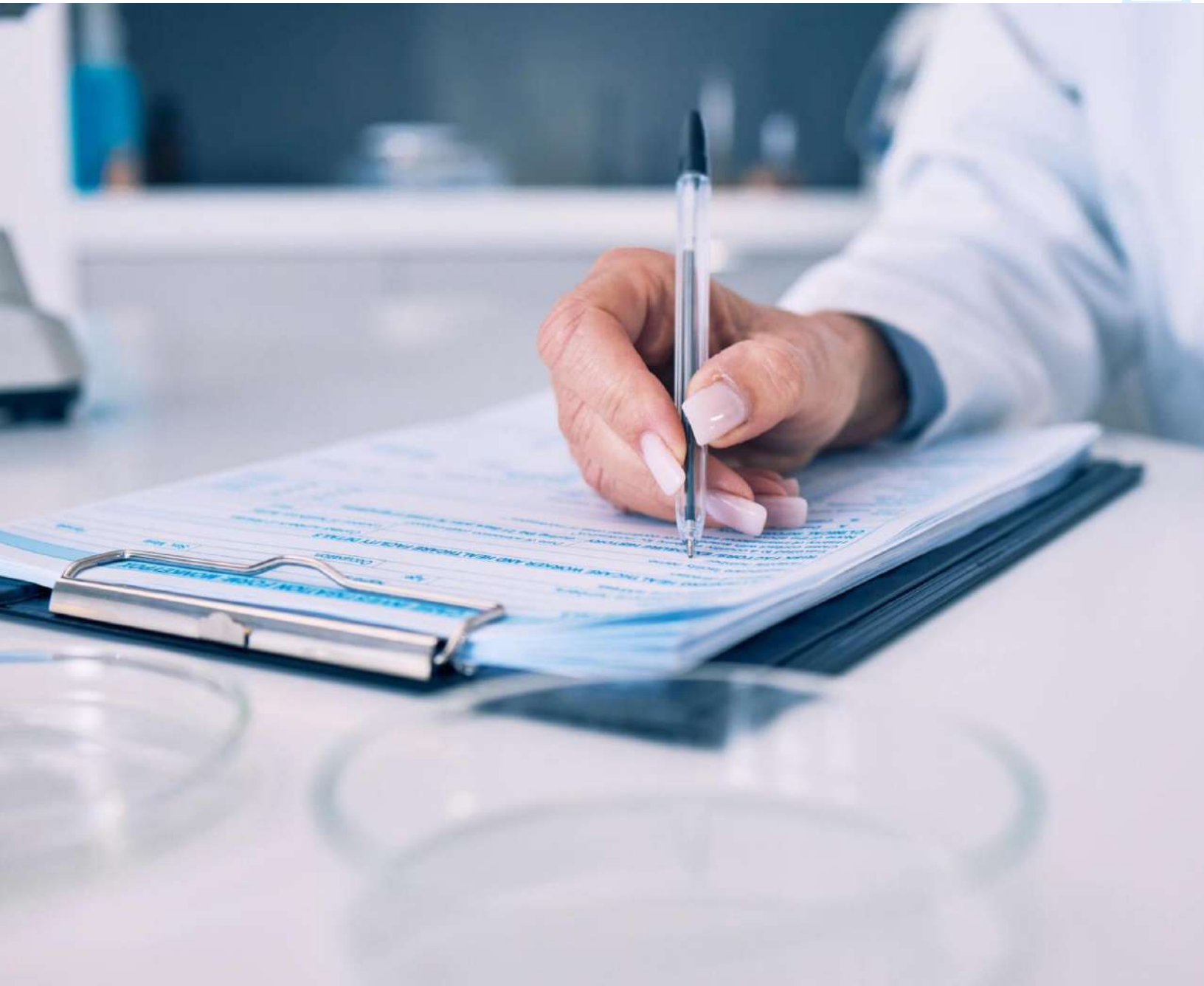
Using Transitions
Effectively – Matthew Neil

Many writers struggle with using transitions effectively. This resource will cover different aspects of effective transition usage, from macro-level transitions between paragraphs to smaller transition words that connect sentences.

Transitions are important because they:

- establish a sense of flow for readers
- allow readers to immerse themselves in your writing and become invested in your story
- create a friendlier reading experience
- connect various aspects of your personal story to your larger narrative or theme

Check structure before revising transitions

Ideally, you will work on transitions in the later stages of revision. But first, you must decide whether you are satisfied with the overall structure of your writing. Working on transitions before the foundation of the essay is set is akin to treating one's symptoms but not the underlying cause.

When assessing the structural logic of your writing, such as an essay, ask yourself:

- Does each body paragraph have one core idea? Does each topic sentence convey what that paragraph is about?
- Do paragraphs logically flow from one to the next? Does the paragraph order make sense?
- Are there any leaps in logic or gaps in your narrative that need filling?

Transitional Sentences: Connecting Paragraphs

A challenge for writers who have limited allotted space is connecting one paragraph to another. Transitioning paragraphs should occur in the topic sentence of a new paragraph, although they can also appear at the end of the previous paragraph.

The topic sentence should establish the central idea of the coming paragraph. It can also be used to harken back to the previous paragraph to establish context for where you are going next.

A good strategy to use is the **X/Y transition**. In this type of transition:

- **X** = a rephrasing of the main idea or context from the previous paragraph
    - usually a dependent clause
- **Y** = a statement that establishes the topic of the coming paragraph
    - usually an independent clause.

See the example below. Note the transition from the first to the second paragraph:

> Joe's hulking figure filled the quiet, somber room, his leg immobilized in a rigid brace. Once a promising NFL prospect, repeated injuries had limited his exposure to scouts and his chance for a professional career. Now he required surgery yet again. With Cal on track to go 1-11, the worst in its 128-year history, there was no compelling reason for him to play, other than his love of the game. "How soon can I return?" was all he asked, his eyes clear of doubt. While I could understand his desire, I was amazed by his fierce motivation and unshakeable confidence that he would return to the field once more. Clearly, he knew something I did not.
>
> While I may have lacked perspective as a new sports medicine intern, I quickly parsed the challenge of earning patient trust. Elite athletes preferred experienced trainers to newly minted interns with halting skills. I spent untold hours…

Highlighted in underline is the topic sentence of the second paragraph, which also includes an X/Y transition. In red is the X part of the transition (the dependent clause). This alludes to an idea established in the opening anecdote of the previous paragraph, where the writer illustrates that they are new to sports medicine. The blue is the Y part of the transition (the independent clause), which establishes the main idea of the second paragraph—how the writer gains the trust of athlete patients.

Not every topic sentence needs to include an X/Y transition, but it can help you move from one idea to another when heavy lifting is needed to change topics. Because a transition sentence must cover a lot of ground, however, try to be as concise as possible. Watch for unnecessary modifiers and helping verbs that can be cut.

Transitional Words or Phrases

Appearing within paragraphs, transitional words or phrases connect one sentence to another. These transitions can help you quickly pivot to a new context, purpose, or setting, and there are many to choose from:

- **Giving an example:** for example, for instance, that is, including, such as…
- **Indicating a sequence:** afterward, first, later, soon, next, finally…
- **Making a comparison:** similarly, likewise, indeed, also…
- **Illustrating contrast:** however, on the other hand, otherwise…
- **Showing cause and effect:** as a result, because of ___, therefore, due to ___
- **Adding information:** additionally, furthermore, in addition, also, what's more…
- **Concluding or summarizing:** finally, for this reason, as a result, therefore…

These are just a few examples. Note, however, that there can be a risk of using too many transition words. Be especially wary of overusing transitions in places where there is a short character limit. For instance, when writing entries for your activities list, you do not need to begin every sentence of your descriptions with, "In this experience." The reader already knows that they are reading about your experiences, so the opening sentence of the description should only include what is absolutely necessary in establishing context for that specific experience. Finally, transition words can improve flow from one sentence to the next, but they should not be relied upon to force a structure that just isn't working. If you find you are having a tough time connecting paragraphs or sentences, then return to revising your structure. When topics and ideas logically flow together, transitions are easier to write.

Final Tips:

- If you are having trouble making the case for how one idea connects to another, try moving paragraphs around.
- When it comes to transitions, less is often more. Applicants sometimes double up on transitions when just one (or zero!) will work fine (e.g., starting the sentence with "In addition," but then adding "also" later in the sentence).

Tips For Writing
Concisely – Matthew Neil

Writing application materials, college essays, resumes, proposals, and reports, among other written tasks often come with length restrictions such as word, page or character limits. Because of these limits, it's crucial to pay attention to the conciseness, or direct style, of your writing. This resource will provide tips for making your writing more direct and making every word count.

A word about process

Writing is a creative process. You come up with the idea, then express the idea, and, finally, refine the idea. With that in mind, it's important to know that it's always easier to cut than it is to add. Worrying too much about wording when you are still trying to produce core ideas can be counterproductive and inhibit your creativity, sometimes leading to writer's block. Improving the conciseness (also known as editing for brevity) of your writing should happen toward that later stage of refinement.

Tip 1 : Keep Your Vocabulary Simple

When writing, keep your writing simple, direct, and clear. Readers often have a short attention span and also do not want to work too hard trying to interpret your message. Do them a favor and use language that is easy to read quickly. Avoid testing the richness of their vocabulary. As tempting as it may be to show off your vocabulary skills, it's best to leave the SAT words at home. Simplicity is better and will convey your ability to communicate in a manner that's easy to understand. Be precise in your terminology when needed, but do not use "fancy" words for the sake of it. Effective communication is an important skill for a future physician, so this is your chance to demonstrate that ability.

Tip 2 : Avoid Long Sentences

In addition to overly sophisticated word choice, another way that a reader can have trouble getting through a statement is if the writer uses sentences packed with too many ideas–with twists and turns in multiple directions–where the writing seems to go on forever without giving the reader a chance to pause, causing them to have to stop and re-read to figure out what you just said.

Did you need to re-read that last sentence? Long sentences like this have a way of interrupting the reader's focus. Just because you can put together a complex sentence does not mean you should.

In general, good sentence rhythm means mixing short with long sentences. Too many short sentences and the writing appears choppy; too many long sentences and it feels winded. It's best to err on the side of brevity.

A good way to check for this issue is to read the statement aloud. Do you find yourself needing to take more breaths than perhaps your commas or periods would allow? If so, sit down again and try to break complex sentences into multiple parts. Take it one idea at a time.

Tip 3 : Remove Unnecessary Modifiers, Hedging, and Empty Emotional Language

You might be surprised how much you can cut down on character count simply by removing unnecessary words. In particular, look for unnecessary modifiers. Words like "very," "really," "actually," "truly," "basically," and many others have a knack for sneaking into sentences. Although it may seem like you are adding emphasis when using these modifiers, in reality your writing is becoming a bit redundant. If you are writing about a topic, the reader knows it's important and does not need this emphasis.

A related issue is the tendency to hedge when writing. That is, you might not want to commit 100 percent to a claim, so you introduce some doubt to give yourself wiggle room. This is especially common when writing about yourself, as you may want to avoid appearing arrogant. Rather than conveying humility, however, hedging often indicates lacking confidence or conviction. Worse still, hedging words and phrases bog down writing and contribute to ballooning character counts. Look for words and phrases like "I hope to," "I was fortunate enough to," "possibly," and others.

Finally, there are phrases that are intended to express positive emotions but end up just feeling empty, vague or cliché. It's preferable to show rather than tell, and that means getting to the point of what happened. You do not need to assure the reader that you felt a certain way about what happened—this adds no useful information.

For instance, instead of saying, "I was excited to begin my shadowing experience with Dr. X, where I learned the importance of strong bedside manner [etc.]," try: "In my shadowing experience with Dr. X, I learned the importance of strong bedside manner…" While the former delays in telling us what occurred, the latter gets straight to the point. What's more, stating things directly and with vivid, specific details is a better way of actually demonstrating excitement. Simply stating that you were excited convinces no one.

Final Tips:

There are many ways to write a personal statement with a sense of clarity. These are just some strategies you can use. Others include:

- Reducing passive voice. For instance, instead of "the patient was reassured by me," (passive voice) try "I reassured the patient" (active voice). It sounds more confident and takes less space to write.

- Avoiding overuse of transitions. Transitions are helpful when crafting a narrative, but they can be overused. Not every sentence needs an "in addition" or a "therefore." Sometimes, the ideas connect just fine on their own.

- Watching for redundancy. Try to ensure that each sentence (and word) contributes a new idea that is not already expressed in a similar manner elsewhere. Writers often rely too heavily on statements of ideals, which can feel repetitive when expressed in every paragraph. State your ideals somewhere in the beginning and remind readers of them in the conclusion (while also varying the language). If you lean too much on abstract principles, it can appear as if you do not have the concrete evidence in your experiences to back up your statements.

- Setting aside time to revise. After you finish writing a draft, take a break! Go on a walk or even sleep on it and come back to your work the next day. When you have a fresh perspective on your writing, you will be less attached to the wording. You may then be able to approach your word choice with a more critical eye, which will help you revise for conciseness.

Passive and
Active Voice – Amy Fredrickson

Use this resource to learn about the main stylistic and grammatical differences between passive and active voice.

What is Active Voice and Passive Voice?

Active voice is a type of sentence structure in which the subject (the person performing an action) is included before the main verb. The sentences below show how the subject (italics) and the main verb (bold) are used in a sentence:

The clouds **floated** across the sky.

Helen **applied** to medical school last year.

The biology professor rarely **returned** grades on time.

Passive voice is a type of sentence structure in which the subject is either (1) taken out of the sentence completely or (2) placed as the object of the prepositional phrase, "by _____," at the end of the sentence. Writers include the subject as the object of a prepositional phrase when they still want the subject to be mentioned but do not want the subject to be the main focus of the sentence.

You can quickly identify passive voice by its use of the perfect tense: is being/are being; was/were; will be + past participle. Sometimes the subject is omitted as well. For example:

The cake **is being made.**

The experiments **were conducted** *by the scientists.*

The house **will be painted** tomorrow.

The movie **was directed** *by Sophia Coppola.*

When to Use Active Voice

Active voice is the default structure for most non-scientific writing situations. You should plan on using active voice in personal documents (like personal statements) and essays for humanities and social science classes (like literature or history courses).

When writers do not use active voice in these writing contexts, they often create vague, confusing sentences.

When to Use Passive Voice

Passive voice is common in scientific writing, like lab reports or scholarly articles for the STEM field. In these writing contexts, the emphasis is usually placed on the action and result, not the doer of the action (i.e., the subject). For example, when writers are explaining steps in a lab report, the reader does not want to know who did something but rather what was done and how "the salt solution was heated to 100°F."

Interestingly, passive voice can be used rhetorically (with an intentional purpose) to hide the performer of an action. This sleight of hand is often seen in news reports or political rhetoric in which the speaker seeks to hide who did what: "The bank has lost much of its revenue" instead of "The bank manager mismanaged funds and lost revenue."

How to Shift Between Active and Passive Voice

If passive or active voice has been used in error (for example, in the wrong writing context), you should switch from one to the other.

- passive to active
  - Identify who/what did the main action
  - Change the perfect tense verb to the correct tense for the new active sentence
  - Rearrange the sentence to fill the following structure: subject + main verb + direct object (what/whom the action was done to OR what/who received the action)
    - **Passive:** The newspaper was thrown away
    - **Active:** My brother threw away the newspaper

- active to passive
  - Remove the subject OR include it as the object of the prepositional phrase "by _____"
  - Reorder the sentence to fill this structure: direct object + main verb
  - Transform the main verb into the perfect tense
    - **Active:** I took apart the vacuum cleaner and rebuilt it.
    - **Passive:** The vacuum cleaner was taken apart and rebuilt. OR The vacuum cleaner was taken apart and rebuilt by me.

Final Thoughts

Active and passive voice both have a place in writing. However, knowing when and how to use these two types of sentence structures can help you convey your message better and more clearly. So, be sure to understand the writing context and who your audience will be.

How to Overcome
Writer's Block – Denise Glaser

When it's time to begin a writing project, all you need to do is simply sit down at your computer, hold your fingers over the keyboard, and let the ideas suddenly flow, right?

If you are lucky. But, if you are like most writers, the process usually looks a bit different. Fortunately, there are multiple strategies you can use to help you start and, more importantly, finish your writing.

Make a Schedule Using SMART Writing Goals

One of the most effective strategies to outwit writer's block is to set goals. SMART Writing Goals, based on George Doran's research, provides clear guidance on how to set goals that are effective and meaningful. SMART Writing Goals are:

Specific	What is your writing goal for this session? What strategies will you use?
Measurable	How will you measure your progress? How will you know it is accomplished?
Achievable	What are your specific steps? Be reasonable, but aim high. Research shows that high goals create more motivation.
Realistic	What conditions must exist for you to work toward this goal?
Timely	What is your specific timeframe or deadline?

Rather than state, "I'm going to write my personal statement on Saturday," create a specific goal that is more narrowly focused. For example: "I will brainstorm three ideas for my personal statement Saturday afternoon." To create a measurable goal, think of how you prefer to approach a writing task, such as writing 250 words, two pages, or writing for one hour. Achievable and realistic goals go hand-in-hand. Sitting down to write your entire activities list in one session is probably neither achievable nor realistic, but developing a rough draft or brainstorming ideas for your three most meaningful experiences could be the perfect balance. Timely goals are particularly important in the application process to ensure your documents are prepared well ahead of the submission dates. This helps eliminate some stress of the writing (and application) process and gives you ample opportunity to revise and polish your work.

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Optimum Time and Place

Similar to creating SMART Writing Goals, it is important to consider the optimum time and place for your writing process and build that into your writing plan. Are you a morning person? Or are you a night owl? Think about what time of day you are most energized and engaged for completing writing tasks, and schedule your time accordingly. Likewise, think about the conditions in which you like to write. If you need absolute quiet, plan your writing session in a setting that will accommodate your needs and limit distractions. If you are a writer who likes a bit of ambient noise in the background, find a place where people are nearby, such as a coffee shop. You may also find that different points in the writing process require different settings (For example, you may need a quiet space when you are doing the final edits of your work).

Getting Your Ideas on Paper

Once you've set clear, specific writing goals and determined the best time and place for your writing, you are ready to explore some ways to get your ideas onto paper. Some of these may already be your go-to writing strategies when you feel blocked, and if so, terrific! Other strategies listed below may be new or unfamiliar to you. While tried-and-true approaches to a writing task can bring a sense of comfort and ease the process, sometimes it can be helpful to get out of your comfort zone and try a new approach when you are struggling to get started and get the ideas flowing.

Here are a few strategies that have helped other students break through writer's block and generate ideas in the medical school application process. Each approach can be useful to get ideas down, so give them a try and see which strategies work best for you!

Methods for Generating Ideas

Lists

One of the easiest ways to get started is to make a list. Grab a sheet of paper or open a document on your computer and jot your ideas down quickly. Do not overthink or judge your ideas at this stage—simply write them down. Also, do not worry about writing full sentences. Use bullet points or numbers, if you like, and do not be concerned if the ideas seem unrelated. The main goal of list-making is to generate a broad list of possible ideas or topics that might be useful in developing your writing project. You may not use all the ideas you generate in the list, and that's okay. But your list can be a good starting point.

When thinking about your personal statement, you might begin by listing the experiences you have had that have inspired your interest in becoming a physician. Or you might list people who have influenced you to pursue medicine as a career. You might also make a list of specific instances or events that come to mind.

Here is a sample list:

- Working as EMT - 2 years
- Working in tissue recovery - 2 years
- TA for organic chemistry
- TA for A & P honors class
- Doing research as part of senior capstone project
- Honors college courses
- Visits to my pediatrician - she was so kind!
- Shadowing
- Intramural sports participation
- Tutor for organic chemistry and A & P
- Project Lead the Way Biomedical Sciences Program - 4 years high school
- Volunteer experience at food bank - 3 years
- Symphony band/jazz band/performance experience
- Working as a campus student advocate - progressive leadership roles
- Family caregiving responsibilities

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Idea mapping

Similar to list-making, idea mapping is a strategy that helps you get your ideas down quickly. Mapping also allows you to visualize and explore the interconnections of your ideas, which can be helpful for projects like the personal statement. Many students like to use colored pens or doodle with this strategy—so feel free to personalize your approach. If you prefer a visual approach to organizing your ideas, then mapping might be for you!

Idea mapping starts with writing down a "big" idea and then drawing a circle around it. What new ideas immediately spring to mind? Write those down near the original thought, draw circles around them, then connect them with a line to the big idea, similar to the spokes on a bicycle wheel. Look for the connections between ideas as you write them down. You may notice connections that you hadn't expected.

If you prefer a more kinesthetic approach to learning, thinking, and writing, consider using sticky notes for idea mapping. You can color code ideas, move them around easily, and look for more patterns.

Here's an example of an idea map created on a tablet:
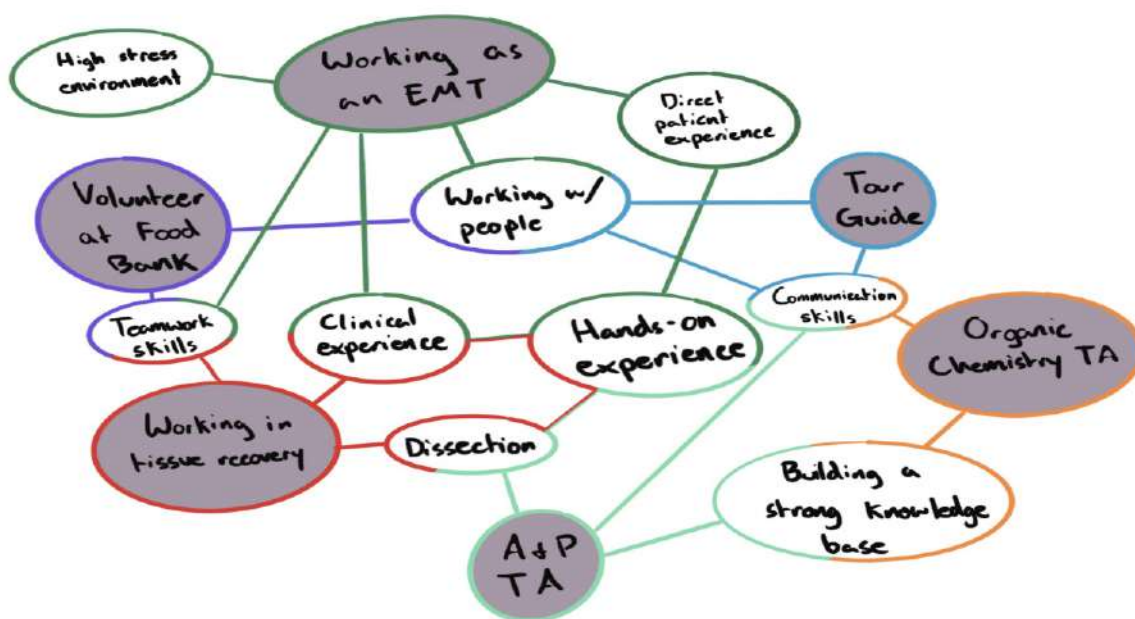
Brainstorming

Brainstorming is another informal way of generating topics to write about, and it can be done at any point in the writing process. You can brainstorm topics for your entire personal statement or just the conclusion. It can also help you discover an example to illustrate a point. The important thing about brainstorming is that there should be no pressure to be "brilliant" or "perfect." Just like making a list, you only need to record all the ideas that come to you.

Freewriting

Most students have had some experience with freewriting during their academic careers. The freewrite is one of the most effective ways to get your ideas on the page quickly and keep the ideas flowing. Freewriting often leads to new ideas, eloquent phrasing, a clearer expression of ideas, or a new line of thought to explore. It can be useful at the beginning of a project if you are having trouble getting started or for getting unstuck in the middle of a project. It can also allow you to explore connections or articulate personal responses to an idea or experience.

Simply stated, freewriting is nonstop writing. Typically, a freewriting session asks you to set a timer (10 minutes is a good place to start). Once you start the timer, keep your fingers on the keyboard or keep the pen moving until the timer stops. Write whatever comes to mind without pausing to think about word choice, grammar, spelling, tone, and organization. If you get stuck, then write about being stuck, but keep going. Do not cross out, erase, or edit ideas. Remember, only you will read this. The uniqueness with which you think and write can be a powerful tool in developing a compelling narrative!

The point is to relax into your writing and see where it takes you. Get your ideas onto the page as quickly as possible without judging them, even if they're messy or seem like a stream of consciousness. Freewriting can take practice, but it's an excellent strategy to generate many ideas quickly.

After the timer goes off, reread what you've written. You might begin to see "big ideas" emerge that you can develop into themes for your personal statement.

Looping freewrite

While the freewrite is a great way to get your ideas down quickly, the looping freewrite invites you to explore those ideas in greater detail. In a looping freewrite, you reread the content from your freewrite, circling or highlighting words or passages that capture your interest. Starting with the things you've noticed, begin a new freewrite focusing on those words or phrases. This process can be repeated for multiple iterations and can lead you to unexpected realizations and insights about your life and experiences. There are some targeted approaches you might even consider, as suggested by writer Peter Elbow (*Writing with Power*):

- **Dialogues:** Have your ideas or feelings talk to one another as if they have their own voice.

- **Scenes:** Pretend that you can stop time and focus on individual moments within experiences.

- **Varying the time:** Look at things as if you lived or will live in a different time than when they actually did—before or after.

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When you analyze your freewriting, look for the following things:

- Go to the end of the freewrite. In most cases, the very last thing you write is the most important thing you have to say and is often a good thesis or starting point for your essay. Highlight it or copy and paste it to the front of your new draft.

- Highlight points relevant to your thesis. Copy and paste these to your draft, or write them out as sentences on another sheet of paper. Prioritize them in order of importance to begin organizing your work.

- Make note of any specific details or examples you think you can use, and look for places in your new draft where they might fit. Copy and paste them as appropriate under your new set of points.

Exploring your ideas through this "loop" approach is an effective strategy to delve more deeply into your thoughts and expand them in new directions.

Outlines

Most students have used the outline approach in writing papers during their academic careers. An outline is a way of formally arranging and developing your ideas in an organized fashion. The first step in crafting an outline is to identify your main points or ideas. Next, you will want to consider how you want to convey those ideas to illustrate your points. You will list sub-points within each main idea. As with other methods, just focus on getting your ideas down on paper. You can go back later and make sure they're in a logical order to best tell your narrative.

Conclusion

Writing can be a long and stressful process, and it's often hard to know how to begin. These strategies will help alleviate any writer's block that may arise so you can tackle the challenging writing process.

How to Edit
Productively – Fumiko Schaub

You've brainstormed, made an outline, and drafted numerous times to develop solid content. Now, you feel ready to move on to the next step: editing. But how do you go about it? Here are a few tips to make the editing process more productive.

Take a Break

This seems obvious. However, taking a break provides tremendous benefits and can help you become more productive. Rather than a five-minute bathroom break or a half-hour dinner break, try taking a substantial amount of time that removes you from the computer screen and forces you to engage in a different activity. You can go for a long walk, bike around your neighborhood, or do yoga. If you are so inclined, you can play the guitar that's been collecting dust in the corner of your bedroom. If the weather permits, you can step outside to garden or even simply weed. I've found weeding very soothing as the simple repetitive task resets my thinking. You can also cook your favorite meal or bake cookies to share with family or friends. Whatever activity you choose, try to forget about your writing for a while.

During the pandemic, what saved my family was our daily walk. Our two dogs kept us motivated, and we all benefited tremendously, both physically and mentally. Stepping outside to change the scenery and breathing in fresh air contributed to maintaining my sanity: it gave me a chance to recharge in the midst of chaos and uncertainty. Likewise, taking a break from your writing after laboring for a long period of time will make you feel refreshed and recharged, giving you a fresh look to edit your essay productively.

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Read Your Draft Aloud

Again, this may seem counterintuitive since we know that reading aloud takes much longer than reading in silence. But, it is essential. You can apply this technique at any stage of writing, although it is particularly beneficial when you are editing your work since you need to pay attention to small details in your writing, such as punctuation, spelling, and flow.

Many people use the spelling and grammar checker, including those on Word or Google Docs. While it's a fantastic feature, it's not perfect. It fails to check your spelling in a context. For example, if you wrote, "I received a heartfelt letter form my grandmother," the computer spell check may fail to recognize that the word "form" is not the right word in this context, even though it's spelled correctly.

Let's take a look at another example. Say you wrote the following sentence: "Dr. Benton asked me, 'is this your first shadowing experience?'" According to standard grammar rules, the first letter of the first word inside a quotation mark should be capitalized, but errors such as this are often overlooked by automatic grammar checkers. Reading your draft aloud forces you to slow down, which can help you spot these mistakes. Creating a polished essay free of errors will ensure that the reader can focus on your content rather than getting distracted by smaller grammar mistakes.

As much as reading aloud can help you notice spelling and grammar errors, it's also important to rely on your listening skills to ensure what you have written is how you want it to sound. You may decide to replace certain words because they sound harsh or feel less impactful. Also, you may notice you have used the same words repeatedly, which wasn't entirely obvious when you wrote and read it in silence. Remember, you do not need to adorn your essay with fancy, big vocabulary; rather, try using synonyms to give your writing more depth and flavor while also feeling more natural to you because the reader could quickly lose interest.

When reading your essay aloud, take note if you stumble on a sentence. That's often a good indication to rework it by splitting it into two or more sentences or reducing the length of the sentence by eliminating unnecessary "fluff" words.

Consistency is important in writing as well. Check for consistency with verb tenses, pronouns, and parallelism (e.g., consistently using *-ing* in "…participating in a forum, assisting a research project, and mentoring freshmen"). Also, ensure your voice is consistent, so you do not suddenly sound too casual and informal when you are trying to retain a more formal, professional tone.

These subtleties become more apparent when you read your written materials out loud, or, better yet, when you have someone you know read them to you. Give yourself a break, and let your listening skills do the editing.

One Last Look

It's always a good idea to give your edited draft one last look before submitting. An essay's format can affect a reader's experience when reviewing your essay. For example, if your paragraphs are huge, it can be quite cumbersome for the reader to retain all the information, so you may want to consider splitting them into smaller paragraphs. On the other hand, if you have a series of short paragraphs, it may feel too choppy and could negatively impact the essay's flow. If that's the case, try to combine two or three short paragraphs into one. You should also check to make sure there aren't any extra spaces between words or before punctuation marks to improve readability and avoid distractions.

Ensuring your essay is polished during the editing process can help you produce stronger writing that lets your content shine. Taking a break, reading your essay out loud, and giving one last look at your written materials are simple yet powerful tools to make editing thorough and productive.

Editing
for Brevity – Darlene Holt

Crafting a stand-out personal statement can be challenging, especially if your writing isn't engaging or does not convey a clear message. That's why editing for brevity is essential. Not only does it help you meet length requirements, but also it makes writing clear, concise, and efficient. Here are some useful tips to make every word count.

Use Active Voice

Active voice can significantly cut down words, specifically uninteresting and overused "to be" verbs. These include *is, was, am, are, were, being,* and *been*. In passive writing, "to be" verbs are prevalent because the person or thing doing the action appears at the end, leading to weaker, wordier sentences. For example:

"The exam was performed by Dr. Smith."

Here, the exam is emphasized rather than the doctor. Though passive voice is sometimes necessary, such as when the person performing the action is unknown, its use can weaken even the most interesting sentences. If the goal is to emphasize the subject, in this case the doctor, then active voice is necessary. To change this sentence to active voice, the person doing the action (the subject, Dr. Smith) should appear at the beginning:

"Dr. Smith performed the exam."

Now the sentence is clearer and more direct, expressing the same message in fewer words.

When composing a draft, I recommend using the "find" feature (Ctrl + F in Windows, CMD + F in MAC OS) in Microsoft Word or Google Docs, which allows you to search for any word in your document. Try typing in various passive verbs you want to eliminate. Once it highlights them, you can choose a stronger verb or reorder the sentence to make it active. For more information on active and passive voice, please see "Passive and Active Voice."

Avoid Filler Phrases

With traditional essays, many students tend to "pad" their writing to meet a page limit or word minimum. However, stringent character limits can mean that there's no room for filler. Common phrases that are used as fillers include "I feel," "I think," "I believe," and "In my opinion." While these phrases may feel essential, your writing is entirely composed of your thoughts and opinions, making these phrases unnecessary. Not only do they bloat essays with "fluff," but also they lessen the impact of our words. Consider this statement:

"I feel I have unique experiences to draw from as I embark on my journey to medical school."

Saying "I feel I have unique experiences" shows the writer's opinion on the topic, but this is already implied. The writer either has unique experiences or does not, so a more direct answer would strengthen this sentence and evoke more certainty in the writer's voice. Likewise, if someone were to ask a writer whether they are a good writer and they respond with, "I believe I'm a good writer," it may cast doubt compared to simply omitting that excess phrase. Showing confidence in your experiences and abilities can be vital to strong writing, including in situations like the application process.

Condense, Condense, Condense

One of my favorite types of writing is called a "drabble," a story written in exactly 100 words. These stories test a writer's ability to provide meaningful content in a limited space. As with documents like personal statements, every word should feel deliberate. Writing drabbles has taught me to become merciless when cutting and condensing my work. First, I write without thinking about length, letting my thoughts flow rather than feeling constricted by word limits. Sometimes I find myself nearing the 200-word range after an initial draft. That means I'm tasked with cutting 50% of my entire story. It may seem like a lot, but this forces me to have a "no mercy" mindset when condensing, the same mindset you should have during the editing process. If you do not need it, cut it. If it adds no value to your work, it goes. If you can say it in one sentence instead of three, do it. Focus on one sentence at a time and ask yourself what words you absolutely need. Some common condensable words include *that, just, which, to,* and *of the*. For instance:

> "The director **of the** hospital" can be reduced to "The hospital director"
>
> "I **just** sat **down** in the waiting room, **which** smelled like Lysol" can become
>
> "I sat in the Lysol-scented waiting room."

Condensing phrases and playing with syntax, or word order, is an easy method to reduce characters. Let's look at the example from earlier:

> "I feel I have unique experiences to draw from as I embark on my journey to medical school."

And here's a condensed version:

> "My unique experiences will aid me on my medical school journey."

That simple change eliminated 27 characters while making the sentence more active and engaging. Here are some other common expressions that can be condensed:

- Due to the fact that > Because
- In order to > To
- On an everyday basis > Daily
- In the event that > If
- Regardless of the fact that > Although

Concise phrasing lets readers focus more on the information you are presenting. The fewer words they have to weed through, the better.

Eliminate Qualifiers and Use Strong Word Choices

Qualifiers, such as *very, really, essentially, basically, extremely, quite, rather,* and *sort of,* make writing sound informal, wordy, or doubtful. It's best to omit them in favor of more precise language. Consider these sentences:

> "The staff was **very** helpful and **super** nice. They **even** gave me a medal to **sort of** honor my work, which **essentially** motivated me to pursue medicine."

Phrases like "very helpful" can be condensed with a stronger word, such as "supportive." Notice how the bolded words add no value here. Comb through sentences and ask yourself if every word is necessary. Also, limit adjectives and adverbs for more concise writing. Do we need "helpful" and "nice" when "supportive" can work? Let's use this technique, as well as active voice and condensing, to combine the two sentences. Here is a more concise version:

> "The supportive staff awarded me a medal for my work, motivating me to pursue medicine."

The final version is less wordy, clearer, and more interesting by omitting unnecessary characters.

Use Logic and Avoid Repetition

Some phrases we use contain certain implications that do not need to be stated outright. If someone is running, it's implied the person is moving quickly; therefore, the sentence "He ran quickly" can simply be "He ran." To emphasize a person running faster than normal, a stronger word choice, such as "sprinted," could be more effective. Similarly, "She whispered quietly" can simply be "She whispered," since whispering is a quiet action. This type of oversight can make writing repetitive. Consider this sentence:

> "I walked through the hospital doors, observing the kindness of the medical staff, and in my head, I thought to myself, *This is where my future lies.*"

On a quick read-through, one might see this as a strong sentence. But there's a lot of redundancy in the wording "In my head, I thought to myself." Can you think outside of your head? Can you think to someone other than yourself? Unless you are telepathic, the answer is no, making these phrases redundant and implied by logic. Even the phrase "I think" is unnecessary here since the writer's thoughts are implied by italics. Here is a less redundant version:

> "I walked through the hospital doors, observing the medical staff's kindness. *This is where my future lies.*"

With a bit of condensing and less repetition, the revised sentences flow better and do not overwhelm readers with verbiage.

Kill Your "Darlings"

We have all written a sentence or paragraph that we've been particularly fond of, where the words flowed so perfectly, they felt poetic. As a writer of short stories, I often find myself falling in love with a well-thought-out metaphor or simile. But despite a sentence's splendor or depth, it does not always fit with the character or setting I'm writing about. It's painful to come to terms with losing our "darlings," these wonderful words we take pride in, but often it's for the betterment of the piece. Try not to get caught up in sentences or even paragraphs you feel strongly about. Ask yourself if the words are necessary to make your point.

If you feel attached to certain sentences, do what I do: save them for later. After cutting a number of my own "darlings" over the years, I created an ongoing document where I paste rejected sentences to use on future writing projects. Even if you never repurpose the words, it might be comforting to know they still exist. Remember to be flexible and objective when editing.

Final Thoughts

If you are like me, you have probably committed at least one of these crimes against brevity. Use these editing methods to help you meet those challenging character restrictions and strengthen your writing to get you one step closer to your goals.

The Ultimate Grammar Guide
– Shayna Pastori

Grammar can be frustrating, confusing, and downright annoying. Some people dismiss grammar's importance in writing and think their ideas will come across clearly without worrying about grammar, punctuation, or sentence structure. However, proper grammar is vital, especially when applying to medical school. It can help transform your essay into an organized, professional, and academic piece of writing. Use this guide to find grammatical errors in your own writing for the best chance of submitting polished, quality work.

Sentence Structure: Independent and Dependent Clauses

A clause is a group of words that includes two parts:

1. A **noun** [subject] = shows the audience who or what the sentence is about. It is a person, place, thing, or idea.

    a. **The doctor** delivered the bad news.

2. A **verb** [predicate] = shows the audience the main action in the sentence. It shows the readers what the subject is doing.

    a. The doctor **delivered the bad news.**

There are two types of clauses:

- An **independent clause**: the main clause, which has a clear subject and verb/predicate. They act as a complete sentence.

- A **dependent clause**: usually has a subject and verb/predicate but contains a modifier (see below) that causes it not to be able to stand alone. These need to be attached to an independent clause.

Independent clauses

Independent clauses must have a noun + verb/predicate + punctuation. They can stand alone, making them complete sentences. To see if sentences in your writing are independent clauses, circle each subject and underline each main verb/predicate. If these two parts are present, check to make sure there is clear punctuation. If your sentence meets these requirements, you have an independent clause.

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Dependent clauses

Most dependent clauses cannot stand alone because they include one of the following parts of speech (if they are not connected to an independent clause):

- Coordinating conjunctions
- Transition words
- Relative pronouns

A **coordinating conjunction** is a connecting word to help demonstrate how different ideas are connected. Coordinating conjunctions are **for, and, nor, but, or, yet,** and **so**. These words can be used to begin a sentence. However, when a coordinating conjunction is included in a clause, it makes it a dependent clause. This is because a clause cannot stand on its own if it begins with a coordinating conjunction and does not have a clear independent clause connected to it.

> "And I enjoyed my experience." (Dependent clause)

> "I worked as a lab assistant, and I enjoyed my experience." (Independent clause + dependent clause)

Transition Words

Transition words help the audience see the connections and relationships between different ideas in a sentence. They are commonly used to connect two independent clauses in a single sentence, typically following a semicolon. A clause that begins with a transition word can still be an independent clause. However, the transition word should be separated from the independent clause with a clear comma.

Transition words and phrases include: **however, therefore, for example, subsequently, in addition, furthermore, nevertheless, finally, also, in general,** and **as a result,** among others. Using a transition word helps show the audience how different ideas are connected or related.

Relative Pronouns

Relative pronouns introduce relative clauses, which are considered dependent clauses. Relative clauses modify a word, phrase, or important idea in a sentence. Relative clauses cannot stand on their own. The most common relative pronouns are **that, which, who(m), who(m)ever,** and **whose**. When a relative pronoun is included in a sentence, the relative clause should be connected to an independent clause. This helps the audience clearly understand the main clause in the sentence and how the relative clause modifies this independent clause.

Proofreading strategies:

- Which sentences are missing a vital grammatical part (e.g., subject or main verb/predicate)?

- Which sentences begin with a coordinating conjunction? Are these dependent clauses connected to an independent clause?

- Which sentences begin with a transition word? Are these dependent clauses connected to an independent clause or contain a clear comma?

- Which sentences begin with a relative pronoun? Are these relative clauses connected to an independent clause?

Sentence Structure: Fragments

A fragment, also known as an incomplete sentence, is not typically used in academic or professional writing. Although they can be used in more creative pieces, like telling a detailed personal story in your personal statement, they should not be used in the activities section or secondaries. Fragments fall into three categories: (1) missing subjects, (2) missing predicates, and (3) unsupported dependent clauses.

Fragments: missing subject

Every independent clause needs to include a clear subject to show who or what the sentence is about. When a clear subject is missing, the subject of the sentence will be unclear, which will cause the audience not to understand the important idea in the sentence. Here is a fragment error that is missing a subject:

"During my junior year shadowed an OB/GYN."

There is no subject in this sentence, making this a fragment. The audience will be asking: "Who shadowed an OB/GYN?" This error can be revised by adding a clear subject before this main verb of "shadowed:"

"During my junior year, **I** shadowed an OB/GYN."

We now have a clear subject, so the audience can clearly identify who shadowed an OB/GYN.

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Fragments: missing predicate

Every complete sentence needs a predicate, which is the word or phrase in a sentence that demonstrates the action of the subject. A predicate always includes at least one verb. If a verb/predicate is missing from a sentence, the main action will be unclear to the audience as well as how this action modifies the subject. Here is a fragment error that is missing a predicate:

> "As a child, I always to the hospital with my mother to follow her around during her shift."

In this sentence, the main verb is missing. This will cause the audience to question how "I always" connects to the rest of the sentence. This error can be revised by adding a clear verb to this sentence:

> "As a child, I always **went** to the hospital with my mother to follow her around during her shift."

With a clear verb added to the predicate, the audience can understand the main action in this sentence and how it modifies the subject.

Fragments: dependent clauses

A dependent clause has a subject and verb/predicate, but it cannot stand alone. Usually, a dependent clause includes a subordinating conjunction (e.g., **when, because, although, how**) or a relative pronoun (**that, who, which**). These conjunctions and relative pronouns make the clause unable to stand alone, which makes it a fragment. Here are two fragment errors involving subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns:

> "**Because** I connected with the patient."

> "**Which** is why I want to become a doctor."

These are both dependent clauses/fragments that need to be attached to an independent clause to make them complete sentences:

> "**Because I connected with the patient,** I felt like I found my future profession."

> "I want to help people, **which is why I want to become a doctor.**"

Now these are complete sentences with an independent and dependent clause to help the audience see the important ideas in the sentence.

Sometimes, a fragment can be a phrase that is missing both a subject and a verb. This type of fragment error can usually be combined with a nearby sentence. A writer can confuse a long phrase for a complete sentence because there are many words in the sentence. Here is an example of this type of fragment error:

> "Before my difficult and time-consuming experience studying to be an EMT."

This is a fragment because it includes a series of prepositional phrases. There is no clear subject and verb to help the audience see what this information connects to or modifies. This error can be revised by adding a subject and predicate:

> "Before my difficult and time-consuming experience studying to be an EMT, **I did not think I could pursue a profession in the medical field.**"

This is now a complete sentence with a clear subject and verb. The audience can clearly decipher the subject, main action, and important idea in the sentence.

Proofreading strategies:

- What sentences are missing a clear subject?

- What sentences are missing a clear main verb/predicate?

- What sentences need independent clauses to be complete?

- What sentences are missing both a clear subject and main verb?

Sentence Structure: Run-on Sentences and Comma Splices

A **run-on sentence** is a sentence with two or more independent clauses that are connected in a single sentence without proper punctuation between them. These errors can cause the audience not to fully understand how the important ideas in the sentence are related.

A **comma splice** error occurs when two or more independent clauses are connected in a single sentence with only a comma connecting them. These errors can make it difficult to understand how the important ideas in the sentence are related.

Let's look at some run-on sentence and comma splice examples:

> "I spent my time working as a medical scribe it changed my life."

This is a **run-on sentence**. There are two independent clauses without a clear coordinating conjunction or punctuation joining these ideas together.

> "I spent my time working as a medical scribe, it changed my life."

This is a comma splice. There are two independent clauses connected in a single sentence with only a comma joining them, which isn't strong enough to combine these two clauses. This can cause the readers to not understand the relationship between these two important ideas.

There are multiple methods to fix these run-on sentence errors, and each method depends on the meaning that you want to convey.

Creating a full stop (periods and semicolons)

A period and semicolon both demonstrate the end of a thought or idea. Both can be used to revise run-on sentences and comma splices, but they carry slightly different meanings.
A **semicolon** [;] shows the audience that the two ideas in the sentence are closely related but does so without demonstrating the specific relationship (i.e., causation, comparison, addition, contrast). To show a close relationship and connection between the ideas in a sentence, a semicolon can be placed between the independent clauses:

> "I spent my time working as a medical scribe; it changed my life."

To go a step further, a period can be used to show a clear separation between these independent clauses. To show a more distant relationship, place a period between them, followed by proper capitalization. This separates the two thoughts.

> "I spent my time working as a medical scribe. It changed my life."

Joining ideas
Run-on sentences and comma splices can also be corrected by joining the ideas to make a compound sentence.

One way to revise these errors is to add a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction. This shows a clear relationship between the independent clauses in the sentence:

> "I spent my time working as a medical scribe, and it changed my life."

This method helps the audience clearly understand how these two important ideas are directly related. An easy way to remember these conjunctions is with the word **FANBOYS:**

For = cause/effect
And = addition
Nor = negation
But = contrast
Or = choice
Yet = contrast
So = result

One more way to revise these types of errors is to join the independent clauses with a semicolon followed by a conjunctive adverb and a comma. This helps show the relationship between these two ideas.

> "I spent my time working as a medical scribe; therefore, it changed my life."

Finally, these errors can be revised by adding a subordinating conjunction and a comma before the second independent clause to demonstrate how these ideas are connected.

> "Because I spent my time working as a medical scribe, it changed my life."

You can use these strategies to identify and revise any sentence structure errors in your writing. This can help effectively connect important ideas in your sentences.

Proofreading strategies:

- Are there commas that join two or more independent clauses in a single sentence? These are considered comma splices.

- Look at each subject and main verb: Is there punctuation connecting or separating these independent clauses? (1) a comma + coordinating conjunction? (2) a semicolon? (3) a period? If not, this is a run-on.

Sentence Structure: Parallel Structure

Parallel structure is using the same grammatical form to show that multiple ideas in a sentence are equally important. This is what clear parallel structure looks like:

> "**Some of my experience includes** *studying biology, participating in medical labs, and working in hospice care.*"

The main connecting clause is in **bold** text. In parallel structure, each equally important idea should be able to seamlessly connect to the main connecting clause.
The three equally important ideas have been *italicized*. Each of these ideas is formed using the same grammatical structure: verb + *ing* followed by a noun/noun phrase.

Now, let's look at a parallel structure error and discuss how to fix it:

> "**I have** *worked as a medical scribe, participated in lab experiments involving mice, and attending multiple medical conferences.*"

The first two equally important ideas have been formed using a past tense verb + a noun phrase. However, the third idea is formed as verb + *ing* followed by a noun phrase. To improve flow and revise this parallel structure error, the third idea should be formed as a past tense verb + noun phrase:

> "**I have** *worked as a medical scribe, participated in lab experiments involving mice, and attended multiple medical conferences.*"

This revised sentence helps the audience clearly see that these three ideas are equally important. This also helps strengthen the sentence structure and organization of the sentence. Remember, when you have sentences with two or more equally important ideas, ensure the same grammatical structure is being used to form these ideas.

Proofreading strategies:

- What ideas in your writing would you like to show are equally important?

- Where in your writing are there sentences with 2 or more ideas of equal importance? Are these words or phrases formed using parallel structure?

Sentence Structure: Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement is vital in helping the audience understand the relationship between each subject and verb in a sentence. A subject performs the action, so the action must clearly connect to and modify the subject. This grammar rule applies to verbs in the simple tense as well as the verbs **is/are/am, was/were**, and **has/have**. These tenses must always agree with the subject.

Third-person singular subjects

The most common subject-verb agreement errors occur when a third-person subject is used, and the verb is not formed to match this subject.

> "**The doctors** in my hospital *works* with patients suffering from dementia."

The plural form of the verb for a third-person subject does not end in **-s**. Therefore, this verb should be formed as the plural tense with *work*:

> "**The doctors** in my hospital *work* with patients suffering from dementia."

This helps the audience clearly see how the subject and verb connect in this sentence.

Prepositional phrases

Also, these errors often occur when a prepositional phrase is connected to the subject. An easy way to spot this error is to cover up the words between the subject and the verb to see if the forms of the subject and verb clearly match.

"**Each of the doctors** *are* responsible for helping their patients during their shifts."

If we cover up "of the doctors," the subject is "each," which is singular; however, the main verb is "are," which is plural. This is a subject-verb agreement error because a plural verb is being used for a singular subject. By revising this main verb to the singular form *is*, this error will be revised:

"**Each of the doctors** *is* responsible for helping their patients during their shifts."

Now the audience can clearly see that you are discussing each doctor individually.

Compound subjects

Subject-verb agreement errors also occur when a compound subject is connected by "or" or "nor." In this case, the verb should agree with the subject that is closest to the verb itself:

"**Either the doctor or nurse** *communicate* with the patient."

Since "doctor or nurse" is connected by "either/or," the verb needs to agree with "nurse;" therefore, the verb should end in the third person singular **-s** to make the connection to the compound subject clear.

"**Either the doctor or nurse** *communicates* with the patient."

Other common subject-verb agreement errors

Here are a few more common subject-verb agreement errors:
An indefinite pronoun (like **any, everyone, nothing)** is the subject of a sentence. These indefinite pronouns have singular meanings, so their verbs should be formed in the third person singular **-s** tense. For example:

"**Everyone** *is* competing to go to medical school."

A collective noun (like **team, community, family**) is the subject of a sentence. These collective nouns refer to a group that acts as a single unit, so their verbs should be formed in the third person singular **-s** tense. For example:

"**The community** *sees* that they need help."

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A sentence beginning with *there*. The verb should agree with the subject complement (the nearest noun or pronoun that follows the verb). For example:

> "There *is a* **great quote** that I relate to…"

> "There *are* **many reasons** why I want to become a doctor."

Revising subject-verb agreement errors can strengthen grammatical structure and clarify the ideas in a piece of written work.

Proofreading strategies:

- What subjects refer to the third person? Are the verbs that connect to these subjects formed using the third person singular **-s** tense?

- Is a prepositional phrase connected to the subject? If so, cover up the words between the subject and verb. Does the verb's tense clearly match the subject?

- Is there a compound subject? If so, does the verb agree with the subject that it is closest to?

- Is an indefinite pronoun being used as the subject? If so, is the verb formed using the singular tense?

- Is a collective noun being used as a subject? If so, is the verb formed in the third person singular **-s** tense?

Commas

Understanding how to properly use commas can be confusing. Many writers tend to overuse them or use them incorrectly. Commas help readers in direction, showing them when ideas are kept separate from one another or showing them how to read and when to pause. When commas are missing or are used improperly, it's like the audience is driving on a highway without signs. The following are some ways in which commas are used in English.

Separating items in a list

Commas can be used to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses in a single list. When a comma that separates one or more of these items in the list is missing, the audience could have a difficult time understanding the list as a whole and how these items modify this list.

However, commas preceding the final item in a list are considered optional ("I have research, clinical and practical experience"). This is up to you as the writer; although sometimes, not including a comma here can create confusion.

Joining independent clauses separated by conjunctions

Coordinating conjunctions, A.K.A. **FANBOYS** (**for, and, not, but, or, yet, so**), are used to connect two independent clauses in a single sentence. When one of these conjunctions is used to connect two complete sentences, a comma should be placed before the coordinating conjunction. This helps the audience to clearly see and understand each independent clause and how they connect to one another.

> "The physician taught me to treat patients holistically, and I want to implement this practice as a future physician."

Separating introductory elements from an independent clause

Introductory elements are words, phrases, or clauses that are placed before the main clause. They modify the main clause by including introductory information. Commonly, they are used to show the audience where, when, why, or how the action occurred. A comma placed after this information helps the readers distinguish the introductory information from the main clause. Here are some examples:

> "**In my childhood**, I suffered from severe asthma." (Tells us "when")

> "**Because Doctor Martinez was able to help this patient,** I was able to see how critical thinking and compassion can be used for medical treatment." (Tells us "why")

> "**While working at a clinic**, I learned the power of medicine." (Tells us "where")

If the comma is not included before this introductory element, the information in the sentence can run together and become obscured. Sometimes, introductory information can be rather long or detailed. However, a comma should still be placed at the end of this introductory element.

> "**Although, I struggled with my mental health in the past** I can use the skills I learned from my therapist when treating my own patients in the future." (incorrect)

> "**Although I struggled with my mental health in the past,** I can use the skills I learned from my therapist when treating my own patients in the future." (correct)

Conjunctive adverbs are another way to connect independent clauses in a single sentence. This includes words like **furthermore, however, moreover,** and **therefore**. However, punctuation is a little more complicated with these adverbs because the adverb is also considered part of the sentence itself. These adverbs are also considered introductory information, which means that a comma should follow them as well. Here is an example:

> "**Furthermore**, I would like to continue my research experience in the lab."

The conjunctive adverb is being used as an introductory word here, so a comma is added that follows this adverb. However, to connect this to another independent clause, a semicolon should be used.

> "This experience has changed my perspective of healthcare; **furthermore**, I would like to continue my research experience in the lab."

The semicolon is added to connect these independent clauses in this sentence. The comma is included after the conjunctive adverb because it is introductory information that is part of this second clause. This helps the audience easily see these two independent clauses and the relationship they have.

Separating nonessential information from the main clause

Nonessential information in a sentence modifies the main clause by providing additional information that is not required in the audience's understanding of the main clause. Usually, this nonessential information provides additional descriptions for nouns and pronouns.

> "The patients at the nursing home felt joy, **a feeling that they had sorely missed**."
> (Modifies the feeling of "joy" by providing additional information about this feeling)
>
> "My research, **which took two years to complete**, has been implemented in osteopathic medicine." (Modifies "research" by providing additional information about the length of completion)
>
> "My mother, **an ENT doctor**, taught me the power of compassion. (Modifies "mother" by providing additional information about her profession)

The bolded clauses in the sentences above provide additional information that's not essential in the audience's understanding of the sentences' main ideas. You could remove these pieces of additional information, and the meaning would still be clear. Therefore, commas are needed to help the audience distinguish what information in the sentence is the most important.

When the relative pronoun "which" is used, the information following this pronoun is considered nonessential. However, when the relative pronoun "that" is used, the information following "that" is considered essential to the main clause and therefore does not require a comma.

> "The fact **that she told me her life story** helped me in her treatment."

Without this bolded information, the audience would not understand "the fact" that the writer is discussing. Keep this in mind when deciding whether to use commas in your writing.

Separating coordinate adjectives

Sometimes, writers use multiple adjectives to describe a noun or noun phrase. When multiple adjectives are placed together, commas should be used to separate them:

"Doctor Paz was a **compassionate, caring** physician."

"The **damp, musty** room did not make her feel safe."

However, sometimes adjectives that are placed next to each other are not coordinate adjectives, which means that they do not describe the noun that follows equally:

"The **large waiting** room…" ("large" describes "waiting room" and not just "room")

Although this may seem confusing, there is an easy trick to help you determine if the adjectives are coordinated. If you can replace the comma with **and**, then the comma is necessary:

"Doctor Paz was a **compassionate and caring** physician." (Correct; coordinate adjectives require a comma)

"The **large and waiting** room…" (Incorrect; does not require a comma)

Try to keep this trick in mind when using back-to-back adjectives in your writing.

Dialogue with commas

If you are writing a narrative, you may be using dialogue. Using punctuation for dialogue can be confusing, and some writers are not sure when commas should be included. Let's look at an example:

"I feel alone and don't know what to do," the texter confided in me.

"How long have you felt this way?" I replied.

She took a while before typing, "Since my grandfather passed away."

As you can see, a comma is used to mark the boundary between narration and dialogue. If a question mark or exclamation point is used, like in the second example, a comma should not be included.

Common comma errors

There are two common comma errors that writers often struggle with:

- **Commas joining two independent clauses**. These are considered comma splice errors. You can refer to the Comma Splice section of this document to help you in noticing and revising these common comma errors.

- **Commas separating a subject from a main verb**. Because these are essential elements of an independent clause, a comma should never be used to separate a subject from the main verb.

  - "The patient, explained his symptoms." (incorrect)
  - "The patient explained his symptoms." (correct)
  - "The patient, who had endometriosis, explained his symptoms." (correct)

Remember to look out for these common comma errors when composing your documents for medical school applications.

Proofreading strategies:

- Do you have three or more items in a single list? If so, does a comma separate these items?

- Do you have a coordinating conjunction connecting two independent clauses in a single sentence? If so, is a comma being used to join these clauses?

- Do you have introductory information that begins your sentence? If so, is it separated from your main clause with a clear comma?

- Do you have nonessential, additional information in your sentence? If so, is it separated from the main clause with a comma?

- Do you have back-to-back adjectives being used to describe a noun or noun phrase? If so, can "and" be added between these adjectives? If so, are you using a clear comma to separate these coordinate adjectives?

- Are you using dialogue in your writing? If so, does a comma separate the dialogue from the narration?

- Do you have a comma separating your subject and main verb? If so, delete it.

Final Thoughts

Remember, if your application materials are not polished, admissions committees may stop reading and move on to the next applicant. Ensuring your grammar is solid will make your writing clear and easy to read to help sell yourself to admissions committees.

Using Dashes and Colons for
Emphasis – Amy Fredrickson

Review this document to learn how to use dashes and colons stylistically to emphasize your ideas.

Stylistically Using Em Dashes

Em dashes (created by connecting two hyphens) are an informal type of punctuation that is typically not recommended for formal writing contexts. In more narrative contexts, however, the dash works well to emphasize the information that follows it. Writers should think about what ideas they want readers to focus on and consider using the em dash accordingly.

Example
Read the following two sentences:

> "Avery spotted an object crawling across the floor, a large, black spider."

> "Avery spotted an object crawling across the floor—a large, black spider."

Notice how the em dash emphasizes what the spider looks like and draws the reader's attention to this description. If a writer is focusing on conveying a story about his fear of spiders, it makes sense to insert an em dash in front of the phrase "a large, black spider."

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Stylistically Using Colons

Colons are a more formal type of punctuation than em dashes and are often found in official, academic writing. Colons, similar to em dashes, can be used stylistically to draw attention to the information that follows them.

When using a colon to emphasize information, keep in mind that it should primarily be used to separate two independent clauses (complete sentences) when the second sentence clarifies information about the first or provides additional details. For example:

"I was late for my math test: I walked in sheepishly at 20 minutes past the top of the hour."

Now, read the following two sentences to compare the stylistic effect of using a colon as opposed to a period to separate two independent clauses:

"The snowstorm came with arctic temperatures. The high in Fairbanks was –10°F."

"The snowstorm came with arctic temperatures: The high in Fairbanks was –10°F."

Notice how the colon works to both effectively connect these two sentences and to emphasize the freezing temperatures in Fairbanks. A writer could also use an em dash to separate these two sentences. However, if the writing context is formal, a colon is more appropriate.

Final Thoughts

Adding dashes and colons to your writing toolkit will help make your work more dynamic and interesting for readers; just be sure to avoid overusing these punctuation marks. When writers incorporate dashes or colons too much, their effect lessens, and the credibility of the writer diminishes.

Ambiguous Antecedents
– Amy Fredrickson

Use this resource to learn how to identify and correct ambiguous antecedents in your writing.

What Is an Antecedent?

An **antecedent** is the noun to which a pronoun refers. For example, in the sentence, "**Gabriel** enjoyed playing hockey, and **he** was skilled at scoring goals," the antecedent of the pronoun "he" is "Gabriel."

What Is an Ambiguous Antecedent?

An **ambiguous antecedent** describes a pronoun (e.g., "he," "she," "they," "we," "it," etc.) that has more than one possible referent. When it is unclear what noun a pronoun refers to, readers are more likely to get confused, and a writer's message can become lost.

When does an ambiguous antecedent occur?
Ambiguous antecedents primarily occur (1) when a pronoun precedes its antecedent in a sentence and (2) when a pronoun has two possible antecedents.

For example:

"Because **she** was interested in learning how to paint, **Helena** enrolled in a watercolor class." (The pronoun "she" precedes its antecedent, Helena).

"**Martin and Alexander** could not decide where to eat dinner, so **he** proposed they flip a coin." (It's unclear whether the pronoun "he" refers to Martin or Alexander).

How to correct ambiguous antecedents
To correct an ambiguous antecedent, writers should ensure the antecedent precedes the pronoun in a sentence and correct sentences in which a pronoun has two possible antecedents—often by replacing the pronoun with the specific noun to which it refers. For example, here are revised versions of the previous examples:

"Because **Helena** was interested in learning how to paint, **she** enrolled in a watercolor class."

"**Martin and Alexander** could not decide where to eat dinner, so **Martin** proposed they flip a coin."

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Final Thoughts

Correcting ambiguous antecedents will help ensure that your message is as clear to the reader as it is to you. Be sure to look out for them as you write!

WRITING IN MEDICAL
SCHOOL APPLICATIONS

Introduction

Author: Jennifer Wyatt-Speegle

As you probably have already found out, applying to medical school requires a lot of writing! From the personal statement to secondary applications to the letter of interest, there seems to be no shortage of opportunities to write. That can be discouraging if writing is not your strong suit. However, there is help! And you are in the right place.

"Writing in Medical School Applications" provides a wealth of resources on how to conquer the medical school personal statement, activities list, and secondary applications. You will be given examples and templates that help you understand what really needs to go into a personal statement. However, we do not want you to create a formulaic or dull response, so there are other articles on writing strong hooks and "showing" versus "telling" that will make your essay more compelling and, well, personal.

Different application materials require different skills, like the activities list and supplemental materials for the TMDSAS application. This section includes guidance on those elements. It also contains information on how to approach some of the most difficult and/or common secondary application prompts. Finally, there are a few articles on how to write update letters and letters of interest for medical school admissions committees.

Applying to medical school is a long and stressful process. This section will help make it a bit more manageable and will help you stand out in the crowd of thousands of applicants.

"DOs and DON'Ts" of Writing
Your Application Materials
– Wendy Gammon

The following is a collection of writing "DOs and DON'Ts" to consider as you begin writing your application materials for medical school. These recommendations are based on client submissions read in recent years.

When Writing, DO the following

Create a compelling personal statement opening — a "grabber"
It's 5:00 p.m. on a Friday afternoon before a holiday weekend in the admission office at the medical school of your choice. Bear that in mind as you create and craft the first opening paragraph of your personal statement. Make it compelling enough to keep the reader motivated to keep reading past closing time. This is your big chance!

It can be challenging to identify a life-changing personal experience, but it's essential if you want to "grab" the attention of admissions readers. You may have had several meaningful or traumatic events in your life that would be perfect to engage readers from the start. To stand out, choose a thread or final sentence that reveals its impact on you and how this experience inspired you to consider medicine as a career. Keep this meaningful event confined to one solid, succinct opening paragraph. It should not take up the first third of your essay. Remember that you have character and word limits for every essay you submit in your application and have other attributes and experiences to share. The lesson here is to spread the content over the entire essay. Let this opener be a thread or theme you might return to or refer to in your conclusion to show how your journey has come "full circle."

Go into greater detail in your most meaningful event (MME) response in the AMCAS activities section
In addition to your description for an activity, you have 1,325 characters (including spaces) allocated for elaboration of that activity. The MME sections of your top three activities let you describe why they were meaningful and how they impacted and influenced you. In the past, I have seen MME sections as brief as a single sentence. This is a missed opportunity! Be sure to make use of the space allotted. I always encourage applicants to flesh out this section and take advantage of another opportunity to show what you have done that's so important to your development and decision making.

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Recycle responses for secondaries

Many school secondaries ask the same questions in their prompts using slightly different language. Applicants will, therefore, "recycle" a response to a repeat question by simply cutting and pasting, which lends to the "work smarter, not harder" approach. If you use this strategy, remember to change the name of the school in each response; otherwise, this will NOT make for a positive impression. Be sure to also tweak your responses to the nuances of each prompt, and never recycle content within the same secondary. Tending to these small, but essential, details before submitting secondaries will improve your chances of getting an interview.

Respect privacy

When discussing impactful experiences you've had with patients or colleagues, be respectful of their privacy by disguising their name with a pseudonym, which can be denoted by using quotation marks the first time you mention it. People can be referred to as "Miss B" or "Mr. D" or by a made-up first name. If you are describing shadowing a physician (and the experience was a positive one), it's acceptable to give the doctor's name.

Be articulate using mature, semi-professional language

You want your writing to reflect who you are, and you should be yourself. However, strive to use a formal vocabulary when writing your personal statement, activities entries, and secondary responses. This does not mean using long, hard-to-pronounce words throughout your writing, however. Keep it clear and direct while remaining formal, being mindful to avoid slang or overly casual words and phrases.

Use transitions

Some applicants struggle with transitioning from their opening paragraph to the following paragraphs. Often, creating an outline of your essay can help as it allows you to take a "big picture" look at your ideas and logically order them. There are many ways to logically order your ideas, including chronology, thematic patterns, and flashbacks, among other methods. Let your ideas guide you in deciding the appropriate logic; do not force a specific way. After you determine the best order for your topics, then address tougher transitions. For example, if your first paragraph finished discussing how an event influenced or inspired you to pursue medicine as a career, the next paragraph could start with mentioning that other experiences similarly steered you toward medicine. Also, consider discussing why you pursued a particular event or what you hoped to gain from that experience to transition from one paragraph to the next.

Check your spelling
This may seem simple, but misspelling even one or two words often reveals a rushed or careless effort and may reflect a measure of disrespect. The reader may interpret this as a lack of sincere interest, which can hurt your chances of getting accepted into medical school.

Adhere to the character/word count limit
Go one word or character over the allocated limits, and your hard work may be tossed in the wastebasket. If you have access to a word processing software like Microsoft Word or Google Docs, then you can determine the "word count" (including character count with spaces). Use it as you write to monitor where you stand.

When Writing, Do NOT

Be overly negative when discussing personal experiences or qualities
If something negative has been particularly impactful on your pre-medical journey, be sure to dwell less on the negative and more on how you overcame this setback. Also, personal medical conditions (including mental health issues) can be discussed if it's about a close colleague, friend, family member, or even yourself. However, it is important to note that you should use discretion when talking about mental health issues as stigmas still exist, even in the medical field.

Describing your experiences can be impactful in crafting a powerful story, especially if it was a life-changing experience for you that helped you evolve as a person. Present it in a way that reflects a challenge or adversity you confronted and overcame, one that shaped your character and brought your personal insight, perspective, and goals into focus. It's always best to end on a positive note.

Use your personal statement as an opportunity to "sell" religious or political beliefs
This is not the place to preach or push a platform. It's fine if you uphold, practice, and have strong feelings about a certain religious practice or political party, but it may be best not to broadcast these beliefs to adcoms. Include this information only if it relates to an event that played a significant or influential role in your life and contributes to a meaningful experience you want to share. This is not the forum for converting readers to your beliefs, and including this information in your written materials puts you at risk of readers rejecting your application simply because they do not agree with your views.

Give cliched reasons for pursuing medicine
Your application essays are essentially a "sell job," where you come across as someone who is fired up, passionate, and committed to a specific school, the field of medicine, or direct patient care. Stating that you want to go into medicine simply because you enjoy helping people isn't enough. Similarly, stating that your grandad was a doctor and you thought a great deal of him is admirable but generally unconvincing as a stand-alone reason for pursuing medicine. Also, declaring that you are fully committed to dedicating your career to research as opposed to direct patient care may not be helpful to your cause if that school's mission is to develop primary care physicians. Do your homework and find out everything you can about your desired school(s), including their missions, curriculums, and special programs to ensure your values align with theirs.

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Make sentences too long
It becomes convoluted and difficult for admissions screeners to wade through long sentences, causing them to lose interest and stop reading. If you have a long sentence, and you want to include all the content and your line of thought, break it up into a second segment by using a period or semicolon. This is also useful for emphasizing a point and finishing a paragraph or sentence with a bang.

Use contractions
Don't—I mean DO NOT—use contractions in your essays unless it's part of dialogue. Contractions are considered informal and do not belong in the medical school application.

Use "etc." or other abbreviations
Like contractions, abbreviations do not belong in formal writing. Omit "etc." in favor of more precise language or say what you have to say and finish your sentence. You can imply there are other factors that could be listed along with what you have to say, such as with the phrase "among others," or list those other factors. Only use abbreviations for the name of an organization if you have previously written out the full name to avoid confusion.

Use too many "I"s
Avoid starting too many sentences with "I" as it can quickly become redundant. Instead of overusing sentence starters like "I did this" or "I did that," try structuring sentences with opening phrases that lead into something you have done. The reader already knows it's all about you, so incorporate more sentence variety to keep your writing fresh and engaging.

Final Thoughts

Following these DOs and DON'Ts will help you as you continue on your application journey and ensure you present your best self!

Talking about Others:
Guidelines for Creating an Inclusive Environment in Your Writing
– Jennifer Wyatt-Speegle

As a future physician, it's important that you create a safe and respectful space for others that encourages openness and promotes inclusion. These guidelines should be used when communicating with patients and colleagues.

While this guide mainly focuses on textual environments, these guidelines can and should be applied to in-person conversations as well.

This guide is not comprehensive, but it's a good start and will be updated and revised in later editions to account for the inevitable changes that will come (language has always been in a state of flux, so this is nothing new). If you are unsure how to approach a conversation, ask the person questions.

Age

A person's age should not be assumed or referenced unless it is relevant to the conversation or story. This includes age-related descriptors like "old," "elderly," and "young." For example, do not address an older woman as a "young lady" as that can perpetuate ideas that youth is better, or it can be infantilizing. Similarly, do not assume age corresponds with experience or more/less knowledge.

Deaf, deaf, and Hard of Hearing

How a person becomes deaf or hard of hearing is a unique and personal experience, which can impact their identity and connection with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. Currently, the most widely accepted terms used in this community are "deaf," "Deaf," and "hard of hearing."

It's also important to note the difference between "deaf" and "Deaf." Use "deaf" when referring to an audiological condition and "Deaf" when referring to a specific community and their culture.

Ableist language and colloquialisms, such as "falling upon deaf ears," should not be used.

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Gender and Sexuality

Use gender neutral pronouns (you/they/them/we) unless referring to a specific person and their gender pronouns are known. Remember, "they" and "them" are appropriate singular pronouns and have been a grammatically correct way to refer to someone for a long time (e.g., "I called my dad yesterday and talked to them for an hour"). Avoid gendered plural nouns, including "guys" (e.g., "Hi guys!"). Instead, use neutral alternatives (e.g., "Hi everyone!").

When meeting someone for the first time, it's appropriate and encouraged to ask them about their pronouns. Assuming a person's pronouns is inappropriate, and one's gender identity should never be revealed without their permission.

Use contemporary language used by LGBTQIA+ communities, including:

- lesbian
- gay
- bisexual
- transgender
- trans
- queer
- LGBTQ+

Never use outdated language or refer to a person's gender or sexuality as a "preference" or "lifestyle."

You do not need to use hyphens when referring to people with dual national or ethnic identities. For example, instead of "Asian-American," use "Asian American."

The word "Black" should be capitalized when referring to Black American people and communities that identify with the African diaspora. This aligns with the rule to capitalize names of other ethnic and national identities that relate as a collective whole in some way (such as Asian and Latinx). Some people from this community may also refer to themselves as African American.

When referring to people who identify as Latinx or Hispanic, it's important to note that these terms are not necessarily interchangeable. "Hispanic" refers to people of Spanish origin, which can be seen as a colonizing term in many Latinx communities. When in doubt, refer to people from Spain as "Hispanic," and use "Latinx" when referring to Spanish-speaking peoples from Latin America. This includes some areas of the Caribbean. Some people may use these terms interchangeably or refer to themselves as Hispanic despite having Latin American heritage; in those instances, be sure to follow their preferences.

"Latinx" is gender neutral and should be used unless the person you are referring to wants to use gender-specific versions of this pronoun (Latino and Latina).

Do not assume everyone from Latin America considers themselves Latinx. Also, it is inappropriate to assume that Latinx or Hispanic equates to a singular racial or ethnic identity (there are, for example, people who identify as Asian Latinx and/or Afro Latinx). Finally, there are identities that have ideological or political roots, including Chicano, that should be respected and used appropriately. As always, if you are unsure, ask someone how they identify.

When referring to people from Asia, try to be as specific as possible. You can be more specific by using terms that refer to a region (West Asians, Central Asians, Southeast Asians), a country (Vietnamese, Koreans, Japanese), and/or specific ethnic groups (Hmong, Han Chinese, Khmer). Avoid Western terms such as "Oriental" and "Middle Eastern."

Finally, when discussing white people, "white" may or may not be capitalized. At present, this seems to be in flux as there are valid reasons for and against the term's capitalization. However, you can capitalize "Whiteness" as it refers to larger political, social, cultural, and economic systems (although this convention is not widespread, so be aware that some readers may be confused or distracted by the capitalization of that word).

Furthermore, not all white people belong to a singular experience. If a white person refers to themselves by their cultural, ethnic, or national identity, like "Polish American" or "Latvian," you should use that term. Also, some people may be described and labeled as white but may identify differently. An example of this is the Sami people, who are an indigenous people of Northern Europe.

Medical, Mental, and Cognitive Conditions

A person's medical, mental, and/or cognitive condition(s) should not be brought up unless it is relevant to a discussion. Never assume a person has a medical, mental, and/or cognitive condition.

If it's relevant to discuss a person's medical, mental, and/or cognitive condition, you can defer to using people-first language (for example, "person with cerebral palsy") and contemporary terms. However, some groups prefer identity-first language, like Autistic people. To many people within this community, being Autistic is a fundamental part of their identity, and the language should reflect that reality. Another reason is that, typically, in the medical field, the attribute that comes after the person (e.g., person with diabetes) is usually a condition that needs to be treated or eliminated. Most Autistic people do not view Autism this way. To that end, it should never be assumed that a person sees their condition as a struggle, hardship, or deficit. Avoid words that imply inferiority or have negative connotations. This includes terms and phrases such as "suffers from," "abnormal," and "midget." When possible or in doubt, ask the person how they would like to be described.

Vision

Many people with vision loss are not considered blind. Unless a person refers to themselves as blind, you should use the terms "limited vision" or "low vision." Ableist language and colloquialisms, such as "blind as a bat," should not be used.

To help others who may have low vision or color vision deficiency, you can make your documents and writing more accessible by using a readable font, bolding instead of using underlining or italicizing, and providing appropriate contrast (instead of using a white background, use a cream-colored background with purple headings. These changes can be done in Google Docs and Microsoft Word, but you cannot change the color background in Microsoft Word Online).

- On fonts and vision: https://webaim.org/techniques/fonts/
- On color vision deficiency: http://scdg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Colour-information-with-header-sheet-2.pdf

Final Thoughts

When writing about other people and communities, the goal should be to honor different identities and backgrounds while remaining cognizant of the social, historical, and political context/history of specific language choices and how that impacts others. With this in mind, framing is key. In addition to thinking about language, you should also ensure that you do not automatically view a person's identities through a lens of struggle or hardship. Always let the person guide and inform you about how they want to discuss their experiences and identities.

Talking about Mental
Health in Applications
– Jennifer Wyatt-Speegle

Let's face it, writing about mental health in this day and age is difficult. Ironically, it can feel almost impossible in the context of the application process, especially for medical school. However, there are opportunities to discuss mental health in your application and even highlight it. This article will guide you on how to discuss mental health in a way that honors your journey while adapting to the current landscape.

STOP HERE FIRST!

- Before discussing anything in your application materials, including mental health, you should consult with a trusted mentor or advisor who is familiar with medical school admissions committees. They can provide sound guidance from an insider perspective. Once you have the green light and/or are comfortable with what you would like to reveal, then you can focus on how to discuss your specific condition.

- Do not force a discussion on mental health. If the reader understands your journey better as a result of discussing a mental health condition, then by all means, include it. However, if including the topic does not help drive your story forward and contribute to the overall message of your narrative, you may want to think twice about writing about it.

- Do not talk about it if it makes you feel uncomfortable. This is your work, and you should feel good about everything you include. If now is not the time to discuss mental health, then that is totally valid!

Do Not Spend Too Much Time on the Negative

Like any other medical condition an applicant may discuss, it's important not to dwell on the emotional and internal responses that are a result of the condition. Rather, try to approach the situation from a place of pragmatism. Explain what happened and the more tangible consequences that came as a result. For example:

> "After my car accident, I endured months of physical therapy while battling PTSD. It became impossible to ride as a passenger in any moving vehicle as I would have a panic attack, impacting my ability to get to school once classes started up again. In addition, the daily pain from my accident took a further toll on my mental health. Unable to attend classes remotely due to mandatory in-person labs, I withdrew from my courses."

In this example, the reader can see the hardships the writer faced without going into detail about how the person felt. Since emotions are more subjective and intangible, speaking about them can potentially isolate the reader. Also, the reader probably has a baseline understanding of how emotionally difficult it can be to manage a mental health condition and may even have some knowledge of the specific condition mentioned, so talking about the symptoms or emotional impact may come across as unnecessary.

Focus on the Changes You Made

After briefly discussing your condition and the resulting challenges, pivot to talking about the changes you made that helped you overcome the obstacles you experienced. Spend more time and space on this aspect than on describing the condition and negative experiences. Using our example from the previous section, let's see what could be added (in **bold**):

> "After my car accident, I endured months of physical therapy while battling PTSD. It became impossible to ride as a passenger in any moving vehicle as I would have a panic attack, impacting my ability to get to school once classes started up again. In addition, the daily pain from my accident took a further toll on my mental health. Unable to attend classes remotely due to mandatory in-person labs, I withdrew from my courses. **At that moment, I realized I needed to take a break and care for myself. I took the next two semesters off to focus on completing my physical therapy as well as going to therapy for my PTSD and other mental health needs. Though it took a long time, I remained committed, attending physical therapy three times a week and therapy once a week. Attending these appointments gave me a renewed sense of purpose and enabled me to see my improvement. It also helped me find a community of people who have gone through similar experiences, giving me an outlet to communicate my feelings in a productive way. Not wanting to put my education entirely on hold, I contacted a local orthopedic physician and shadowed her while I was out of school."**

Once the reader understands the steps you took to overcome the challenges associated with your mental health condition, remark on how you've moved forward and yielded positive impacts from this experience. Of course, you do not need to make it appear as if everything is perfectly fine, but you should demonstrate how you recovered and the insights you gained that are now shaping your new future. Let's take another look at our example, complete with content that follows this guidance (in *italics*):

> "After my car accident, I endured months of physical therapy while battling PTSD. It became impossible to ride as a passenger in any moving vehicle as I would have a panic attack, impacting my ability to get to school once classes started up again. In addition, the daily pain from my accident took a further toll on my mental health. Unable to attend classes remotely due to mandatory in-person labs, I withdrew from my courses. **At that moment, I realized I needed to take a break and care for myself. I took the next two semesters off to focus on completing my physical therapy as well as going to therapy for my PTSD and other mental health needs. Though it took a long time, I remained committed, attending physical therapy three times a week and therapy once a week. Attending these appointments gave me a renewed sense of purpose and enabled me to see my improvement. It also helped me find a community of people who have gone through similar experiences, giving me an outlet to communicate my feelings in a productive way. Not wanting to put my education entirely on hold, I contacted a local orthopedic physician and shadowed her while I was out of school.**
>
> *After successfully graduating from physical therapy, I learned valuable coping skills to manage my mental health conditions through continued therapy sessions, including breathing techniques and cognitive behavior therapy. I started school again and earned straight As my first semester back. I also became a surgical scribe. These experiences led me to my passion: orthopedic surgery. With the support system I have built and the strategies I have learned, I am confident I will continue to succeed and move forward with greater purpose."*

Note how the writer indicates that they still attend therapy and are managing their conditions, but that they have moved forward in their lives. The writer has also used this experience to discover their specific passion within medicine. Most importantly, the writer has reassured the reader that they are capable of attending medical school and finding success.

Final Thoughts

Talking about mental health can be a challenge on its own. However, depending on how you discuss it, you can demonstrate how your experiences are clearly an asset to your future.

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Personal Statement Outline
– Jennifer Wyatt-Speegle

IMPORTANT: you do not need to incorporate all of the points developed in this outline. This is a "working" document, meaning that things can change and you only should use what serves your purpose best.

Developing Your Working Thesis Statement

To begin, answer the two questions below:
What inspires you about medicine?
What personal characteristics are you particularly proud of?

Use your answers to the questions above to complete the following statements:

- I want to go to medical school because:

- My reasons for wanting to go to medical school are authentic to me because (if your reasons could be said by any other applicant, then revise that sentence)

- The experiences that fit with this theme are (one should be healthcare-related)

  - Were any of these experiences a pivotal moment in your journey? If so, which one?

- My vision for practicing medicine is

- One-three skills/qualities that I would like to highlight in this essay is/are

Based on your responses above, complete the following statement:
The theme(s) of my personal statement is(are)

Essay Structure

I want to talk about _____ first, followed by _____, and then _____ (if applicable).

- My first topic will transition to my second topic by
- My second topic will transition to my third topic by (if applicable)

Use complete sentences to fill out the outline

Introduction

Hook (can be a fun fact, foreshadowing anecdote, or a compelling question):

Thesis or main message (formed by your theme, reasons for wanting to go to medical school, and inspiration/vision for practicing medicine):

Topic 1

Topic Sentence:
The concrete experience(s) that supports this topic is:

- The detail(s) I really want the reader to know about this experience(s) is(are)

Topic 2

Topic Sentence:
The concrete experience(s) that supports this topic is:

- The detail(s) I really want the reader to know about this experience(s) is(are)

Topic 3 (if applicable)

Topic Sentence:
The concrete experience(s) that supports this topic is:

- The detail(s) I really want the reader to know about this experience(s) is(are)

Developing Your Conclusion

What is your vision for your future and/or how can you create closure in this essay?

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Personal Statement Sample
and Guide – Darlene Holt

While a high GPA and MCAT score are crucial for consideration into a medical school, another factor that holds a great deal of weight is the medical school personal statement. This part of the application gives you the opportunity to truly showcase your qualities and experiences and can give you the boost you need if you fall short in other areas. The following sample and guide offers an example of what an introduction, body paragraph, and conclusion can look like in a medical school personal statement to help you stand out among other applicants.

Introduction Example

An effective intro will use a show-don't-tell approach. Rather than telling ("I got injured during a gymnastics routine when I was 15"), the writer shows us the details and sets the scene as if the reader is standing right beside her as it happened.

Non-medical anecdotes can be particularly effective in the opening paragraph to help applicants stand out and highlight how well-rounded they are. Just be sure the connection to medicine is clear.

Beware of cliched openers, such as "Ever since I was child, I knew I wanted to be a doctor," or "My love for helping people has led me to pursue medicine."

My heart hammered against my ribs as I approached the uneven bars, the crowd's cheers resounding through the immense auditorium. Years of intense training had prepared me for this moment, and after saluting the judges, I began my routine. Adrenaline coursed through me as I seamlessly transitioned from bar to bar, the applause of the crowd lighting a fire in me. But on the final swing to my dismount, I struggled to maintain my grip. Before I knew it, I slipped off the bar and landed hard on my knees, dislocating both kneecaps and tearing multiple ligaments. At 15 years old, I underwent immediate surgery. Although my dream of becoming an Olympian was finished, months of physical therapy and doctor visits left me fascinated by the human body and inspired by the care and compassion of the physicians who aided in my recovery.

Intros should show a meaningful or notable moment in your life that motivated or validated your decision to pursue medicine.

If you haven't had that "Aha!" moment, don't worry. Simply choose a meaningful memory that contributes to your desire to pursue medicine.

A good way to connect the opening anecdote to one's pursuit of medicine is to include a thesis at the end of the intro or second paragraph. This is especially useful if that connection to medicine isn't immediately clear.

Keep in mind, the purpose of this essay is not "Why I want to be a doctor"; it is "Why I will be a good doctor." This is accomplished by describing scenarios where you displayed the qualities important to being a good doctor: empathy, communication, leadership, cultural competency, teamwork, integrity, etc.

Body Paragraph Example

My passion for working with children and my desire to learn more about the medical field led me to volunteer at Rady Children's Hospital in San Diego. I had the privilege of spending time with patients and doing activities, such as playing games, telling stories, and painting pictures. One patient, "Sarah," had been admitted after having several seizures, and I could sense her disappointment when she learned she would have to spend Christmas in the hospital. Noticing a beaded bracelet around her wrist, I asked, "Do you like crafts?" She shyly nodded, and as I set a box of beads, glitter glue, and ribbons in front of her, I was thrilled to see her disappointment melt into wonder. Seeing her face light up as we bejeweled handmade Christmas ornaments was profoundly rewarding. She placed a sparkly ornament on her head and exclaimed, "Look, I'm a princess!" before bursting into infectious laughter. In that moment, I felt proud to offer her respite from her worries and saw the impact that small kindnesses can have on patients. Providing Sarah and other children companionship during difficult times in their lives reinforced the importance of kindness and empathy in medicine, qualities I aspire to bring into my own practice to help improve patients' lives.

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Conclusion Example

The goals of the conclusion are to reiterate your positive qualities, how your experiences have shaped you and your perspective, and your passion for medicine.

Remember not to give any new information about past experiences in the conclusion. This is the place to wrap everything up and discuss future goals.

Through volunteering, clinical experiences, and my own recovery, I now understand that medicine is more than treating physical ailments; it is providing companionship to those who need it, showing empathy to support patients' families, or going beyond one's duties to aid a struggling community. Through these perspectives, I have witnessed the transformative power of medicine and am confident of my ability to make a positive difference in patients' lives. While my injury at 15 hindered my Olympic goals, I am grateful that it set me on this rewarding yet challenging path to becoming a physician and showing others the same care and compassion that was shown to me.

The conclusion is the place to "close the loop" of your essay by tying in the anecdote from your intro to show how much you've grown since that moment.

Audience, Tone, and Purpose:
Tips and Tricks for the Medical School Personal Statement – Darlene Holt

Understanding how audience, tone, and purpose work in writing is vital to penning an excellent essay, but how does one apply these concepts to a medical school personal statement? Here are a few tips to help you avoid common personal statement pitfalls.

Audience

Understanding who your readers are will help dictate how you approach writing. Applicants are typically well-informed that admissions committees, who are current and former physicians, will be their readers. Yet, I often see applicants make the following mistakes as they seemingly forget who their readers are:

- Giving information on a medically related topic that is common knowledge to a doctor.

   For example: "Patients' health outcomes dramatically affect what their days look like and, ultimately, what their lives look like."

Even to non-medical professionals, this information is understood to be true. Providing common knowledge information like this not only wastes valuable characters in the personal statement but also comes off "preachy," as though you are lecturing readers. Avoid this type of generic information, which does little to impress admissions committees.

- Overstating your experiences.

   For example: "Babysitting was immensely rewarding because it was my first experience having someone's life in my hands."

Avoid making your experiences seem more important than they are. While a task such as babysitting is incredibly important, it should not be conflated to the same level as a surgeon who has literally held a person's beating heart in their hands (and who could be one of your readers).

Tone

Knowing your audience will also dictate your tone. Do you know the actual person who will be reading your personal statement? Would you speak to a physician the way you would speak to your sibling or friend? Keeping an appropriate distance from the reader by using formal language is essential. However, informal language often plagues personal statements and distracts readers from the story being told. Avoid the following pitfalls:

- Using colloquial, conversational language, including slang, abbreviations, contractions, and idioms.

    For example: "So, I spilled the beans to my buddy and told him I donated 20 lbs of food before getting my first taste of service at the food bank."

    Using conversational words such as "so" and "buddy" and informal abbreviations like "lbs" give the wrong impression to readers and could make them think you are not taking your application seriously. Similarly, using idioms (overused expressions that do not translate literally) like "spilled the beans" or "first taste of" can cause clarity issues if readers are unfamiliar with them. Someone may think that beans were literally spilled in this scenario, and since we do not know who our reader will be, we should not assume what idioms they're familiar with. Remember, formal language is always more respectful when you do not know your reader.

- Embodying the dreaded "savior complex."

    For example: "After helping so many patients, I owe it to myself and to future patients to pursue a career in medicine to end the health inequities in the healthcare system."

As a prospective physician, you are clearly passionate about helping others, but when writing your personal statement, humility is key. While confidence is a great trait to have, it's a fine line between confident and arrogant, so try to remain humble when discussing experiences, achievements, and goals. Rather than telling us you have compassion, show us through well-crafted anecdotes, and let adcoms see for themselves how great you are. Try not to portray yourself as the one who will save everyone else or the person who will discover a cure for cancer.

Purpose

This may seem obvious, but it's amazing how many people veer away from their purpose for writing the personal statement. Your goal is twofold: to discuss why you are pursuing medicine and to convince adcoms why you would make a great doctor by showing them the positive qualities you possess. More simply put: "Why medicine?" and "Why choose me?" are the main questions being answered. But there are a few mistakes applicants tend to make:

- Only focusing on persuasion as your purpose for writing.

    For example: You have great experiences to discuss, and you assume that telling adcoms about these amazing experiences will help persuade them to choose you.

Sure, having good experiences is essential, but how you discuss these experiences will help you stand out and set you apart from other applicants with similar experiences. Remember, you are not only trying to persuade your audience here; you are also trying to captivate. Use sensory details to help adcoms visualize these impactful moments. Show rather than tell to keep readers engaged and pull at their heartstrings. Otherwise, they may get bored and decide to stop reading.

- Not reflecting on experiences to show what you gained from them and how they shaped you.

    For example: Writing an entire body paragraph describing what responsibilities you held in a certain job, the equipment you used, and the doctors you shadowed.

While it's useful to get some background information on your experiences, it can usually be summed up in one to three sentences. What really matters to adcoms is how each of your experiences further motivated you to pursue medicine, how your perspective changed, and how interactions with patients and physicians impacted your journey. Simply telling us what you did does not answer WHY you want to become a doctor, nor does it convince adcoms to select you out of a pool of thousands of applicants. Show them why your experiences have been meaningful. Understanding your purpose for writing the personal statement will help adcoms see who you truly are and why you want to be a doctor.

Final Thoughts

Appropriately applying the notions of audience, tone, and purpose in the medical school personal statement will allow you to craft an excellent piece of writing to help you stand out and get you one step closer to medical school.

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Confidence Is Not Arrogance:
Balancing Pride and Humility in Personal Statements
– Colette Murphy

A personal statement is a chance for you to "show off" who you are and what you've accomplished. How do you do that without seeming overly full of yourself? As we try to straddle the line of confidence and humility, let's take a deeper look into these definitions:

Confidence (n.): The feeling of self-assurance or appreciation of one's own abilities or qualities.

Humility (n.): A modest or low view of one's own importance.

At first glance, these two traits may seem in opposition to one another. How can a person be self-assured and appreciate their own abilities while still having a modest view of their own importance? While it may seem like a paradox, striking that balance when writing a personal statement is not only possible but also necessary.

When writing a personal statement, or any application material, it is crucial that you highlight and explain your accomplishments. You want to show admissions committees that you are qualified, capable, and desirable as a candidate for their school. At the same time, you need to acknowledge that you do not know and have not done everything; otherwise, what would be the point of continuing your education and attending medical school?

One of the easiest ways to write confidently while maintaining a sense of humility is to focus on the verbs you choose. Look at the following two sentences. Which seems more confident?

> "I was able to work with patients, help nurses with various duties, and learn from the physicians on staff."

> "I worked with patients, helped nurses with various duties, and learned from the physicians on staff."

The latter employs verbs in a much stronger way. It shows what the person did as opposed to simply listing general opportunities. After all, just because you are able to do something does not mean you follow through and do it.

Oftentimes writers think phrases like these help show humility:

> "I was able to…"

> "My duties/tasks included…

> "I was responsible for…"

However, these phrases tend to undermine a writer's confidence. Giving a task list does not tell a reader what was accomplished. On the flip side, using confident language does not undermine your humility. Consider these two sentences:

> "I served as first author for the article, helped manage a team of four researchers, and developed a new protocol for our experiment."

> "I wrote the whole article, was in charge of everyone, and came up with the only protocol that actually worked."

Both use confident language, but which statement shows humility? The first one. It outlines the responsibilities and achievements while still acknowledging the contributions and importance of others.

Final Thoughts

As you prepare to apply for medical school, just remember: It's good to be proud of what you've accomplished while still showing your excitement to continue to learn, grow, and do more with future opportunities.

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Showing Versus Telling
– Maria Aladren

When it comes to writing your essays, following the advice, "show, don't tell," will ensure readers respond much more strongly and positively to your prose that "shows" the action. In a medical school application, you are making a case for yourself. You want readers engaged, emotionally responsive, and convinced. To get readers to that point FAST (remember, you may have just 30 seconds to get them there!), you have to SHOW your case.

Here are some quick definitions before we dig in:

- **Telling** uses philosophical summations, descriptions, and summaries or conclusions of events.
- **Showing** uses action, obstacles, conflict, suspense, and dialogue.

Let's look at these examples:

> **Option 1:** "I love my brother and will always be there for him."
>
> **Option 2:** "Yesterday, I was in the middle of a hot date when my younger brother called. 'You're my last hope.' His car had broken down, and he was stranded in an unfamiliar town. Our ten-year difference meant he was still making the silly mistakes we all made in our late teens, like driving to an unknown place without a single credit card. He sounded, well, scared.
>
> My date would have to wait. I jumped in the car and drove an hour to rescue him. I found him sitting on the sidewalk by his broken car, looking like the small kid I remember taking to parties behind my mother's back. His eyes lit up. I was still the cool older sister, slightly superhuman. The drive back, amid teasing and laughing, made me forget the sculptured blonde I had left behind. My brother, after all, will always have my heart."

Which example would convince you that my love for my brother is real?

The first option **told** you how I felt, whereas the second option **showed** you how I felt.

Great stories function as metaphors for statements. They are powerful because humans are fundamentally storytelling animals, and we like to come to our own conclusions.

Storytelling
Structure

Storytelling has several components:

- A **setting**: "In my internship at a fertility clinic one evening…"
- One or more **characters**: "...we encountered a young girl distraught and alone…."
- An **objective**: "I reached out trying to comfort her…."
- An **obstacle**: "...but she refused care from everyone, including me…"
- An **action** or series of actions aiming to overcome the obstacle and achieve the objective: "I noticed she had a Steven Universe T-shirt, and I asked her if Amethyst was her favorite character. That seemed to get her attention, and I slowly managed to gain her confidence, strike a conversation, and find out how to help her…"
- A **thematic** conclusion. For our purposes, this may be a more obvious approach than in traditional storytelling. After all, we have a small character bandwidth to work with: "My attention to those small details patients sometimes display or communicate enabled me to reach past this girl's discomfort, opening the door to give her the care she needed."

Most, if not all, stories will have at least these elements. You can make the story shine by asking some of these questions:

- Where or when did this happen?
- Who? (Make sure you are one of the characters, not just a mere observer!)
- What did you want to change?
- What was in your way of achieving this?
- How did you change it?
- How did it change you?

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Methods to Move From Telling to Showing

Most of the time, you will face that your writing has mostly philosophical statements but no examples, stories, anecdotes, or other methods for showing. Here are two questions you can ask of those statements to move them into storytelling:

● When did you notice [your statement] was true for you? For example, if you write, "I believe in treating patients in a holistic manner," and you ask yourself the question above, you could tell this story:

"After breaking my finger when I was six, my doctor sensed my embarrassment about the possibility of wearing a cast, so he opened a drawer with the coolest multicolored patterned cast I had ever seen. He never said a word, but my attitude about my broken finger changed immediately. I noticed then that being a doctor is more than following a checklist of symptoms and that treating the person as a whole was the best approach."

From there, you can structure the story in the most advantageous manner possible, drawing detail and concentrating on the action that proves the statement you were trying to make.

How about if you feel that "This was always true for me" or "I don't know"? You can use this next follow-up question:

● If you said that and someone said, "I don't believe you; tell me what you've done that proves [your statement]," what would you tell them? For example, let's say you've written:

"My vision for the future of healthcare includes integrating it with the local community."

You may respond:

● "In March 2021, I volunteered with a healthcare group traveling to a town in rural India. One evening at a pop-up clinic, I met an older woman concerned about heart disease because it ran in her family. The woman walked me through her meals, from biscuits and tea for breakfast to butter naan and samosas in the afternoon. I could, at that moment, have talked to her about diets, kale, tofu, and some of the ideas I had on how to eat healthy, but those were the ideas of a girl from California. What good would it do her? I kept her traditional North Indian diet in mind, such as whole-wheat naan and air-fried samosas. That, she could take to her home and do. Our approaches to healthcare must take into account the whole community of the patient, not just their symptoms."

Either of those two questions may open up your writing to the kind of story that will prove your point in compelling, strong prose.

...And Then There's Grammar.

In showing, not all words (and structures) are made equal. Here's a quick list of tips to make your story even more "showy":

Use strong verbs

When creating action, verbs are king. In short stories with character limits, we need to trim a lot of "color" sometimes. Favor active, meaty verbs. Run away from the verb "to be" as it ruins action. Language around "to be" becomes limp, lifeless, and static. The verb "to be" is even worse in its evil twin form: passive voice. In that mutation, storytelling simply halts.

Strong	Weak
I encouraged my patient to seek further treatment.	I was delighted to see my patient looking for further treatment.
I reduced the bleeding by applying pressure.	The bleeding was manageable after pressure from my hand was applied.
My decision bolstered the team's commitment.	My decision was instrumental in getting the team to commit.
My mentor's actions awoke my interest in pediatrics.	I was very interested in pediatrics after I saw what my mentor did.

Minimize Adverbs

We all know adverbs modify verbs. But before settling for an adverb, ask yourself if you can find a better verb that includes the adverb itself. Plus, we get the satisfaction of knocking off those pesky extra characters.

With Adverb	Without Adverb
I really like working with diverse communities.	I treasure working with diverse communities
I quickly ran to help the patient	I dashed to help the patient
I listened intently to his lecture	I absorbed his lecture
She held my arm tightly	She gripped my arm

Make Nouns, Adjectives, and Adverbs Specific

This is also known as "the devil, the details" rule. Make the pictures in the mind of your reader as clearly as possible. Oftentimes, a specific noun may be more effective than a weak adjective plus a general noun.

General	Specific
I took very difficult material to gain new skills.	I enrolled in a neurophysiology course to improve my ability to monitor neurological disease.
The patient looked sad, so I gave her some assistance.	I offered the shaking, crying patient a bottle of water.

To Sum It All Up

Gripping, interesting personal statements paint vivid pictures in the mind of the reader, and they do it quickly and clearly. In short, when we're told the result of an action, we tend to distrust or lose interest:

"I learned how to collaborate and that made me a better leader."

When we tell the story of what happened, readers come to their own conclusion, they remain interested, and they tend to believe the narrative:

"That summer, instead of offering idea after idea, I took the time to really listen: I avoided interrupting my co-workers, I paraphrased back to them, and I praised what I thought was interesting. Only then did I add to the ideas, using what improvisers call, 'Yes, and…' As a result, my co-workers began to seek me out for projects, and I found myself leading several of them."

Final Thoughts

If we give readers vague and uninspiring information, it's easy for them to disengage. That's why showing is an essential component to creating writing that will pique the reader's interest and make them feel like they're part of your experiences.

Have I Got a Story for You:
Enticing Readers with a Strong Hook – Colette Murphy

"It was the best of times; it was the worst of times."
"A long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away…"
"Call me Ishmael."
"This is the story of how I died."

A strong opening line in a work of literature (or a movie) can have an exceptional impact. In some cases, it can become what the work is most well known for, such as with *Moby Dick*. Scholars have argued that "Call me Ishmael" is the most recognizable opening line in Western literature. In almost all cases, though, a strong opening compels a reader or viewer to keep paying attention to the work in front of them.

So, how do you craft a similarly strong opening for your personal statement? You do it with a "hook." Just as a fishing hook at the end of a line can help you snag and reel in a fish, a hook in writing is the opening statement designed to grab your reader's attention. There are several types of hooks you can choose to use in your introduction.

Common Hooks

The most common types of writing hooks are:

- Quotes
- Questions
- Declarative statements
- Facts or statistics
- Similes or metaphors
- Surprising words or phrases
- Stories or anecdotes

Each hook serves a different purpose and works best in different situations. For a personal statement, the strongest hooks are a **quote**, a **declarative statement**, or a **surprising word or phrase**, all of which will lead into a longer **story or anecdote** as the main portion of your introduction.

Why Use a Quote as Your Hook?

A quote might be something famous, like the quotes at the beginning of this article, or it might be something a family member or mentor said to you. Here are some quotes you might see at the start of a personal statement.

"You'll never be a doctor if you keep fainting at the sight of blood."

"First, do no harm."

"Handing me the scalpel, my high school biology teacher looked at me and said, 'Steve, make the first incision.'"

A quote is a good way to summarize the emotions of a moment and to help your reader "hear" the thought you are trying to express, which can be an engaging way to open a story or anecdote.

Why Use a Quote as Your Hook?

A declarative statement in a personal statement is simply the first sentence of your story or anecdote. It should express the theme of the story and give enough basic information that readers will immediately understand the type of story they're about to read. These are examples of declarative statements at the start of an introduction:

"As the oldest of six children, my entire life has revolved around caring for others."

"The day I failed my AP Biology exam was the day I knew I wanted to be a doctor."

"Before the accident, I had never thought about dying."

These statements make clear points and provide an interesting lead-in to a story explaining the context and details of the statement, which is a solid way to shape your introduction.

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Why Use a Surprising Word or Phrase as Your Hook?

A surprising word or phrase can act like an amuse-bouche in a fine dining meal. It should be brief and enticing, and its purpose is to whet your appetite and get you excited about what's to come. Sample words and phrases include:

"Myocardial infarction."

"Failure."

"Third place."

With fewer words (and even fewer characters toward your character limit), you can make a big impact as you begin to tell the story or anecdote that makes up the rest of your introduction.

Some Tips for All Hooks

Regardless of what type of statement you decide to use, all hooks should be:

- Vivid
- Concise
- Specific

Final Thoughts

Remember, your hook should "reel in" readers and get them to connect with your story and overall personal statement. If the hook is boring, long-winded, or generic, it's unlikely to have that desired effect.

TMDSAS Primary Application
Guide – Hillary Weiss

The Texas Medical & Dental Schools Application Service (TMDSAS) is a broad application that can be used to apply to all medical, dental, and veterinary schools in Texas for a single application fee.

To expand their options, some clients want to apply to both TMDSAS and the American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS), but they do not necessarily understand the similarities and differences between them. This guide will break down the difference between the two to ensure you have the best chances of acceptance into medical school.

At a Glance

While both services require a personal statement and activities, TMDSAS and AMCAS differ in their requirements:

TMDSAS

- Personal statement allows for a maximum of 5,000 characters, including spaces.
- Activities list allows for 300 characters, including spaces, for Academic Recognition, Non-Academic Recognition, and Employment.
- Activities list allows for 500 characters, including spaces, for Leadership, Research, Healthcare Related, Community Engagement, and Extracurriculars.
- Includes three most meaningful experiences, each 500 characters, including spaces.
- Includes one required essay (5,000 characters, including spaces) and one optional essay (2,500 characters, including spaces).

AMCAS

- Personal statement allows for a maximum of 5,300 characters, including spaces.
- Activities list allows for 700 characters, including spaces, for each regular activity description.
- Includes three most meaningful experiences, each 1,325 characters, including spaces.
- No optional or required additional essays.

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TMDSAS Medical Application Personal Statement

Similar to AMCAS's personal statement prompt, TMDSAS asks applicants to "explain [their] motivation to seek a career in medicine. [They] are asked to include the value of [their] experiences that prepare [them] to be a physician." The website explicitly asks applicants to spell out all abbreviations and watch for extra spaces, as the 5,000-character limit includes spaces. Some applicants have used the same personal statement for both AMCAS and TMDSAS, and they have had offers from both AMCAS and TMDSAS medical schools. However, because AMCAS offers 300 extra characters, many applicants take the opportunity to expand on the AMCAS personal statement.

TMDSAS Activities List

Unlike AMCAS's activities list, there is no limit to the number of activities TMDSAS applicants can submit. They are categorized as the following:

- Academic Recognition
- Non-Academic Recognition
- Leadership
- Employment
- Research Activities
- Healthcare Activities
- Community Service
- Extracurricular Activities
- Planned Activities (before matriculation)

With limited characters for each regular TMDSAS activity, each activity must be clear and concise. Rather than trying to squeeze in your full range of duties, you only need to describe the most important responsibilities and skills, which will help cut out any clutter.

Most Meaningful Experiences

The TMDSAS Most Meaningful Experiences (MMEs) allow an additional 500 characters on an activity to explain why the experience was meaningful to the applicant. Try to explain the skills and characteristics you learned during this meaningful experience that align with the suggested AMCAS core competencies of medical students.

Other Essays

The other TMDSAS essays are a chance for admissions committees to know more about the applicant's experiences that they have not expanded on in other parts of their application. Though one of these essays is optional, it is strongly recommended that applicants complete both essays.

Required: Personal Characteristics Essay

The TMDSAS personal characteristics essay asks applicants to write about the following:

"A key aspect of holistic review includes the consideration of applicants' attributes within the context of their experiences and academic metrics. Describe any personal qualities, characteristics, and/or lived experiences that could enrich the educational experience of others. 5000 characters, including spaces."

Choose a single topic you have not written about in your TMDSAS personal statement to write about for this essay. The focus should be on the background, experience, talent, event, or hobby that applicants describe in this essay and how this would add to their peers' or patients' experiences. Previous applicants have written about:

- Their unique cultural backgrounds and how this will help patients
- Their love for puzzles, likening medicine to a puzzle
- Climbing as a sport to demonstrate collaboration

Optional But Highly Recommended: Unique Circumstances

The TMDSAS unique circumstances essay asks applicants to write about the following:

"Briefly discuss any unique circumstances or life experiences that are relevant to your application, which have not previously been presented. Optional Essay is limited to 2500 characters, including spaces."

Like the required personal characteristics essay, this is a chance to discuss anything else you have not written about in other parts of your application. Previous applicants have written about:

- How they were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic
- Overcoming personal struggles, such as public speaking
- Adapting to life in a new country

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Additional Essays For DO/Ph.D. And MD/Ph.D. Essays

There are two additional essays if clients wish to apply to DO/Ph.D. and MD/Ph.D. programs. Each essay is limited to 5,000 characters, including spaces, with the following prompts:

"Explain your motivation to seek an MD/Ph.D. or DO/Ph.D. dual. Discuss your research interests and career goals as an applicant to a dual degree program.

Describe your significant research. Include the name and title of your research mentor as well as your contributions to the project. List any publications that have resulted from your work."

Final Thoughts

Understanding the unique application requirements of TMDSAS will help you better prepare your materials and ensure you the greatest chances of acceptance to a Texas medical school.

Work and Activities Writing
Guide – Amy Whitcomb

The Work and Activities section highlights your involvement in paid employment, extracurricular, academic, and other activities by describing your roles and accomplishments. AMCAS, AACOMAS, and TMDSAS applications differ only slightly in their wording and requirements. This guide will discuss everything you will need to know to successfully complete the Work and Activities section.

Information Needed

- Experience type
- Experience name (i.e., your position title)
- Start and end dates
- Total hours
- Organization's name
- Organization's country and city
- Supervisor's contact information (name, title, and phone number or email address)
- Description

Constraints

- Up to 15 activities for AMCAS
    - Up to four instances of the same activity can be combined into a single entry. (This is most common with shadowing, awards, publications, conferences, and hobbies).
    - Reviewers look for quality and duration of activities as much as quantity of activities. Include activities that show your commitment and development over time.
    - AACOMAS does not limit the number of activities entries, but you can list only up to five achievements.
    - TMDSAS does not limit the number of activities entries.

- Character Counts
    - AMCAS
        - allows 700 characters with spaces for each activity and three "Most Meaningful Experiences" (MMEs), which allot another 1,325 characters to explain and reflect.
    - TMDSAS
        - allows 300 characters for three categories, 500 characters with spaces for the remaining categories, and 500 additional characters with spaces for up to three MMEs.
    - AACOMAS
        - divides this section into two: Achievements and Experiences. It allows 600 characters with spaces for each entry. There are no MMEs.

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Experience Types

For each activity, you must choose one of the following categories:

- Paid Employment—Not Military
- Paid Employment—Military
- Community Service/Volunteer (Non-Medical/Non-Clinical)
- Community Service/Volunteer (Medical/Clinical)
- Physician Shadowing/Clinical Observation
- Research/Lab
- Teaching/Tutoring/Teaching Assistant
- Leadership—Not Listed Elsewhere
- Conferences Attended
- Presentations/Posters
- Publications
- Honors/Awards/Recognition
- Extracurricular
- Hobbies
- Other

Advice

- Use details, including specific tasks and quantities.
- Use action verbs. See the included reference sheet for options.
- Do not use formatting like bullet points or bold/italic font. (The application corrupts formatting, which may replace your writing with symbols or unintended errors).
- Consider how each experience was unique on your path. For example:
    - Was this activity the first time you were exposed to something or tried it yourself?
    - Did this activity build on something else in your experiences? How so?
    - Did this activity help you decide a direction or focus? How so?
    - Did you develop a particular skill or perspective from this activity?

Basic Template

- Describe the organization, if necessary.
- Describe your individual role and tasks.
- Describe your impact on the organization and/or its impact on you.

Example (AMCAS)

Read this paragraph closely for specific details, action verbs, and reflection in the Work and Activities writing. This is only one example of how to draft your activities entries. You should write in a style that matches your voice and can describe your activities to complement and reinforce, but not repeat, your personal statement and other application materials.

Description:

As a surgical technician at Albany's New Haven Hospital, I sterilized OR equipment, explained treatment procedures to patients, and prepared them for surgeries. Working with other healthcare professionals before, during, and after procedures showed me the importance of collaboration in creating positive health outcomes. I assisted in various surgeries, from appendectomies to a coronary artery bypass, admiring the surgeon's impressive dexterity as he performed these operations, giving me valuable insight into the role of a surgeon. Interacting with patients and providing them comfort in times of distress was incredibly fulfilling, and I will offer that same compassion to my future patients.

MME:

As I walked into "Katie's" room, I could see her foot tapping anxiously against the tile, tears forming in her eyes. We still had some time before her surgery, so I sat beside her and asked how she was feeling. Her hands trembled as she managed to breathe the word, "Scared." I gently cupped my hand around hers and, noticing her rainbow-painted nails, I asked if she did them herself. "My sister did," she said. I shared with her how my own sister and I used to love designing each other's nails, and her voice suddenly came to life as she excitedly described the decals they used and how much fun they had choosing the colors. For the first time that day, she gave me a small smile as her hands began to steady beneath mine. It felt gratifying to offer patients like Katie the slightest respite from their worries, and when I met with her after her surgery, she gave me a thumbs up and thanked me for being there. My experience with Katie and patients like her have shown me the power of kindness and compassion in medicine, and as a future physician, I will strive to make all patients feel as cared for as Katie.

Structured Freewrite for Most Meaningful Paragraphs

1. What is the stimulant for reflection (for example, an incident, event, idea)?

2. What were your reactions and feelings?

3. What was good and bad about the experience? (It's okay to state your initial judgments here.)

4. What sense can you make of the situation or incident? (Bring in ideas from outside the experience as necessary. What was really going on?)

5. What can be concluded, in a general sense, from this experience?

6. What can be concluded about your specific, unique personal interests or ways of working? (How have you changed?)

7. What are you going to do differently in this type of situation or experience next time? What steps are you going to take based on what you've learned? (How will the impact or transformation carry forward?)

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Final Thoughts

Use these tools and techniques to help make the most out of your Work and Activities section. And remember, it's not enough to simply describe your responsibilities for each activity; highlight your growth by offering reflection on the qualities, experiences, and skills you've gained that will contribute to your success as a medical student and physician.

List of Action Verbs for Resumes & Professional Profiles

Management/ Leadership Skills
administered
analyzed
appointed
approved
assigned
attained
authorized
chaired
considered
consolidated
contracted
controlled
converted
coordinated
decided
delegated
developed
directed
eliminated
emphasized
enforced
enhanced
established
executed
generated
handled headed
hired
hosted
improved
incorporated
increased
initiated
inspected
instituted
led
managed
merged
motivated
organized
originated
overhauled
oversaw
planned
presided
prioritized
produced

recommended
reorganized
replaced
restored
reviewed
scheduled streamlined
strengthened
supervised
terminated

Communication/ People Skills
addressed
advertised
arbitrated
arranged
articulated
authored
clarified
collaborated
communicated
composed
condensed
conferred
consulted
contacted
conveyed
convinced
corresponded
debated
defined
described
developed
directed
discussed drafted
edited
elicited
enlisted
explained
expressed
formulated
furnished
incorporated
influenced
interacted
interpreted
interviewed
involved

joined
judged
lectured
listened
marketed
mediated
moderated
negotiated
observed
outlined
participated
persuaded
presented
promoted
proposed
publicized
reconciled
recruited
referred
reinforced
reported
resolved
responded
solicited
specified
spoke
suggested
summarized
synthesized
translated
wrote

Research Skills
analyzed
clarified
collected compared
conducted
critiqued
detected
determined
diagnosed
evaluated
examined
experimented
explored
extracted
formulated
gathered

identified
inspected
interpreted
interviewed
invented
investigated
located
measured
organized
researched
searched
solved
summarized
surveyed
systematized
tested

Technical Skills
adapted
assembled
built
calculated
computed
conserved
constructed
converted
debugged
designed
determined
developed
engineered
fabricated
fortified
installed
maintained
operated
overhauled
printed
programmed
rectified
regulated
remodeled
repaired
replaced
restored
solved
specialized
standardized

studied
upgraded utilized

Teaching Skills
adapted
advised
clarified
coached
communicated
conducted
coordinated
critiqued
developed
enabled
encouraged
evaluated
explained
facilitated
focused
guided
individualized
informed
instilled
instructed
motivated
persuaded
set goals
simulated
stimulated
taught
tested
trained
transmitted
tutored

List of Action Verbs for Resumes & Professional Profiles

Financial/ Data Skills

administered
adjusted
allocated
analyzed
appraised
assessed
audited
balanced
calculated
computed
conserved
corrected
determined
developed
estimated
forecasted
managed
marketed
measured
planned
programmed
projected
reconciled
reduced
researched
retrieved
creative skills
acted
adapted
began
combined
conceptualized
condensed
created
customized
designed
developed
directed
displayed
drew
entertained
established
fashioned
formulated
founded
illustrated

initiated
instituted
integrated
introduced
invented
modeled
modified
originated
performed
photographed
planned
revised
revitalized
shaped
solved

Helping skills

adapted
advocated
aided
answered
arranged
assessed
assisted
cared for
clarified
coached
collaborated
contributed
cooperated
counseled
demonstrated
diagnosed
educated
encouraged
ensured
expedited
facilitated
familiarize
furthered
guided
helped
insured
intervened
motivated
provided
referred
rehabilitated

presented
resolved
simplified
supplied
supported
volunteered

Organization/ Detail Skills

approved
arranged
cataloged
categorized
charted
classified
coded
collected
compiled
corresponded
distributed
executed
filed
generated
implemented
incorporated
inspected
logged
maintained
monitored
obtained
operated
ordered
organized
prepared
processed
provided
purchased
recorded
registered
reserved
responded
reviewed
routed
scheduled
screened
set up
submitted
supplied

standardized
systematized
updated
validated
verified

More verbs for Accomplishments

achieved
completed
expanded
exceeded
improved
pioneered
reduced (losses)
resolved (issues)
restored
spearheaded
succeeded
surpassed
transformed
won

Writing Common Secondary Prompts – R.J. Lambert

Congratulations on completing and submitting your primary application to medical school! Whether applying to AMCAS, AACOMAS, TMDSAS, or a combination of the three, you will find that nearly every school requests supplemental essays, commonly known as "Secondary Essays" or "Secondaries." In addition to the content of each response, the timeliness of returning them to schools is important. Aim for 2-3 weeks maximum to return a secondary to a school after receiving it, and prioritize returning the schools at the top of your list first.

The purpose of this guide is to help you think through common secondary prompts. However, the specific guidance provided for these common prompts can also be adapted to approach other secondary questions as they arise.

Before You Begin: Think About the Goal

Before planning or writing your secondary essays, it's important to reflect on how they fit into your overall application. Remember that admission committees will already have access to your online application, including your written materials (personal statement and activities/experiences lists). Therefore, the goal of secondary essays is to supplement or expand upon the information you have already submitted in the primary application. Unless specifically asked to do so in a secondary prompt, try to avoid listing and describing activities and experiences in the same way you already did in your personal statement or activities.

The goal is to add new information that strengthens your primary application, rather than repeating yourself. Try to focus on describing different experiences or different aspects of experiences you have already covered in the primary application.

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Dos and Don'ts

Do:

- Directly answer the question or respond to the prompt early in the essay.
- Stay on topic from start to finish.
- Provide specific details or examples rather than generalities.
- Conclude with a final reflection or extension to your future in medicine.
- Try to be unique and compelling to set yourself apart from other applicants.

Don't:

- Repeat yourself or "double dip" across essays for the same school.
- Exaggerate hardships or focus too much on the negative.
- Use informal writing such as bullet lists, abbreviations, shorthand, and contractions.
- Merely repeat information that is already listed on your CV or is otherwise obvious.
- Leave out important information, lie about experiences, or include irrelevant details.

The Basics: Prompt and Length

The most important information you will have for each secondary essay is the **prompts** and the **length**, which will be measured as word or character count.

Prompts

Some secondary prompts are very explicit and easy to understand. Others may be more complicated, containing multiple sentences of background information or even several questions. Issues applicants have with secondaries include not answering all the questions or not staying on topic. I suggest that you copy and paste the prompt for each secondary into a document and then highlight or underline the most important background information or the core part of each question being asked. This will help you start to brainstorm your response and ensure that you stay on topic and answer all the questions embedded in the prompt.

Length

While secondary prompts may be similar across medical schools, it's not uncommon for the length of the essays to have different limits. A standard range for pre-writing responses is 300-500 words, but some schools allow much longer responses, especially if they only have one or two secondary prompts. The length limit of a prompt will determine how detailed you can be or how much ground you can cover. For example, a longer limit may allow you to discuss three examples in depth, whereas a shorter prompt will require you to focus your description on one in-depth example or cover three examples at a more surface level.

Common Prompts

- Any COVID-19 impact or disruptions.
- Your gap year or reapplicant activities.
- Your most meaningful clinical experience or list your clinical exposure.
- A challenge, obstacle, or failure you have overcome.
- Any academic issues (low grades) or other issues in your academic record.
- A conflict you experienced or a time you received criticism.
- A time you advocated for someone or disagreed with a policy or decision.
- How your unique background/experiences add to diversity and inclusion.
- "Why us?" or "Why are you a good fit for our school and values?"
- Experience, skills, or interests in the arts or something outside of medicine.
- Anything not already covered in your application.

The following are suggestions, best practices, and common missteps in approaching these common secondary essay prompts. Remember that two schools may have different questions or prompts that are aiming for the same type of answer, so reflect on what the school is asking and whether a prewritten essay can be adapted for a different (but similar) question at another school.

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Answer the prompt/question in the first sentence or two.

- Adcoms will read secondaries relatively quickly and will look to make sure you are on topic and have answered the question. Directly answering the question up front helps the reader understand all the other information in the response under the overall topic you introduced.

Brainstorm two or three possible answers for each prompt/question.

- Sometimes, the best idea for a secondary essay is the first one that comes to mind. However, there's real value in brainstorming multiple possible answers and examples and then weighing their strength based on: 1) the other questions in that school's secondary prompts, 2) the other content in your primary application, and 3) how unique or compelling the answer may be compared to what the average medical school applicant might write for that prompt.

Try to avoid "double dipping" between secondaries and the primary application.

- Sometimes it's necessary to discuss the same experience in more than one secondary essay for the same school or write about the same meaningful activities from your primary application. However, this risks sounding repetitive and showing only one side of yourself. If part of the goal is to present a well-rounded background and supplement your primary application with new information, then your secondaries will be much stronger if each question for a school highlights a unique aspect of your background and describes it in a different way than you described it in the primary application.

Outline the main points, details, and examples before writing.

- The best way to avoid a winding, confusing, or unorganized secondary response is to outline your ideas first. Having an outline will help ensure the content's in a logical order before writing, which also requires less reorganization during the revision process.

Use a similar approach to the personal statement and activities.

- Many of the same approaches you've used in the primary application written materials apply to secondaries. These include using formal tone, clear wording, concrete details, and logical sentence order. You might even think of approaching secondary essays like the "Most Meaningful/Memorable Experience" part of the activities.

Questions can be divided into three categories, which may help you plan responses:
- Neutral (factual, explaining, listing)
- Positive (highlighting your strengths)
- Negative (how you dealt with something challenging or uncomfortable).
  - For "negative" prompts or questions, be sure to spin the focus to how you overcame the challenge.

Prompt:

Describe any COVID-19 impact or disruptions.

During the last two years, many students were impacted in their preparation or inspiration for medical school by the pandemic. The COVID-impact prompt began as an opportunity to explain the negative impact on premedical preparation, such as shadowing, coursework, research, work experience, or even health in general. As we have all adapted to COVID, the question has evolved to sometimes include an opportunity to reflect on the impact of COVID in your motivation to pursue medical school or to provide equitable care and adapt to changes in the healthcare system. Be sure to read carefully and adjust accordingly.

Things to think about:

- You do not need to list the similar, mundane disruptions everyone has experienced.
- Stick to the facts when describing actual disruptions.
- Consider different aspects: personal, professional, academic, research, etc.
- It's important not to exaggerate or focus on the negative; instead, focus on your solutions.
- If possible, end the response by drawing a lesson that applies to your future in medicine.

Prompt:

Describe your gap year or reapplicant activities.

This secondary takes many forms, but it's common for schools to ask about your current/future activities during a gap year(s) and to ask what you've done to strengthen your application since. Sometimes a school will ask you both questions as different prompts with separate essays. A shorter prompt will typically ask for a CV-like listing of activities or even a "timeline" that simply establishes a chronology of activities you've been involved in, perhaps updating each activity in a single sentence. Sometimes, however, there will be room to reflect briefly (maybe one sentence per each new activity) about how this makes you a stronger applicant or prepares you for medicine.

Adcoms want to see:

- that you are continuing to stay busy and productive during a gap year.
- what new things you are doing or have done to improve your application.
- that you've continued or completed activities that you started before.
- that you have a well-rounded background that includes elements of being a physician, such as clinical, research/academics, teaching, service, and leadership.

Prompt:

What is your most meaningful clinical experience or list your clinical exposure?

Since medicine is ultimately a clinical field, it's not uncommon for schools to ask about your clinical exposure and most meaningful experience. The main things to remember here are that you are not simply repeating information from your personal statement or activities. It's important to find new details, examples, or nuances in the secondary essays.

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Things to think about:

- Set yourself apart from other applicants by not going for the most obvious answer.

- Be sure to include a reflection on what exactly made it meaningful to you.

- You can also discuss what related experiences or goals came out of that experience, or connect this meaningful experience to your passion and interest in medicine.

Prompt:

Describe a challenge, obstacle, or failure you have overcome.

The "challenge" or "failure" prompt is one of the most common secondary questions across schools. Medical school is notoriously difficult, and one of the best qualities for a medical student is to have the work ethic and attitude to overcome initial setbacks. Therefore, the point of this question is for you to demonstrate to readers that you have grit, perseverance, and problem-solving abilities to overcome challenges.

Things to think about:

- Avoid exaggerating hardship or focusing too much on the challenge or failure.

- Briefly establish the context or details of the setback, and then discuss the solution.

- Describe the specific approach, strategy, steps, or mindset you used to overcome it.

- Remember to apply this to medical school and medicine: How will this approach be useful?

Prompt:

Describe any academic red flags (e.g., low grades) or other issues on your record.

Various versions of this secondary invite you to explain any potential blips or red flags in your academic record. Much like the "challenge" or "failure" prompt above, the goal is to briefly establish the context or facts of the situation, to take accountability, and then to move on to how you addressed and overcame it.

Things to think about:

- Identify why the academic issue or other red flag occurred. Be reflective.
- Take full responsibility for your role and do not make excuses or minimize it.
- Explain what efforts you made to address the issue and how it was resolved.
- Reflect on the lessons you learned and how you apply them now and in the future.
- If it seems relevant, you can affirm that you will do better in med school.

Prompt:

Describe a conflict you experienced or a time you received criticism.

Medical students are highly intelligent, highly motivated, and highly successful. However, an important aspect of being a medical student is remaining humble, taking direction, and being teachable. Thus, one of the common prompts for secondary essays is to describe how you handled a conflict or received criticism. Like all other "negative-toned" prompts, the goal is to briefly establish the facts of the situation, and then spend most of your time focusing on how you responded, overcame it, improved upon it, and remain open and willing to incorporate feedback or revise your approach to become better.

Things to think about:

- While prompts often do not state it, it's best if the conflict is professional or academic, not personal.
- It's important to not portray yourself in a bad light or focus on a red flag.
- The goal is to highlight your openness to criticism and responsiveness.
- Ideally, think if there's a step-by-step process you can describe for how you responded. This shows a strategic, thoughtful, and intentional response.

Prompt:

Describe a time when you advocated for someone or disagreed with a policy or decision.

These are two different prompts (advocated or spoke up about an unethical situation) that share the same idea: as a physician, you need to be a leader who stands up for what is right and advocate for the medical care your patients need. It touches both on leadership and on an ethical compass that you know the right thing to do and advocate for it.

Things to think about:

- Strike a tone that is responsible and sensitive rather than self-righteous or bossy.

- Be careful wading into hot topics that may be too dicey or turn some readers off.

- This does not have to be a clinical example and may be less ethically dicey if you stay out of clinical examples. Sometimes when a medical student advocates for or points out an unethical clinical situation, it can sound presumptuous or like they are in over their head.

Prompt:

Discuss how your unique background and/or experiences add to diversity and inclusion.

One of the most common secondary prompts relates to diversity. Over time, as our views and definitions of "diversity" have broadened, the prompts have broadened to include several possible responses related to your personal background and identity as well as your beliefs about diversity or your ability to work with others who are diverse.

Do you have:

- a diverse background? This can include family of origin, SES, race, gender/sexual identity, geography/rurality, nationality, language, culture, or others.

- unique experiences from growing up, work, or school that opened your mind?

- unique skills and talents that will make you work well with others?

- a unique perspective or diversity of thought through education or experience?

- a demonstrated commitment to diversity (advocacy, leadership, volunteering)?

- a demonstrated contribution to diversity (research, awards, recognition)?

Prompt:

Why are you a good fit for our school and values?

Medical schools understand that most applicants are applying to many schools and that they will mostly be using the same secondary essays to reply to each school's prompts. To mitigate this and weed out applicants who are less sincerely interested, many schools have a "Why us?" question, wherein they ask you to make the case for why you are a good fit, what you like about their program, and what you plan to take part in or contribute to while there. This is one of the harder common prompts because the best answer to this prompt is one that is entirely original and specific to the school asking it. Unlike the regular secondary approach of focusing on your background and experiences, the "Why us?" secondary is about pointing out that you have thoroughly researched them and really think they're a good fit. Most of the paragraph should be framed in terms of what they offer and what you will take advantage of/benefit from there. Be sure to also include how your past experiences will help you contribute to their offerings.

Do you have:

- any special connections to the school (family, hometown, education, professional contacts)?
- any research, volunteering, organizational, or other opportunities you like?

Prompt:

Describe your experience, skills, or interests in the arts or something outside of medicine.

This is not the most common secondary question, but if they ask it, they are asking to understand you as a whole person, your personality, and your interests as they transcend medicine. Remember that most medical school applicants have similarly impressive backgrounds and have completed premedical preparation in similar areas, such as clinical, academic, research, volunteering, and leadership. What does not always come through in the primary application is what makes you a unique or interesting person outside of these premedical activities. This is your chance to show that you are a well-rounded applicant.

Things to think about:

- Possible topics worth mentioning include hobbies, sports, skills, and passions.
- Depending on the prompt, they may be asking for multiple examples or just one main example.
- Consider reflecting on how the interest or skill began and how you developed it over time.
- Mention any memorable or notable achievements or contributions in that area.
- End by connecting the skill, mindset, or interest to your future approach to medicine.

Prompt:

Is there anything not covered in your application that you'd like to discuss?

Some schools will give you a final prompt that allows you to describe any additional information that has not been covered but may be relevant to your application. Note that this is a truly optional question and does not need to be answered simply to fill space.

One use for this essay can be an illness, low-SES, rurality, or other childhood adversity. If a school asks this question but does not have a "Why us?" prompt, then you can use the open-ended additional information prompt to make the case for your fit at their school. Similarly, if a school did not give you a place to explain a low grade or other red flag on your academic record, then you can use the open-ended question to address these issues.

Things to think about:

- This is not a place to rehash and overlap on other parts of your application.
- Avoid lecturing or philosophizing on your views about medicine.
- Consider a unique experience that is worth mentioning for the first time.
- Think about any serious adversity impacting the competitiveness of your application.

Final Thoughts

There is no right way or wrong way to write a secondary response, and no two applicants will have the same answer because they are deeper reflections and descriptions about what makes you unique as an applicant.

Remember to keep the spotlight on you, try to stay positive and highlight your strengths rather than focusing too much on the negative, and try to present a well-rounded set of essays for each school without too much overlap between responses.

I'm So (Not) Diverse!
Navigating Diversity Themes Within Secondaries – Melissa Muth Martinez

Discussions surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are becoming increasingly prominent in educational spaces. Now, more than ever, medical schools are working to ensure that the students walking their halls represent the diverse identities, experiences, and challenges found in broader U.S. society, which includes those who have historically been on the margins. However, in the context of unclear definitions and, conversely, potent delineations surrounding themes of diversity, many clients struggle to describe their backgrounds and experiences. Furthermore, they struggle to balance the desire to craft humble, captivating, and unique responses to secondaries with the conventional diversity-centered questions and the often unwritten expectations of admissions committees. But don't fret! Here are some tips on how to most effectively respond to diversity-themed secondary prompts.

Best Practices

Respond to the prompt and only the prompt.

- Some schools are starting to target specific issues related to DEI in their questions for applicants; if this is the case, be sure to respond to the elements clearly being addressed.

Consider diversity as something defined not only by race.

- Remember that one person alone cannot be considered diverse. An individual will have multiple identities, but diversity discussions are more centered around the ways in which individual differences make up a group that is reflective of varying identities, needs, perspectives, and experiences.

- Given historical and social contexts, the sphere of DEI work in the United States is often centered around discussions of race, with perhaps a slightly smaller but still sizable focus on ethnicity and culture. While you will want to adhere to each specific secondary prompt's wording, oftentimes, there's ample room for a response that focuses on other elements of diversity, including:

  - Socioeconomics
  - Religion
  - Diverse abilities
  - Intercultural experiences/exposures
  - Health challenges
  - Leadership or responsibility in family/community
  - Grief and trauma (e.g., loss, abuse, addiction, divorce)
  - Some medical schools acknowledge this, as is evident in the following prompt from a previous year's cycle:

"Diversity means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. Describe what uniqueness you would bring to our institution. We are proud to already have a medical school rich in cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity. What values, skills, talents, and life experiences would you add to our culture?"

Remember that identity is the personality and character of each person and is individually defined.

- Sometimes applicants feel that checking a diversity box is enough, but answers that explain the "why" behind a chosen element of diversity stand out most.

- Consider the whole of you and what/who has shaped your worldview or perspective. Every statement should be supported with evidence.

- Dig deep as it relates to your identity and how you would define yourself as an individual, and use this to guide your writing. Sometimes embracing vulnerability is key here.

Be thoughtful with your use of terminology, especially buzzwords or vernacular, that is deemed insensitive and inappropriate.

- Consider alternatives for phrases such as "vulnerable," "at risk," "in need," and "third world." These terms can be considered obscure, generalizing, or dehumanizing; they often perpetuate discrimination and stereotyping, positioning the group being labeled as such as the one to be blamed or as being defined by its struggles. For example, instead of saying "disadvantaged youth," you might say "youth who have not received adequate support (such as in school or health care)."

- If you are speaking about a group that is more likely to contract COVID-19, for example, identify the specific population you are discussing rather than using terminology as sweeping and unpersonalized as "vulnerable population."

- Articulate the challenges of the group, and be sure to describe the root causes of a particular problem. For example, if you are writing about Muslim refugee communities having limited healthcare access, discuss the why behind this issue (such as structural racism or religious intolerance).

- If using buzzwords, like "equity" or "justice," be sure to personalize them; do not just throw around "trendy lingo" without demonstrating a clear understanding of what a term means and why it's important.

Share difficult circumstances and tragedies—even if you feel you might be labeled as a "sob story"—but be careful not to present yourself as a victim.

- Put lessons at the center of your writing; do not disclose personal information without providing context for a bigger takeaway that, of course, speaks to the question at hand.

- Be careful with tokenization. While we each belong to specific communities, our unique lived experiences do not speak for those of everyone else.

Consider whether what you are writing about is actually unique. If it's not, it's time to go back to the drawing board.

- Large numbers of students apply to medical school, which means admissions committees are inundated with materials to read. Stand out by making sure what you are sharing is unique. Having trouble? Ask yourself the following:

  - What makes my observations unique? When asking ourselves this question, we're forced to dig deeper, and we often generate ideas that are out of the norm.

  - Am I using a lot of clichés in my writing? Clichés are often used in writing when we have not taken the time to contextualize something for ourselves. In turn, we are not authentically and sincerely sharing our experiences and ideas.

  - Have I given myself the space to track all the ideas or thoughts I have on a given day? Seemingly monotonous moments in our daily lives can actually ignite profound thoughts and ideas. Have a journal or notepad on your phone handy so you can collect and reflect on them later; random notes often yield superb writing material!

Discuss volunteer experiences, but do not simply equate diversity stories with tales of "saving" members of one population or another.

- Volunteer experiences allow us to step outside ourselves and learn more about others, making them suitable content for secondaries in many cases. But regardless of your identity, be careful not to present yourself as a "savior." A good way to avoid this is to center your experience on "working" with a community, as opposed to "helping" them. This makes you and the community partners in solving some of the issues the community faces. In addition, it is always great to learn more about how communities have managed issues over time. You are not the first one to arrive and help address these issues and, more often than not, these communities have amassed great knowledge that can help you and your colleagues in your work!

Speak as a participant, not as a bystander.

- Focusing on observations and other passive experiences do not give the reader insight about what you've learned, how you've contributed, or how you've prepared for life as a medical student and future doctor. For example, did you see a doctor help a patient who could not afford her procedure, or did you work alongside the doctor as she helped her? Seeing is good, but doing is better.

Prompt:

In the medical profession, you will be exposed to students, faculty, colleagues, and patients of various cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds. How has your involvement with diverse populations prepared you for potentially four years in Elk Grove, the greater Sacramento area, and the rest of the Central Valley?

Considerations:

- "Involvement" is the key word in this prompt, so be sure to speak to activities you've done instead of actions you've only observed.

- Sometimes applicants write about cultural differences they've observed, but if you choose to go this route, consider going beyond superficial differences, such as those related to food and hand gestures, and be sure to discuss how an observation has impacted you, or perhaps show deeper reflection by touching upon the history of a cultural difference.

- When discussing diverse cultures, people, or experiences, sometimes applicants write about experiences as varied as religion, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomics, culture, and personal circumstances all at once. However, focusing on too much in one short essay can become distracting and even seem overly eager. Remember, diversity is a broad term, and while our identities and perspectives are intersectional in nature, having a focused, centralized message is important for the sake of clarity and brevity.

- Avoid giving lip service; you do not want to come across as "preachy."

- When talking about a specific group, you can appear less distant from that group by discussing specific moments of personal learning while engaging with that group.

Prompt:

Have you experienced any hardship or adversity, personally or professionally?

Considerations:

- Consider the use of generalities for this prompt. Sometimes applicants discuss "being a minority," for example, without diving deeper and defining what this means within the context of their own lives. What about this experience is actually meaningful? What does this experience look like? To say you are a "minority" without any context could yield an insensitive, boring, and conventional narrative.

- It can be easy to forget about the context at hand. While the secondary is asking about a hardship, it's important to not get wrapped up in speaking endlessly about this without remembering why the question is being asked in the first place. As such, be sure to connect what you write about to your interest in becoming a physician.

- Discussing a hardship without articulating a lesson or something you gained from it might not be well-received by some members of the admissions committee. The key is to focus on the positive by discussing how a hardship made you more resilient, how it altered your perspective, or how it helped shape your identity.

Prompt:

The values of the UCR SOM are integrity, innovation, inclusion, excellence, accountability and respect. Please choose one of the values and tell us how you have personally experienced it or have seen it emulated in a clinical setting.

Considerations:

- It's important to write with heart and passion, and it's necessary to effectively market yourself as a promising medical student, but humility is vital. Keeping this in mind can help prevent you from sounding "preachy" or arrogant.

- Bringing up values can sometimes lead to sweeping generalizations and assertions about one's beliefs, but this will leave readers asking: Where did you gain these perspectives? Be sure to provide context about where you gained specific thoughts and ideas.

Prompt:

What makes you a unique individual? What challenges have you faced? How will these factors help you contribute to the diversity of the student body at [insert school name here]?

Considerations:

- For this question, applicants often include too much about themselves in one short response. Focusing on one or two aspects of your identity and including specific examples can help prevent the reader from becoming distracted or confused.

- Applicants often discuss topics like moving or their transnational backgrounds, among other things. While moving regularly or living abroad has considerable challenges, applicants should be sure to highlight any privileges or important lessons gained from these experiences.

Prompt:

This should be a true autobiographical statement. Topics to be included are family, childhood, primary and secondary school years, undergraduate years, and, if applicable, what you've done since completing your bachelor's degree. You should also discuss the motivational factors which led you to a career in medicine, including any disadvantages or obstacles which might put your accomplishments into context. A repeat of your AMCAS statement will not be acceptable.

Considerations:

- Similar to the personal statement, this should be all about you and should speak to your interest in medicine, but there does not need to be a profound message or theme tying everything together.

- Incorporate various elements of your identity that you have not already addressed in your personal statement.

- Outline important aspects of your life chronologically and simplistically; do not worry as much about creativity.

Final Thoughts

Perfect applications do not exist, partially because you never know who will be reviewing your application, what their day looks like, or who the other applicants are. This makes it difficult to say that the best practices discussed above are the key to medical school admission. However, now more than ever medical schools are seeking well-rounded candidates who reflect the myriad identities, experiences, and perspectives of all the communities that rely on the U.S. healthcare system. As such, the secondary responses that stand out in a sea of applications are thoughtful, inclusive, moving, humble, and pointed, and most importantly, authentic. So, be genuine, and do not forget to own the uniqueness of your identity when writing your secondaries.

Thank-You
Letters – Hillary Weiss

Writing a thank-you letter is an excellent way to express your gratitude for the opportunity to interview and to remind interviewers or the admissions officers of your candidacy. Whether your medical school interview was one-on-one or a multiple mini-interview (MMI), it is recommended for you to send a thank you.

Before the Interview

It's important to prepare to write a thank-you letter before you complete the interview itself. You will need some key information to create an effective thank-you letter:

- Make sure to collect the contact information of your interviewer(s) or the admissions officers. You can ask the interviewer(s) at the end of the interview if you do not have their email address(es). Alternatively, you can often find this information on the school's website.

- Have a notebook and writing utensil near you to write down notes during and after your interview. You will want to mention specific conversation points to personalize your letter. If you are too nervous during the interview, simply wait until after your interview to write down what you remember.

A Thank-You Letter and Its Parameters

After your interview, you will want to begin drafting your thank-you letter as soon as possible. As you write, keep the following in mind:

- A thank-you letter should be no more than 250 words; the recipient should be able to read this letter quickly. Brevity is key!

- The email subject line should be straightforward, such as "Thank You."

- A thank-you letter's purpose is to express your appreciation for their time and knowledge. Ask yourself, "What did I learn by interacting with these individuals?"

- Edit your letter and have someone read it before you submit it.

- Try to send the letter within 24 hours after your interview.

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Structuring a Thank-You Letter

Utilize the following structure when drafting your letter:

The greeting:

● Include a formal greeting (such as "Dear Dr. X").

The body:

The body of your letter should be succinct, organized, and include the following:

● Mention when your interview was and thank them for their time.

● Explain one or two things you learned through the interview. It should be something positive and relevant to the interviewer to help them remember you. One thing you learned could be a bit less formal if you had something in common with the interviewer (a hobby, hometown/home state, etc.). However, you will want to include something about the school as well.

● Briefly explain why the knowledge you learned during your interview makes you a good fit for this medical school. You could draw upon your past experiences here.

● Briefly add anything you forgot to mention during your interview, if applicable.

The closing:

● Thank them again and/or reiterate your interest in their school.

● Offer to provide them with any supplementary information. Volunteering to meet their requirements will show the school that you are truly interested.

● Finish with "Sincerely," "Regards," or another formal closing and your name.

Sample Thank-You Letter

Dear Dr. Neil,

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me this morning. It was a pleasure speaking with you to learn more about ABC School of Medicine's commitment to training health care leaders through the school's Community Health Initiative. In addition, I am impressed by the robust research opportunities ABC School offers to medical students and would be honored to participate.

My keen interest in research makes ABC's program especially appealing. With experience researching hematologic malignancies at XYZ University's Biology Lab, I am confident I can make valuable contributions to your program.

Thank you again for this incredible opportunity. Please let me know if I can provide you with additional information to help you evaluate my candidacy.

Best regards,

Jane Smith

Sending a thank-you letter following an interview not only shows you appreciate the interviewer's time but also reminds them of your candidacy and can help leave a good lasting impression.

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The Must-Knows of Medical
School Letters – Darlene Holt

Understanding the process behind medical school letters can be confusing when it comes to when and who to send them to. Below are some useful must-knows of medical school letters to help orient you during this often stressful time.

Update Letters

Who to send to:
Schools you have applied to but haven't heard from

Purpose:
To provide updates on recent activities not included in your primary or secondary applications

When to send:
Six to ten weeks after submitting your application

Letters of Interest

Who to send to:
Schools you'd be the best fit for but haven't heard from

Purpose:
To provide updates (if applicable) and show your continued interest in a school's program

When to send:
After update letters have been sent, and you still have not heard back

Letters of Intent

Who to send to:
Only your top-choice school

Purpose:
To provide updates (if applicable) and let a single school know you will attend if accepted

When to send:
After completing interviews and selecting your number one school

Other Must-Knows

- Letters should be formatted in **business letter format**, with a heading that includes the contact person's name, position, school, and address, along with the current date.

- **Avoid generic contacts** if possible (e.g., "To Whom It May Concern"). Do some research to find the best contact and address your letter to them to show schools you care enough to research the people reviewing your application. If a contact cannot be found, then "Dear XYZ School of Medicine's Admissions Committee" should suffice.

- Ideally, letters should be no more than **one page, single-spaced.**

- **Not all schools accept letters**. Those who cannot will usually state it on their admissions page, secondary portals, or the FAQ page of their website, so be sure to do some research beforehand.

- Schools have individual policies on how to submit letters, such as by email or through secondary portals. You may have to paste them directly in a textbox for secondary portals, or you can add them as an attachment via email (upload as a PDF to ensure your format stays intact).

- **Do not send too many letters to a single school**. Some will indicate a limit of how many they accept per applicant; however, if it's not clear, send no more than two or three and submit them several months apart.

- **Be confident yet humble** when discussing your achievements, and be sure to avoid exaggerating their importance.

- It's essential that you only send a letter of intent to **one** school. Sending to multiple schools is dishonest and can hurt your chances of acceptance as medical schools communicate often with one another.

Final Thoughts

Keep in mind that patience is key as you determine the best time to send out your letters, but by following these guidelines, you are sure to catch the attention of admissions committees to get you even closer to that well-deserved acceptance.

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Update Letters, Letters of
Interest, and Letters of Intent
– Darlene Holt

After surviving the stress-inducing process of the primary application, secondaries, and interviews, medical school applicants experience a new type of stress: waiting. It can take months to hear back from schools to which you've applied, and waiting for that acceptance letter from your top-choice can be especially grueling. As admissions committees pore over tens of thousands of applications, it's important to remind them why YOU would be an ideal candidate for their program. That's where letters come in.

Three types of letters can help "seal the deal" on your acceptance: update letters, letters of interest, and letters of intent.

Update Letters

Update letters are an applicant's way of nudging medical schools to remind them you would be a great fit for their school. You should include any updates about your professional achievements since submitting your primary and secondary applications while connecting these activities to the school's overall mission. Be sure to discuss new positions, research projects, honors, publications, volunteer work, or any progress updates regarding your current professional activities. Aim for no more than half a page in length, and be sure to exude confidence (yet humility!) when discussing your achievements.

Sample update letter

Dear Dean Williams:

My name is Jane Smith, and I am a current applicant of ABC School of Medicine. I am writing to provide an update to my medical school application for Fall 2023.

Since submitting my application, I presented my work on microRNA and HIV at the XYZ Undergraduate Symposium for Scholarly Work, earning third place in the Life Sciences category out of over fifty presenters:

[Citation of presentation in APA format]

I have also begun volunteering at ABC Food Bank, where I have made meaningful connections with Philadelphia residents through delivering groceries to families facing financial hardships. This experience has increased my sense of humility, instilling in me a newfound passion for aiding populations experiencing poverty.

Additionally, I have begun developing a mobile application with multiple students that tracks migraine triggers in individuals. I intend to utilize this information to help identify causes of patients' migraines with the goal of finding individualized treatment. The development of this technology has enhanced my collaboration skills and fostered my creativity, traits that will serve me well as a physician.

Thank you for your continued interest in my candidacy at ABC School of Medicine. I greatly appreciate your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jane Smith
AMCAS ID: 12345678

Letters of Interest

While update letters provide updates and highlight your personal growth, letters of interest (as well as letters of intent) will update schools on your recent activities (if applicable) AND reaffirm your interest in their programs. Remember, it's not only about how the school is a good fit for you but also how you are a good fit for them. In other words, how will your background and experiences contribute to the school's culture and offerings? Be sure to emphasize what you appreciate about the school's programs and show enthusiasm for wanting to attend.

Sample letter of interest:

Dear Dean Williams:

My name is Jane Smith, and I am a current applicant of ABC School of Medicine. Thank you for your continued consideration of my application by offering me a place on the waitlist. I greatly appreciated the opportunity to interview with Dr. Danika Katzen on December 12th to learn more about ABC's abundant offerings and opportunities. I would like to express my continued interest in your school and update you on my recent activities.

Through extensive research and speaking with ABC alumni, I discovered ABC's unique collaborative and inclusive culture. XYZ College provided me with a similar environment, giving me ample opportunities to work with peers and faculty. Learning in this setting exposed me to multiple, diverse perspectives and prepared me to take on challenging assignments and responsibilities, such as my senior research project, where I collaborated with fellow students to achieve optimal results. Moreover, my experience playing college water polo, in which I collaborated with and supported my team as captain, will further aid me in contributing to ABC School of Medicine's culture.

In addition, the opportunity to learn and practice clinical skills in Philadelphia excites me. My interest in surgery has led me to shadow Dr. Lee Nole, a cardiac surgeon, whom I have observed and assisted with multiple coronary artery bypasses and valve repairs. Rotations at ABC's Penn Hospital would further increase my exposure to the city's diverse patient population. Observing and treating patients from a variety of backgrounds would provide me with a phenomenal opportunity to better understand health disparities of specific populations in Philadelphia.

ABC School of Medicine is an outstanding institution that I would be honored to attend. I appreciate the time and effort that you and the admissions team have spent reviewing my application, and thank you for your continued consideration.

Sincerely,

Jane Smith
AMCAS ID: 12345678

Letters of Intent

Like letters of interest, letters of intent should emphasize your interest in and appreciation of the school's culture and offerings. The difference here is your level of commitment. This letter should only be sent to your top-choice school, underscoring your commitment to attend should you be accepted. Let's look at the same letter with a few key additions highlighted in orange.

Sample letter of intent:

Dear Dean Williams:

My name is Jane Smith, and I am a current applicant of ABC School of Medicine. Thank you for your continued consideration of my application by offering me a place on the waitlist. I greatly appreciated the opportunity to interview with Dr. Danika Katzen on December 12th to learn more about ABC's abundant offerings and opportunities. I am writing to express that ABC School of Medicine is my top-choice medical school, and I will undoubtedly attend if accepted.

Through extensive research and speaking with ABC alumni, I discovered ABC's unique collaborative and inclusive culture. XYZ College provided me with a similar environment, giving me ample opportunities to work with peers and faculty. Learning in this setting exposed me to multiple, diverse perspectives and prepared me to take on challenging assignments and responsibilities, such as my senior research project, where I collaborated with fellow students to achieve optimal results. Moreover, my experience playing college water polo, in which I collaborated with and supported my team as captain, will further aid me in contributing to ABC School of Medicine's culture.

In addition, the opportunity to learn and practice clinical skills in Philadelphia excites me. My interest in surgery has led me to shadow Dr. Lee Nole, a cardiac surgeon, whom I have observed and assisted with multiple coronary artery bypasses and valve repairs. Rotations at ABC's Penn Hospital would further increase my exposure to the city's diverse patient population. Observing and treating patients from a variety of backgrounds would provide me with a phenomenal opportunity to better understand health disparities of specific populations in Philadelphia.

ABC School of Medicine is an outstanding institution that I would be honored to attend. I appreciate the time and effort that you and the admissions team have spent reviewing my application, and thank you for your continued consideration. I strive to become a physician that ABC will be proud to call its own, and if admitted, I will accept without hesitation.

Sincerely,

Jane Smith
AMCAS ID: 12345678

MEDSCHOOLCOACH

Reminding schools of your candidacy can be effective during the stressful waiting process and could get you one step closer to attending your dream school.

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helping you achieve your medical school dreams

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