

Writing a winning personal statement

By Jeanette L. Calli

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Your personal statement is an important tool for selling yourself in the residency application process. Since it's the only part of the application you have complete control over, it's your voice and your chance to give insight into who you are beyond test scores, clerkship grades, and medical school activities. Your personal statement should show you know something about, have a commitment to, and are a good match with the specialty you've chosen. It's how interviewers meet you before the interview process. And while a good personal statement won't earn you the training spot, a bad one can torpedo your candidacy.

How do you write a high-quality personal statement? Start with the three main topic areas generally addressed in a personal statement:

- Why did you choose your specialty?
- What are looking for in a residency program?
- What are your future goals in the specialty and/or in medicine?

As you discuss them, describe interests or influential experiences that help the reader understand your enthusiasm. Saying you love kids, while hopefully true, should be one of several — not your only — reason for pursuing pediatrics. Elaborate on skills, qualities, and strengths that make you well-suited to the field and a potential asset to their program. Write about a clinical activity, research project, or volunteer commitment that helped you develop skills valued in your specialty, or clarify your career goals. Your personal statement is a chance to highlight what makes you unique and should provide concrete examples that pertain to your life, goals, and experiences.

While there's no need to tailor your personal statement to each specific program, you should adapt it to reflect your residency choice. For example, if you're applying to advanced programs, modify your personal statement for preliminary or transitional programs explaining what you hope to gain through preliminary year training. If you're looking for specific experiences such as a research track, ensure the programs receiving your personal statement offer those experiences. You can direct different statements to different programs through the [Electronic Residency Application Service® \(ERAS®\)](#), so you might create a version of your statement that mentions your research interests and another version without a research emphasis.

Your statement can also be used to explain gaps in education, academic difficulties, or unusual circumstances — often red flags for program directors. And the personal statement can help provide context and communicate lessons learned, especially if the situation can be explained positively. Consult with your student affairs office for specific guidance on your situation and whether to address it.

Your statement should reflect your personality, but should not be an example of your creative writing. Gimmicky statements frequently fall flat, and you'll be remembered for the wrong reasons. Interviewers seek coherent ideas conveyed clearly that explain who you are. Use a theme or otherwise organize your content so the concepts flow. Check with your student affairs office for sample personal statements you can review for ideas.

Personal Statement Do's and Don'ts

Do

- start early
- ask a physician in your specialty to review it
- limit to one page
- vary your sentence structure
- proofread your work carefully, especially for grammar and spelling errors

Don't

- underestimate the importance of your personal statement

- begin every sentence with “I”
- rehash the content of your CV or why you want to be a doctor
- plagiarize
- focus too much on your fellowship interest

Personal statements can be difficult to write, and many writers of your letters of recommendation will want a copy, so start early. Strong statements require several drafts and reviews by multiple people. Ask advisors, student affairs staff, and good writers to proofread your statement for content, clarity, flow, grammar, and spelling. The first draft may be tough, but refine the content, get feedback, and polish your prose to produce a winning personal statement.

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Jeanette has a master’s degree in higher education with a specialty in career development counseling. She has been working with medical schools and students on career planning and specialty choice for 11 years and is primarily responsible for developing CiM content, day-to-day management of the program, and training faculty how to effectively advise medical students.