

Hints and Tips for Writing a Letter of Motivation

Master's Program in Molecular Medicine
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Opening remarks

The letter of motivation is **one of the most important parts** of your entire application. It plays a decisive role in determining if you will be accepted or not. Therefore we highly encourage you to read this document very carefully. It contains the hints and tips we in the program have collected over the years and after reading many, many essays. In our experience we have seen that many applicants with otherwise outstanding records were not accepted to our program because their letters of motivation were inadequate. In this document we describe the typical problems and deficiencies in these essays and give you concrete examples showing the do's and don'ts. We hope you find our suggestions helpful, not only for your application to this program, but also for other documents you may need to write in the future.

Why is the letter of motivation so crucial to the overall application?

If you are a good student, with good grades in a field related to molecular medicine, and have already obtained some research experience, then most likely your application will make it to the last round of evaluations. By the time your application makes it this far your chances of being accepted to our program will depend largely your letter of motivation. The reason the letter becomes so important at this stage is that it enables the admissions committee to **distinguish between those excellent students who will no doubt go on to succeed in science**, and those who will be **outstanding**. Obviously, our admissions committee seeks the latter and the letter of motivation **usually marks this difference**.

What is the difference between an excellent student and an outstanding one?

The excellent students **possess the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience** to participate and even excel in our program. They often stand out because they are unusually **ambitious, confident, and goal oriented**. The outstanding students, whose backgrounds are generally also impressive, may not always appear to be so **dedicated**. However, these students, in the way they describe their interests, experiences, and motivation, **indicate a degree of creativity and intellectual integrity** that is missing from the otherwise top students. The content of their essays **reflect a deep enthusiasm** not so much for achieving success in the profession (though sometimes that too) as for science itself and engagement in the scientific process.

In the picture they paint of themselves, **their curiosity dazzles**. The words and phrases they choose demonstrate creativity and an **innate ability to think outside the box**. If you are such a student, or aim to be, then it behooves you to do your best to show us these characteristics in your letter of motivation.

How do I show that I am an outstanding student?

The quick and dirty answer to this question is very simple. Show, don't tell. You will read these words repeatedly in this document. They hold true not just when it comes to writing letters of motivation, but for writing just about anything. For some people this command extends to an entire life strategy or philosophy in and of itself. But for now, let us stick to the more practical aspects of writing your letter of motivation.

An important corollary follows from the general suggestion, "Show, don't tell" and it certainly applies here. A good letter of motivation depends **not only on WHAT you write, but HOW you write it**. Keep this corollary in mind as you read through the rest of this document, and as you write your own essay (or anything else for that matter). A quick example; anyone can write "I am highly motivated to study molecular medicine." In fact, that sentence probably appears in about 50% of all the essays we receive. It shows up so often that has become a meaningless cliché at this point. And while it may be true for you, and is an important point to get across, if you write it like that you are **unlikely to be accepted**. Thus, you need to consider carefully **HOW you can express this statement so that you SHOW you are motivated**, rather than just TELLING us you are.

Specific Directions; **Describe your Background**

Any letter of motivation should include a description of your background. At first glance this requirement may appear unnecessary since the application form requires that you include background information already. But that information comes across only as **one-dimensional facts; your grades, what classes you took, where you studied**. These facts are, of course, vitally important, but they tell us **little about you as a person**. When you describe your background in your own words, you finally have an opportunity to show us who you are by HOW you describe your experiences.

Are you a machine?

"I took general and organic chemistry. These were excellent classes. I enjoyed them so much I decided to major in chemistry."

Are you a **poet**?

"I felt the connections between the molecules, the types of different bonds, as trembling vibrations awaiting the pondering thrills of electronic exchanges."

Are you a bureaucrat?

“After completing the required courses in chemistry and biology I went on to fulfill the more extensive requirements for a degree in molecular medicine. I graduated with honors and was ranked 7th in my class.”

Think about how you could describe the classes you took which are relevant to our program in such a way that you come across as an enthusiastic, curious, driven **scientist**. To help you here, you may want to consider **what exactly it was about your favorite classes that you liked**. Was there something about the information presented in those classes which you found particularly intriguing? Mystifying? Fascinating? Perplexing? If so, how exactly did this reaction manifest itself in you? Did you find yourself staying up all night to read your text books? Or talking non-stop about genetic mutations to your mother? The more you can delve into your own positive experiences of enjoying science, the more your unique personality will show through. By **showing** us these details you are also avoiding **telling** us in a boring way that you really like science. But watch out! You must be VERY honest in your descriptions. As soon as you start to exaggerate, you will sound ridiculous. **Only if you remain brutally honest will you come across as seriously enthusiastic.**

The First Draft

When you **first start writing your letter of motivation, allow yourself to go crazy**. Write absolutely ANYTHING and EVERYTHING that comes to your mind as you think about all the ways you liked (and maybe also disliked) your experiences with science so far. Take it to an extreme; describe the looks, feel, taste, sound, and even smell of your feelings and experiences. These descriptions will often supply you with excellent, and very unique, verbs and adjectives that you can use later in a more polished version. For example, every time you find yourself writing one of those cliché sentences like “I really loved my course in biochemistry,” you can replace it with sentences like “I found the dynamic/sleek/intricate/raw interactions involved in DNA transcription burned/sizzled/chimed/ in my imagination.” Okay, that might be over-doing it a bit, but you get the idea.

At this stage you **shouldn't worry about trying to write a formal essay**. In fact, if it helps, you may just want to make **a list of the classes, laboratory experiences, topics, questions, papers** and techniques that you have come across so far. Then, next to each item on your list, **force yourself to generate a list of verbs and adjectives that describe your reaction to that item**. If you find yourself writing adjectives like “cool,” “amazing,” “fascinating,” then try again. These are totally boring words that appear in every essay. To dig deeper, ask yourself what, exactly, you thought was cool about learning PCR. **Why** did you find tumor genetics fascinating? How is bioinformatics amazing? **If you are really clever, you will be able to think up your own questions to make yourself generate ever more specific descriptions. The more specific and unique your verbs and adjectives become, the more you will reflect the depth of your intellect and enthusiasm.** And again, the more you can include specifics, the more you will be **showing** us that you loved learning about the immune system, rather than just **telling** us. If you can't think of anything, then perhaps you should ask yourself if molecular medicine is really the program for you.

What to Avoid -- Clichés

This is one of the most common mistakes students make when writing their letter of motivation. Typical clichés include the following:

"I am highly motivated to study molecular medicine in your program."

"My greatest ambition is to pursue scientific research at the highest level."

"I have always been interested in science and especially biology. My interest goes back to when I was a child and"

"I have always been fascinated by scientific research / molecular mechanisms of disease / the scientific method / laboratory research."

Sentences such as these appear so often in the essays the admissions committee reads that they almost become meaningless. "Almost" meaningless because they implicitly provide an important insight into who you are and how you think: Clichés such as the ones above tell us that you **lack the ability to think originally**; that while you may have earned excellent grades in the past, you are more of a parrot than a scientist; that you have not taken the time to work very hard on your letter of motivation and therefore **you are either intellectually lazy, or arrogant enough to think that what you have written quickly will be good enough**, or you don't really care about being accepted, or all of the above.

A single cliché in your essay can be enough to remove you from the list of candidates. Thus, you should make every effort to avoid these statements. If you have read this document carefully then you know how to dig deeper into your unique experience, write specifically about what motivates you, and be very honest in the way you write. If you do that then the clichés will automatically disappear because no one has had exactly your experiences.

How to Avoid Clichés

While the use of clichés in your essay is certainly to be avoided, don't worry if they **appear in early drafts of your essay**. That is quite normal because you are probably just beginning to think about what truly motivates you. You shouldn't expect to automatically come up with deep motivations and be able to describe them eloquently. In fact, your first draft might look like this:

"I have always loved science. I always loved my science classes best when I was in school. When I reached university, there was no doubt in my mind that I would pursue a major in one of the sciences. It was really just a question of which one as I found all the basic scientific fields so interesting. However, I finally decided to study biology because I liked that topic in science the best. At the university I had the opportunity to work a great deal in the lab. I loved learning

new techniques and seeing how experiments worked. This was so much fun that I decided I would like to pursue research after I graduated. That is why I am so eager and motivated now to attend your program. I know that I am highly enthusiastic, capable of working hard, and am quite ambitious to achieve the best that is possible."

As you can see, the example above is full of clichés, but if it honestly reflects the candidate's experience, then it is a good start. All the author needs to do is dissect each sentence and ask themselves questions that will make them think more deeply about what they have said.

Let us assume you wrote the paragraph above. You could start with the first sentence and ask "Why have I always loved science? What exactly was it about science, as opposed to art or literature or history that I liked so much?" If the initial answer to those questions is "well, I just thought it was so cool to learn how real things worked," then dissect that statement too. Why did you think that was so cool? Keep repeating these questions, perhaps even over the course of a few days, until you come up with very specific reasons.

Don't expect answers to pop into your head immediately. Know that some people ponder these questions for the whole life and never really come up with good answers. In fact, most people never bother to think about why they do what they do, or like what they like, or study what they have decided to study at all. If you even make an effort in your essay you will already be pretty far ahead of the game. Also keep in mind that you are young and that knowing yourself well, and the ability to think deeply about anything, is not something you have had a chance to practice very much, if at all. What's more examples that illustrate the process of questioning rarely float around in most cultures (especially where television is prevalent). Thus, don't feel badly if your first draft is full of clichés. This is to be expected. But do work hard to replace them with more substantive statements.

What to Avoid -- Plagiarizing

At this point in your career you most certainly know that plagiarizing is strictly forbidden in any remotely academic context. Within the context of your application to this program plagiarizing constitutes a good enough reason to immediately dismiss your application from further consideration. While these facts should be obvious, you would be very surprised how many candidates nevertheless lift text from other sources and include it in their essays. What is still more surprising, is how often they use text from our very own website. For example, where our website might say

"the program offers students the opportunity to work intensively in the laboratory and learn state-of-the-art techniques,"

we will then see the following sentence in a candidate's application:

"I am eager to join the master's program in molecular medicine because it offers me the opportunity to work intensively in the laboratory and learn state-of-the-art techniques."

As stated above, if the admissions committee, members of which wrote most of the text for the website themselves, see examples like the one above, the application in question will immediately be removed from further consideration.

What to Avoid -- Religious Motivations

Some of the candidates for our program come from religious backgrounds. Often these applicants feel especially motivated by their **deep religious beliefs**. Such beliefs may be highly inspirational and sometimes enable students to achieve what might otherwise not have been possible for them. If this is the case for you then you may be inclined to base your essay on your religious motivations. While this would certainly be an honest approach, nevertheless, it should be avoided. The admissions committee is strictly interested in your **intellectual motivations**. The more you emphasize other sources of motivation, the less impressed they will be by your intellectual motivations, and the less likely it is that you will be accepted to this program. Furthermore, any discussion of religion opens up the possibility that the reader of your essay has strong and opposing beliefs. If this happens then you run the risk of having your application rejected for differences of opinion that actually have nothing to do with your ability to perform well in our program. Thus, while it may well be that you feel guided and inspired by your religion, and that these beliefs do indeed help you significantly, you should not discuss them in your letter of motivation. Stick to your intellectual interests in scientifically related topics.

What to Avoid -- **Altruistic** Motivations

Many applicants feel deeply motivated by their altruistic intentions. For example, they have witnessed first-hand human suffering due to a particular disease and now they feel highly inspired to pursue research that might provide a cure. Or they come from a country that lacks sufficient medical treatment facilities and/or knowledge and they would like to study in Germany so that they can return to their home countries and develop more medical infrastructures. As with the religious motivations discussed above, these types of altruistic motivations may have been a strong motivating factor for you in your studies so far. They may be a significant reason for the success you have experienced in your academic work. Thus you may be highly tempted to include a discussion of these motivations, or indeed base your entire essay around this source of motivation. **However, we strongly discourage** you from doing so for two reasons. **The first is that these essays tend to sound like clichés**, which, as discussed above, are very much to be avoided. **It is extremely difficult to write about altruistic motivations without sounding like a television commercial**. What's more, they also tend to sound like **childish clichés** and can give the impression that you **are not mature** enough to handle the considerable pressures involved in our intensive program.

The second and more important reason is that the admissions committee is much more interested in **your mind** than your heart. They want to know your intellectual reasons for wanting to attend this program, not your **sentimental** reasons. This is not to say that emotions cannot play a very significant role in motivating you (in fact, they most certainly do, whether you know it or not). But if you emphasize your emotional reasons for wanting to study molecular medicine, then your intellectual reasons will slip downwards in importance. The admissions committee is only interested in your intellectual motivations! Romantic notions will not impress them at all. In fact, your application will probably be rejected because

the admissions committee may conclude that, while you are intelligent enough, with such a sensitive orientation, you may not survive in a rigorous academic environment.

What to Avoid – Childhood Experiences

Many applicants focus the first paragraph of their essays on events that took place before they went to university. This approach is understandable because we are interested in your background, and since most of our applicants are under 27, most of their life up until now was their childhood. Nevertheless, given that the admissions committee is only interested in your intellectual motivations, pretty much anything you might say about your childhood is not of interest to them. On the contrary, mentions of teachers you had in school who particularly inspired you, or significant family events that took place when you were young, make you sound childish and detract from the overall mature, professional, intellectually inspired picture you probably want to paint of yourself.

What to Avoid -- The verb “to be,” in all its forms

If you think you are done, set your essay aside for a day or two. Only after a day or two pick it up again and re-read it. This time as you read just look at your verbs and adjectives. Any sentence that contains the verb “to be” in some form or another (but especially “is,” “are,” and “was”) ~~should be re-written~~, no, “qualifies as a candidate for re-writing.” The relatively boring verbs “to make,” “to have,” and “to do,” generally qualify as well.

Be aware as you change your verbs that this is not simply a matter of replacing one verb with another. If it were that easy then the world would be full of famous writers. Rather, **you need to rethink the sentence completely**. Many people find this a nearly impossible task and give up rather quickly, which is understandable. However, if you break up the process into two steps it becomes significantly easier. In the **first step, just think of verbs that in some sense convey the meaning you might want to get across**. Only after you have **generated a list of potential verbs**, is it worth it to **pick one and then consider how you might want to rewrite the sentence**.

Before and After – Drafts that illustrate the process

Now that you have read all the tips, take a look at the following example of an **adequately** written paragraph and the drafts that follow to improve it. Here you will see the suggestions described above put into practice.

Draft One

My biology courses were especially interesting. The topics related to cancer were among my favorites. The related research project was also extremely fascinating. In the lab I was thrilled to be

*working with cell cultures. At first the techniques involved were difficult, but I was **stubborn** in my wish to be very good, and finally I was successful.*

Not a bad paragraph, but it could be so much better with some attention to the verbs. Look at the next version and notice the verbs.

Draft Two

*At university my biology courses **captivated** my interest the most. In particular, the topics related to cancer **engaged** me and **emerged** as my favorites. Working with cell cultures in a related research project thrilled me too. Initially I found the steps involved extremely difficult, but with stubborn persistence I finally mastered the procedure.*

Obviously the verbs in the second draft add spice to an otherwise boring paragraph. However, adding details that **show** the facts, rather than just **telling** them, would enhance the text even more. **Why was the author especially captivated** by her biology courses? Why did the topics related to cancer **engage her more than the others**? **How did that engagement manifest itself in concrete terms**? **Why was working with cell cultures so thrilling**? Answers to these questions could lead to a third draft like the one below

Draft Three

*At university my biology courses captivated my interest the most, not only because the facts themselves interested me, but also because behind each fact **lurked** the fascinating **detective story** of its discovery. I found the topics related to cancer especially engaging. Here, the **complexity of the mechanisms** involved presented a particularly **compelling drama**, and one **filled** with plenty of **remaining mysteries**. Working with cell cultures in a related research project **thrilled** me too as I had always read about the technique but had never had the opportunity to perform it myself. Initially I **stumbled** a great deal. But with stubborn persistence I finally mastered the procedure and in the end achieved **the best results in my group**.*

Now this text is beginning to show the reader something about how enthusiastically this person ticks. The description of facts as “lurking” in a mysterious detective story **shows** the reader that she is highly engaged in the subject matter. This is much better than the second draft where she simply **tells** us that she is engaged. Likewise, when she tells us that she had always read about the techniques and now finally was able to perform them herself, she is **showing** us how enthusiastic she is about the work in the lab, not just telling us. One gets the impression that here is someone who is so excited about cell culture that she could hardly wait for the opportunity to perform the technique herself.

Adding specific details about her experience also adds significant flavor to an otherwise **bland** paragraph. When she concludes the paragraph with a statement about her modest success, the reader senses that she is proud, and that is because, small as her success might have been, it is obviously quite meaningful to her. With this little fact she shows the reader a budding scientist who will be committed to her work. These words are much more convincing than if she had just written “I am very enthusiastic and will show a great deal of commitment to my work if you accept me to your prestigious program.”

What to stress

Your intellectual interest in molecular medicine

A professional, serious tone

Specific details about the research experience you have had so far.

We hope that this document proves helpful to you in writing the letter of motivation. If you have further questions please send an email to admissions-molmed@charite.de.

Good luck with your essay!
