Personal Statements

For help with your Personal Statement, please make an appointment with:

1st - Ms. Dolores Ciaccio, Director of the Career Development Center, Student Success Center, Greenley Hall, 1st floor.  # (631) 420-2296.  Email ciaccidl@farmingdale.edu

2nd – Dr. Christine Sacco-Sanchez, Director of the Writing Center, Knapp Hall, 2nd floor. Room 30, # (631) 794-6134. Email saccocs@farmingdale.edu

PURPOSE OF THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

- Your opportunity to describe who you are and why you are uniquely qualified for a career in the health professions beyond GPA and standardized test results. Advocate for yourself.
- To get you an interview!
- Medical schools receive thousands of applications from applicants with strong GPAs and MCAT scores, but they have a limited number of interview invitations to extend. The personal statement plays a significant role in determining who gets an interview, and you can greatly improve your chances by submitting a well-written and interesting essay.

SPECIFICS OF THE AMCAS ESSAY (AKA “PERSONAL COMMENTS”)

- The Prompt: Use the space provided to explain why you want to go to medical school.
- **5300 characters (including spaces)**.
- MD/PhD candidates: must submit two additional essays (“MD/PhD Essay” and “Significant Research Experience Essay”).

SUGGESTED TOPICS

- Why do you want to be a physician (or dentist, or veterinarian)? What experiences have motivated and reinforced your desire to pursue this profession? Something to think about – but not necessarily state – is what can medicine offer that other professions do not. For instance, you can help people by being a teacher or social worker. What draws you specifically to medicine?
- What experiences have allowed you to develop the skills necessary to be successful in medical school and to become an effective physician?
- What have you learned about medicine and what do you want to learn more about?
- What individuals have shaped your life and influenced you to pursue medicine?
- What will you contribute to the medical school community?
- What do you want admissions committees to know about you that is not addressed elsewhere in your application?
QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF ABOUT YOUR CHOICE OF TOPIC

- Why is it important for me to tell admissions committees about this topic as it relates to me?
- What does this topic choice tell admissions committees about me? How does my choice of this topic reflect on me?
- How is this topic relevant to my pursuit of the health professions and to my application to health professions school?

QUALITIES TO PORTRAY

Maturity  Compassion and empathy
Reflectiveness  Genuineness and sincerity
Honesty and integrity  Leadership
Clarity of thought  Insightfulness
Passion  Humanity
Individuality  A realistic perspective
Positivity  Enthusiasm
Logic  “Distance traveled”/lessons learned
Distinctiveness  Industriousness and persistence
Commitment  Self-awareness
Ability to relate to diverse people
Insight into the chosen health profession
Strong written communication skills

THEMES TO AVOID

- Clichés: How many times do you think admissions committees have read the phrase, “I want to become a physician because I like science and I want to help people”?
- The “epiphany into medicine”: Your pursuit of the health professions should be the result of a series of thoughtful, conscious, and reflective decisions, NOT an instantaneous realization.
- Manifest Destiny: You have not “always known” that you want to be a physician (or dentist, etc.). See above. Similarly, who cares if “everyone has always said that I would make a good physician.” What do they know?
- The narrative resume: Do not rehash all of your activities and achievements. Choose ONE or TWO significant and distinguishing experiences to elaborate upon.
- “I know what it is like to be a physician from [shadowing, clinical volunteer experience, etc.].” No, you do not. That is why you are hoping to go to medical school – so you might be lucky enough to find out one day.
- Grandiosity: Claiming that you plan to cure cancer (or HIV, or healthcare disparities, or anything else) shows a grave lack of understanding of whatever problem you are planning to solve.
- Negativity: No one likes a complainer. In particular, do not be negative about Johns Hopkins, your professors, or your research mentors.
• **“I am special”:** Of course you are special. But claiming “you probably do not see many applicants like me” is not only arrogant but is also likely untrue. Admissions committees have seen it all.

• **Anything potentially inflammatory or controversial:** You do not know the values, beliefs, and background of the person who is reading your essay. Additionally, your beliefs are not the only “correct” beliefs. Furthermore, some people – including admissions officers – have personal biases and prejudices. For these reasons, it is advisable to avoid making any strong statements regarding politics, religion, and other polarizing topics. Be extremely cautious to avoid expressing any views that could be construed as derogatory to any group.

• **“I am a victim”:** Victims are never attractive candidates. If you have experienced difficulties, explain your experiences dispassionately and focus on how you overcame these difficulties, what you learned from your experiences, and how you are a stronger person because of your experiences.

• **Excuses:** In general, there are better uses for your personal statement than explaining away and justifying poor grades, incidents of misconduct, etc. However, if you choose to address these subjects, be sure to focus on what you have learned from those incidents and how your experiences have made you a stronger person. Never, ever blame anyone else for your mistakes.

• **Lies:** This includes information that may be factually accurate but is presented in a misleading way.

• **Leading with a quotation written by someone else:** Admissions committees are interested in what you have to say.

• **Any unusual formats:** Do not submit artwork, photographs, collages, videos, etc. in lieu of a written essay. Likewise, do not write your personal statement in verse, limerick, haiku, etc.

**FOR MD/PHD APPLICANTS**

• The “MD/PhD Essay” = describe why you want the dual degree in 3000 characters. In brief: your patient interactions should inform your research, and your research should enhance your patient interactions. You need to articulate passion and aptitude for BOTH basic scientific research and patient care.

• When discussing your research interests: Be specific but general (how about that oxymoron?!)
  For instance:
  Do not write, “I want to cure cancer.”
  Do write, “I am interested in developmental biology, specifically how developmental pathways become inappropriately regulated, resulting in tumor formation.”

• Do not mention specific PIs with whom you are interested in working.

• The “Significant Research Experience Essay” = describe your research experiences in 10000 characters.
  Describe both the “big picture” of the lab’s work as well as your independent role.
  Follow this general format: 1) what is known (i.e., background information); 2) the “hole” in the field (i.e., the specific question or problem that the lab’s work aims to understand or solve); 3) the hypothesis; and 4) your specific contributions to the project.
- For each experience: specify your mentor’s name and affiliation and the duration of your experience.
- If your work resulted in a publication on which you were an author, provide the full citation in the “Work/Activities” section of the application. Be certain to cite publications properly and accurately, using the standard formatting for your field. In general, do not cite papers that are “in preparation” for publication. It is OK to cite papers as “submitted.” Definitely cite papers that are “in press.”
- Do not overstate your contributions to a lab. Washing glassware, preparing solutions, and doing minipreps does not constitute “research.”
- Be REALLY SURE that you understand what you are writing about and that you are being accurate.
- The two additional essays will ONLY be forwarded to your designated MD/PhD programs (i.e., schools to which you are only applying to the MD program will not receive these essays).

SECONDARY APPLICATION ESSAYS

- Answer the questions asked.
- Do not be tempted to reuse secondary essays verbatim. Tailor each essay to the question asked and the school which asked it.
- Take these seriously. Many applicants invest significant time and effort in the personal statement and then submit hastily written, careless secondary essays. The quality of the secondary essays needs to be on par with that of your personal statement.

HELPFUL HINTS & TIPS

- Keep in mind the purpose of the personal statement.
- Do not wait until the last minute. Go through several drafts.
- Have ONE central theme to your personal statement.
- Organize your essay in a logical manner. It may be helpful to develop an outline before you begin writing.
- Highlight specific, unique accomplishments of which you are proud. Provide details! Show, don’t tell.
- In general, stick to recent experiences and accomplishments (i.e., things you have done since beginning college).
- Do not repeat information that is found elsewhere in your application.
- Know your audience. This will involve researching the schools and programs to which you are applying.
- Be interesting and engaging.
- Be concise. Every single sentence must be crucial to the essay. Do not waste words (e.g., “for instance,” “in conclusion”).
- Use active voice, use strong verbs, and vary your sentence structure. Avoid beginning every sentence with “I.”
- Use normal rules of capitalization, punctuation, spelling, etc. (ur writin n essay not a txt msg)
• Use appropriate vocabulary. Use your thesaurus judiciously. Do not try to impress with “million dollar words,” but also avoid the use of slang and colloquialisms. If a sentence sounds awkward when spoken, it probably sounds awkward when read, too.
• Humor is really tricky to pull off, and application to health professions school should be taken seriously.
• Be sure you have an actual conclusion to your essay so that it does not look like you continued writing until you ran out of characters.
• Verify that there are no inconsistencies between your personal statement and the rest of your application package (including your secondary applications).
• Beware of formatting errors that result from copying from a word processing program and pasting into the AMCAS application.
• PROOFREAD. Then proofread again. Then proofread some more. Then have others proofread for you. Then proofread one more time. You cannot run spell check within the AMCAS application. NO CHANGES MAY BE MADE TO YOUR AMCAS APPLICATION AFTER SUBMISSION.
• Do not even think about plagiarizing.
• BE YOURSELF. Make sure the personal statement that you submit is: 1) reflective of your personality; and 2) in your own words (not those of your editors).
• Be prepared for the fact that your personal statement and essays will be conversation material for your interviews!

RESOURCES

The Johns Hopkins Writing Center
The AMCAS Instruction Manual
The Pre-Prof. Office's Guide to Creating Effective Personal Statements
The Writing Center's Writing Center AMCAS Presentation Handouts