Avoid Common Mistakes on the Medical School Personal Statement

Many medical school essays start out the same way, so avoid common cliches to stand out.

A good medical school personal statement can be the difference between an acceptance letter and a rejection.

When I was applying to medical school, the MCAT still contained an essay portion, and a common maxim about the essay stated "A good one may not get you in, but a bad one could keep you out.”

This resulted in many students not working too hard on their essay techniques. Today the essay is gone, so students tend to focus on the numerical aspects of their applications, which are important. But some students focus on these to the detriment of their personal statement. Statistics from the Association of American Medical Colleges show that even students with stellar GPAs and top 5 percent MCAT scores can fail to gain admission.

With the new MCAT, the association has highlighted its aim to widen the range of students admitted to medical school. The personal statement part of your application is the greatest opportunity you have to show schools why you should be admitted into medical school and what you will contribute to medicine – but there are a few pitfalls to avoid when crafting it.

All students have their own reasons for wanting to be a doctor. The problem is most of these reasons are presented in a similar manner in personal statements. Many admissions committee members and
advisers I have talked to report thousands of essays that all start the same way: "I have wanted to be a doctor since," "My dream of being a doctor began when I was a child playing" or "I have always wanted to make a difference."

While these stories are likely honest and heartfelt, the essays risk getting pushed to the side in favor of an applicant with a story to tell that complements his or her application. While it is important to give your reasons for pursuing medicine, a more personal and engaging essay will resonate with readers. [Find out how to use a personal story in a medical school application.]

I was "lucky" enough to grow up in a family with extensive experience with hospitals, surgeons and medicine because of myriad medical complications resulting from birth defects, diseases and disabilities. When it was time to write my personal statement, I had ample material.

This need not be necessary. Think outside the box. Even nonmedical or academic experiences can inform your decision to become a doctor. You should also browse online through sample essays to both be inspired and learn which cliches to avoid.

The next most important point to get across to schools is to show – not tell – them why you will make such a great addition to the ranks of physicianhood. This does not mean summarizing all of the achievements, honors and experience you painstakingly outlined in your centralized application. Simply giving an executive summary of your accolades is not personal and does not offer any insight into what you can bring to a school. [Learn about four common mistakes that lead to medical school rejection.]

If you had a great volunteer experience, show how it affected your life. Did you participate in some exciting research? If you can build a story around it or offer some insight as to how it will inform your career as a physician, then by all means bring it in as a part of your essay. Otherwise, leave it where it belongs.

As a physician, you will spend your whole life learning and a great physician is not infallible. Not everyone who is admitted to medical school had a perfect academic record. Many of my successful students were nontraditional applicants, struggled during freshman year or overcame some personal obstacle to continue through school. They used these experiences.

Don't ignore potential red flags – embrace them so that you can put them in the best light possible. This does not mean justifying or excusing mistakes. You cannot undo the past, but even education gaps, a C grade or a lackluster semester is a learning opportunity. Academic adversity can be used to show medical schools how these experiences have made you a stronger candidate. You will likely be asked about anomalies during your interviews so it is better to address them head on. [Find out what to include in medical school application secondary essays.]

You would never rush through your MCAT prep or final exam preparation, so do not throw four years of hard work away by cranking your personal statement out in a week. Take your time. Start early.

Begin by thinking about experiences, people and activities that have brought you to this point in life. Ask yourself, why do you want to be a physician?

When studying for the MCAT, I advise all of my students to take a day off per week to avoid burnout. I encourage them to use this day to work on other, less tangible parts of their application – and premeds will know how their peers hate doing something that's not premed related.

The online applications are standardized, so it is easy to determine what you need long before the application is due. Work on your letters of recommendation. Why not use this time to also get started on your personal statement? This gives you time to draft and rewrite, and seek out as many eyes as you can get on your personal statement.

Do not just ask physicians and medical professionals to read it. Many of the people evaluating your
applications never attended medical school and are not clinical professionals of any kind. Have family, friends and even friends of friends read your drafts. The more varied an audience you can engage, the better your story will be told.

Unlike the old MCAT essay, a good personal statement can get you in.

TAGS: education, graduate schools, medical school, medicine, students

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