Application Seminar II: Crafting Your Personal Statement
Part One

The Personal Statement
Details

- 5,300 characters
  - Approximately one page
  - Includes spaces

We refer you to the AG-14

Typical Admissions Order of Operations:
1. GPA
2. MCAT/GRE
3. Personal Statement
The Power of the Personal Statement

- One of the few parts of the application over which you have complete control
- Your opportunity to speak directly to the admissions committee on your own terms
The personal statement in context

**PERSONAL STATEMENT**

- **Linkages** between and among all these aspects of your application
- **A narrative** in which these connections/aspects are revealed

**Life of the mind**
- Lifelong learning
- Competency in science

**Life outside the mind**
- Civic engagement
- Leadership

**Strengths and weaknesses**
- Academic, personal
- Resilience, insight

**Personal qualities**
- Self-awareness
- Maturity

**Career exploration**
- Deliberate decisions
- Understanding of the field

**Motivations**
- “Goodness of fit”
- Your goals and aspirations

**PERSONAL STATEMENT**

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Articulating competencies

- “A combination of knowledge and skills which demonstrate ability in a particular domain” (AG-14)
- Providing **evidence** that you have cultivated these competencies
AAMC’s Personal Competencies

- Integrity and ethics
- Reliability and dependability
- Service orientation
- Social and interpersonal skills
- Teamwork
- Capacity for improvement
- Resilience and adaptability
- Cultural competence
- Oral communication
Your application as a whole can tell a coherent story about you: a portrait
- Strategic thinking about what goes where
- Avoid repetition: What appears nowhere else in application?

Cohesiveness
- The parts of your application must hold together

What common themes or values underlie your various pursuits?
- How do your activities and experiences complement one another?
- What has guided your choice of activities?
Goals and Opportunities

- An introduction to you—a *part* of your story (a chapter, not a novel)
- A chance to demonstrate
  - How you are a unique match for your profession
  - How you came to understand the nature of the profession
  - How your experiences reveal your competencies
Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,
And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,
I will be brief.

- 5,300 characters isn’t much
- Tone, voice, and humor
- Articulating motivations without sounding banal
- Presenting yourself to people who don’t know you
- Audience fatigue
Know Your Audience

Individuals who understand education in health and medicine from a range of perspectives, including:

- Clinical, teaching, and research faculty
- Admissions officers
- Current health professions students
- Alumni
- Community members
Woo Your Audience

- At the very least, don’t marginalize them
- Nothing politically charged
- No hostility (“I hate surgeons.”)
- Don’t be lurid or salacious
- Be careful about what you might be remembered for—don’t do anything that’s going to earn you a nickname
  - You don’t want to be “The Love Molecule Guy”
Things They Have Seen Before

- Clichés, Platitudes, Truisms
  - “Medicine is a caring profession.”
  - “When I held Little Tina in my arms, I knew I wanted to be a doctor.”
  - “I really liked science, so I started doing lab work, but I found that lab work didn’t afford me opportunities for meeting with other people.”

- Exaggerations of longitudinal commitment, roles in community, your title, etc.
  - Epiphanies are not longitudinal!
  - Better a “volunteer” for three years than a “Foundation Director” for a week
Messages that work

- Simple/clear
- Unexpected
- Concrete
- Credible
- Emotional
- Stories
Part Two

Writing the Personal Statement
The Lifecycle of the Personal Statement

- An iterative process
  - Reflection, writing, revision, repetition

- Reflection
  - Taking time to know, and reflect on, yourself
  - Don’t have time to reflect? This may not be your year.

- Writing
  - Become more self-aware through writing

- Revision
  - Is not the same as editing
  - Substantial rewording and reorganization of material

- Repeat
  - Allow time for more reflection
  - Time spent away from a piece of writing can allow insights to happen—this is a necessity, not a luxury
First Step: Gather Information

- **Revisit** college essays, old journals, etc.
  - How have you grown?
  - In what ways are you the same/different?
  - What does your evolution look like?
- **Ask** family, friends, teachers these questions
- **Brainstorm:** make lists of...
  - **Activities** that relate to your chosen field and schools of interest; linkages among them
  - **Qualities** that make you a strong applicant...
  - ...and **weaknesses** that make you a strong applicant
  - **Motivations** for a career in medicine
Know Yourself: A How-to

- Consider:
  - Memorable, particular experiences that relate to your interest in the health professions
  - Challenges and obstacles you have encountered—what skills, approaches, strategies did you learn?
  - You do not need to be perfect. Knowing your imperfections means knowing yourself.
- Remember: imperfections can be strengths
Self-knowledge into Evidence

- **Experiences** from your personal life, volunteer activities, clinical work, lab work
- **Particular moments** with particular people
  - Patients you interacted with
  - Practitioners or scientists you worked with
  - People you have helped through volunteer work
- Your **exploration of other fields**, which has given you insight into why this profession is a good fit
- The goal: a pattern, not a point
Evidence into Content

- Authenticity
  - Conveying who you really are
  - Revealing your personality
- Evidence
  - Demonstrating your commitments, not claiming them
  - Map evidence onto competencies profession cares about
- Reflection
  - Expressing maturity and thoughtfulness
  - Articulating motivations
Connective tissue:

- How do you tie together
  1. Experiences
  2. Personal Qualities
  3. Motivations

- What is the big picture? The narrative?

- Think broadly about linkages
  - Skills you developed or used across pursuits
  - Passions and commitments
  - Values that underlie your activities

- The connections = big ideas, themes
Limits and Choices

- You can’t write about everything
  - Keep in mind what will appear elsewhere
  - Strategic, deliberate choices about which topic/theme to write about
- Simple...
  - A limited number of main points
- ...yet sophisticated
  - A thorough discussion of these points
  - Don’t be reductive or dismissive or naïve
Limits and Choices

- You need to look like someone who is together enough to make it through a school of the health professions
- What does this mean?
  - Not so affected by bad experience that you will be a liability
  - Not so unchallenged by life that you will fold at the first—inevitable—trauma or challenge
  - Don’t put anything in that you would be uncomfortable talking about in an interview
How to Frame Yourself

- **BAD:**
  “I’m not ashamed of my body—not at all. In fact, it’s pretty spectacular. My love for my body will translate into love for my patient’s bodies—even if they don’t care for theirs as much as I do for mine.”

- **GOOD:**
  “My time as a tennis player showed me the thrill of athletic competition, as well as the importance of mobility to one’s sense of self-worth. I know now that movement is an important part of a comfortable life, and will use this understanding when I am offering treatments to my patients.”

- Don’t be “that guy”.
Achieving authenticity means communicating realness to the reader

- Describe a small number of experiences in specific detail—*showing vs. telling*
- Show how experience leads to insight
  - “What this taught me was…”
  - “I realized that…”
- Avoid second-hand knowledge
  - What you learned, not what others learned
Authenticity: Examples

- **[UNEARNED REALIZATION]:** “That brave little squirrel’s spirit taught me everything I needed to know about resilience.”

- **[PLATITUDES]:** “I discovered physicians relied on their own knowledge and experience acquired from years of personal study from medical and non-medical perspectives. The doctors used their knowledge about the human body and applied it in serving their patient during surgical operations.”

- **[MORE HONEST—MORE REFLECTIVE]:** “I held his hand in hopes of comforting him while the doctor gave him a check-up, and helped his mother turn him around in his bed to prevent bed sores. I was sorry it was all I could do for him. I walked out of his room that day, humbled by the fragility of life and the complexities of the human body.”
Reflection

Self-awareness, self-evaluation, self-reflection:
• Displays maturity and thoughtfulness
• Helps readers see the significance of what you’ve told them

Being reflective:
• Application: How do the particulars relate to your desire to study medicine?
• Growth: What have you learned from your experiences?
• Origin: Where does your motivation to study medicine/health care come from?
“I could think of nothing but the discrepancy between my reasons for wanting to be a doctor and the reality of the medical field. For the first time, I was terrified that I lacked the necessary strength and courage to be a physician.”

“There’s nothing quite like working in an understaffed after-school club with dozens of active kids to open your eyes to hands-on service. I was frustrated and tired after only an hour of trying to explain long division, but I felt the oddest sense of fulfillment that was entirely different than fundraising. Not only had I ensured that something good happened to someone, I was directly part of that process that made it happen.”
A Reflectiveness Gap

- [SECOND-HAND DESCRIPTION: ] “Watching Dr. Rolando in action, I was surprised at how the nurses respected her. That looked awesome! One day, I want to be respected, too.”

- [FIRST-HAND DESCRIPTION: ] “I kept making the beds. By the end of my six weeks, they called me the ‘Bed King.’ Those patients were comfortable, and also visibly happier.”
Faux Pas

- **READ THIS OUT LOUD:**
  “However, enthusiasm and compassion kept me continue dedicating for activities I treasured as self-reflections and exploration in the medical field.”

- **AYN RAND IS MY HOMEGIRL:**
  “I want to become a physician so I can help myself.”

- **LAY ALL YOUR LOVE ON ME:**
  “Then one night I read some online articles about oxytocin, a.k.a. ‘the love molecule’, and found that many of my theories about love had been supported by science.”

- **I HAVE REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCE. REALLY, I DO:**
  “With my unique background of a lifelong study of human nature and a college career dedicated to biology, the most beneficial role I can play in society is as a doctor of neuroscience.”
Writing: Nuts and Bolts

- **Clear Points**
  - Point = the single sentence that articulates what you’re trying to say in a paragraph
  - Points should appear at the start of each paragraph

- **Transitions**
  - How does a new point connect to what came before?
  - The bigger the gap, the bigger the cue you need to give

- **Information Flow**
  - Key terms from previous paragraph used to introduce new paragraph
  - Reminds reader of what came before and main points
Editing

- **Proofread carefully**: absolutely NO typos, misspellings, or grammatical errors
- **Print** your personal statement in **different fonts** to facilitate proofreading
- Read your statement out loud
- Have friends—useful friends—read it to you aloud
- Keep a document with **scraps, odds, and ends**—they will be useful later, in a secondary or in an interview
In Conclusion: Show, Don’t Tell

- [TELL]: “I’m a great public speaker, an empathetic caregiver, and a profoundly above-average medical school applicant.”

- [SHOW]: “In my job as a hospice volunteer, I worked with patients at the extremities of life. I learned a great deal about the limits of medicine, and about the small difference in a patient’s life that a routine interaction—straightening bedsheets or helping with family members’ visits—can make.”
Part Three

Next steps
UCIHP Review Process

- Personal statement review at UCIHP is strongly encouraged
- Review appointments throughout Winter Quarter, but especially January 28-30
- Sign-ups begin January 14
- If you’re here, you got dibs
- Whenever your appointment is, submit your polished personal statement draft to Cindy Domecki one week in advance
Not your first draft
- See AG-14, page 17, for expectations
Other people—constructive friends, faculty, PIs, a stranger, etc.—need to have looked at it first
To get the most out of your review, you will need:
- To understand what you’ve written
- To take notes
- To make significant revisions
- To understand what we tell you as constructive, not harmful
Many sources of advice: advisers, faculty, doctors, etc.
Remember: complex expectations
No one way to write a personal statement...
...and you need to produce a solid account of yourself
Panicked revision can only hurt you
What happens if you radically revise your statement after you’ve met with us?
- Proceed with caution: remember, epiphanies are not longitudinal
- Discuss changes (and reasons for them) with an adviser
- Leave time for iteration
  - Reflect, write, revise, repeat
- Forest, trees: remember the rest of your application
Letting Go

- Remember complex expectations?
- You’re trying to get an interview, not change their lives
- There is such a thing as editing something to death
- If you own your application, you will know when it’s ready
Secondary Applications: Mo’ Money, Mo’ Questions

- Once you have completed AMCAS application process, each school has its own application requirements.
- Chance to speak to why *this specific school*.
- Do not repeat the statement from your primary application.
- Know your reader...know the school.