

The Anatomy of a Personal Statement

It is now time to prepare your personal statement for your residency application. Trying to describe yourself succinctly in a page can be difficult. Where do you begin? Well, I hope the following helps you to prepare a knockout, top-notch personal statement. The first thing that you need to know is what is the purpose of a personal statement?

The purpose of the personal statement is to get you the residency of your choice.

Remember that most people who are applying for a residency are smart. Most people are sending excellent letters of recommendation (only a fool asks somebody who is not impressed with him or her to write a letter of recommendation). Also, remember only a few people in medical school have actually done any research. In fact, most people simply completed years I and II, worked hard on their clerkships and got deeply in debt. A few distinguished themselves with extra and co-curricular activities. And since half of you are below the mean...just like half the students at Harvard think of the personal statement as an opportunity. **The personal statement is your chance to distinguish yourself as an individual.** So let's begin. In my opinion the personal statement is divided into five paragraphs.

Paragraph #1: Why you decided to become a physician.

This paragraph should begin with something like, "I always knew I wanted to be a physician, or "it wasn't until my fourth year of college that I realized that I wanted to be a physician." You can link this with your hobbies, your family or whatever is unique about the way you came to decide to become a physician. And, by the way, if you decided to become a physician because you were **good in science, you like people, and you want to make a difference** that's okay too. Everybody is good in science and hopefully likes people.

Paragraph #2: When you decided to become an internist (this can apply to any specialty).

This paragraph usually talks about that clairvoyant moment... "during my junior clerkship I found Internal Medicine to be the most interesting. I enjoyed the clinical application of Pathophysiology." Alternatively, you might have decided to become an internist based on a particular patient. Describe the patient and run with it. This can be a really fun paragraph.

Paragraph #3: What unique characteristics do you have that makes you a good candidate?

This paragraph is more of a discussion about your unique talents and attributes. For example, you could say, "during my Internal Medicine rotation I found that I really had a tremendous talent for Internal Medicine. I am good at Pathophysiology, excel in differential diagnosis and my patients just love me. They told me I functioned at the

level of a senior resident, in fact, they invited me to be a chief resident.” Or you could say, “ I am an incredibly talented individual when it comes to memorizing statistics, I memorized all the baseball cards that were ever printed. I am sure this talent will make me a better Internist (than all of your other candidates) because I will be able to remember all the minutia.” Or you could say, “I have always been good at problem solving...I won the future problem solvers award in high school or I love difficult problems. I do the New York Times crossword puzzle every week and I never miss a word.” Remember, **this paragraph should not be modest**. In fact the entire personal statement should not be modest. You are trying to sell yourself. In fact, the personal statement is a tool to do that. Nevertheless, **you should not sound boastful**. Try to **be humble and sell yourself**. I had one student who wanted to go into Plastic Surgery and he was a sculptor. He said his background was in the fine arts and that as a sculptor he would have a true appreciation of the three-dimensionality allowing him to really understand cross sectional anatomy. He said he felt it made him “uniquely talented to be this kind of surgeon.”

Paragraph #4: What kind of program are you looking for?

Think about what you really want and make sure the programs you are applying to jive with what you are looking for. Are you looking for a diverse program or do you want a program with less diversity and more cultural uniformity? Do you want to train in an urban environment knowing that urban programs tend to have limited resources and fewer amenities but a wealth of pathology or do you want a suburban program with ample resources? Do want a program that provides care to the underserved? If so you are probably looking at an urban program...or a rural program. Do you want to take care of really sick patients or do you prefer patients who are healthier. After you figure it out let them know in this paragraph.

Now think about the program itself. Do you want an academic program? How about a program that is involved in the community? How about one that is research oriented? Do you want one with special tracks for example a women’s health track or a primary care track?

The last thing you have to think about is **what you want to do with your life**. Yes, you finally figured out you want to be an internist (or surgeon or whatever). Now do you want to do a fellowship, practice in the community, do research or teach? And by the way, you can change your mind. No one will force you to do what you said in your personal statement. Just remember this is a time to reflect and think about the future.

“I am looking for a program that is going to provide on outstanding foundation for the practice of internal medicine...at this point I am uncertain as to whether I want to specialize but before I even consider specialization I want to know that I am well trained as an internist.” Or “I am looking for a program that is is innovative and I am looking for a program that has a diverse patient population.” You might say, “I am looking for a program that emphasizes the academic approach, that emphasizes self-directed learning

etc. I am looking for a program that emphasizes teaching.” **Whatever you say here should describe the program you are looking for and applying to.**

I had one student who was fluent in Spanish and wanted a program that served the Hispanic community. She put it in paragraph four. If you think you are potentially interested in research then you want to mention that at this juncture. But seriously, what **everybody wants is a program that provides an outstanding foundation in internal medicine that will allow a graduate from that program to have a choice to become a clinician, specialist, educator or researcher.** Express your point of view here.

Paragraph #5: The *last* paragraph

This is in some ways the hardest paragraph. It is supposed to sum everything up and be clever too. “I hope you will strongly consider me as a candidate because I am the best person for this job or actually because I am deeply committed to excellence.” You want to mention excellence or outstanding or some other similar descriptor here. **I hope there is nobody among my advisees that wants to aim for anything less than excellence.** Finally, sum it up with some wonderful closing sentence. Good luck.

Putting it together:

Does what I described sound like a bunch of brown-nosing? No, it is not! So let me give you an example using my personal experience. I decided to become a physician when I was really young. In fact, as long as I can remember I wanted to be a physician. My whole life was directed towards that goal. I could describe that my parents have been the strongest influence in my life. I could put down in paragraph one that I decided to be a physician because I saw how my father’s patients loved him and how enthusiastic and excited he was about the practice of medicine. I could say that I knew that’s what I wanted. I would say I wanted a job that I could love, that I could throw myself into and that was fulfilling. This is exactly how I felt...and I still love my job today!

Next I could talk about my deciding on Internal Medicine. I could describe my love of problem solving which I discovered during Year Three and which became solidified in Year Four. Next I could describe my attributes. My greatest attribute is that I can talk! I don’t know if I would write that on my personal statement but I might have said I am good communicator and that I am enthusiastic. Now, what about the program? I wanted a very academic program that would push me to achieve my personal best and that demanded excellence.

Special Situations:

What if you can’t decide what you want to do? Well, you can apply to different specialties. In this situation you need to have different personal statements. Sometimes you really want one specialty, say dermatology but it is so competitive you need a back

up. That means you need to write a second personal statement. I guess that means 10 paragraphs.

Additional Thoughts:

The personal statement can eat up lots of time. Just sit down and do it! I am available to help.

After the Personal Statement is done:

Ok so you finished your personal statement. Hurray! Now don't blow it by sending it to the *wrong* programs. What do I mean? Students often contradict themselves and make themselves look bad without meaning to. For example, if your personal statement says you are looking for a university program and send off applications to community hospitals well, you aren't looking too smart. It might have been better to say you were looking for an *academic* program. If you say you want an urban program and send applications to suburbia. All that work...and you look shall we say unintelligent. Just remember to **say what you mean and mean what you say.**

This is a fine transition to talking about choosing programs but that is for another email.