What NOT to Write in Your Personal Statement

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Succeeding in residency takes grit, determination, compassion, and industrial doses of caffeine. For program directors, figuring out which applicants are most likely to navigate the transition from perpetual student to skilled professional is an imperfect science at best.

Choosing who to interview and rank for residency or fellowship among hundreds of highly qualified applicants is a daunting task. All our applicants have demonstrated intelligence and dedication by getting to this point in their education. Still, successfully navigating the demands of residency or fellowship is a different beast.

Program directors have fewer ways to stratify applications than in the past. United States Medical Licensing Examination Step 1 has shifted from numeric scores to pass/fail. Grades cannot easily be compared between institutions—some medical schools use letter grades, some use honors/pass/fail, and some use indecipherable holograms.

The numeric cutoffs for standardized tests we used previously were often arbitrary, culturally biased, and not as objective as we believed. That said, the year I received 900 applications for 6 residency spots, I had to utilize some criteria to make the list shorter.

Many program directors want the application process to be holistic rather than simply numeric, but we only have access to limited data about each candidate. This magnifies the importance of the personal statement. It is the applicant's first and best opportunity to tell their story in their own words.

I appreciate that candidates pour their hearts and hopes into their essays. I must choose whether to offer an interview to someone who has improved access to reproductive health care for patients with disabilities versus someone who has worked to decrease maternal mortality in rural North America. Both are impressive and deserving.

Some personal statements are memorable because they hit the mark: they told me something profound about the applicant, beyond a sterile computer-formatted application. Some were memorable in an unfortunate way—please don't write a poem unless you're a national poet laureate.

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Editor's Note: The online supplementary data contains a visual abstract.

Most medical students are not polished writers. We understand that. Most applicants were science majors in college and spent more time poring over unknowns in organic chemistry than reworking a 1200-word article down to its essence. As a liberal arts major, published author, program director, and practicing obstetrician gynecologist, I have done a lot of both, so I have thoughts.

Your personal statement doesn't have to be perfect. Perfection is unattainable and overrated. There are good articles describing the process of writing to get you started.[1] Your statement should be powerful and succinct. It should also be free of errors and represent you well.

These are my best recommendations for what NOT to write in your personal statement:

1. **Don't write more than one page.** You are a unique and wonderful human, but even if you won a medal at the Paris Olympics, tell us in one page. Even a line or 2 over is annoying. Edit ruthlessly, so we read, rather than skim, your words.

2. **Don't write before you think.** Think about the core experiences, beliefs, and values that make you who you are *before* you start writing. Don't repeat everything in your CV; we already have that.

   It can be hard to be objective about yourself. One option is to ask a trusted friend (not your parent) to describe you. It's often easier for someone else to see what makes you unique. We want to know what made you who you are and how that will help you handle the challenges of residency or fellowship.

3. **Do not tell me about the first baby you saw being born** (or the first code for cardiac arrest in the emergency department or the equivalent momentous experience in your specialty of choice). It doesn't matter if it was triplets, an emergency C-section that saved the pregnant patient's life, or your baby brother. It is very unlikely you will have something to say about the miracle of birth that we haven't read before. This story only tells me you are not oblivious to miracles. Choose something less obviously dramatic. Tell me something thoughtful about that experience and why it mattered to you.

4. **Don't focus on medical experiences only.** Many applicants have volunteered in a hospital or a free clinic for a couple hours a month or have spent a week on an international mission trip. These experiences may be interesting, but your involvement was probably limited.

   Choose a life experience like a job, sport, volunteer work, or research that you have put significant effort into and explain what it means to you. Pick a topic you are comfortable discussing because you know it well—maybe years spent helping your grandmother navigate a complex health care system or working as a cashier at night to pay for college. Tell me how these experiences shaped your drive to be a practicing physician.

5. **Do not explain my field to me.** I know that obstetrics and gynecology combines primary care and surgery. I want to know what interests you about the specialty and what unique attributes you will contribute. Imagine each word you write costs you $10. Don't waste them on facts I know.

6. **Don't tell me, show me.** This is a fundamental rule of good writing. Show me you have the grit it takes to make it through a rigorous residency program. If you say, "I'm hard working, determined, and a team player," I may or may not believe you. Describe the night you spent on a freezing mountain caring for a friend who broke their leg and I'll both believe and remember you.

7. **Don't pretend.** If you didn't have a meaningful role in an organization or on a research project, that's ok, but don't overinflate your experience. You should be "first date" honest. You don't need to tell me about your cousin who ran a Ponzi scheme, but don't pretend you are royalty if you're not (even if you are, I'd skip it). Interviewers are likely to ask about the experiences you bring up in your personal statement, so be prepared to discuss them confidently. Authenticity matters.

8. **Do not disparage physicians.** Your motivation to become a physician may have started with a bad experience you or a family member had with a physician. However, claiming an individual physician botched your care is unlikely to endear you to other physicians. Allegations of professional misconduct are serious and should be addressed in an appropriate venue, not in your application. I would rather hear about an issue in medicine you are committed to improving, and how you might do that.

9. **Don't be casual.** OMG don't use LOL! You may think you're showing your personality by being chatty, but it can come across as juvenile. Residency is not for kids. You are applying for a role where you will have people's lives in your hands. Your statement should be professional and serious. Also, exclamation points are BAD!!! One is one too many. Make your point with your words, not your punctuation.

10. **Doon't maek Typoes.** They make you, not just your writing, look careless and unprofessional.

    One way to do a thorough last check of your work is to have someone else read your statement, starting at the end, reviewing the spelling of each word, back to the beginning. You will have read and edited your own statement too many times to see the mistakes.

11. **DON'T GO OVER ONE PAGE.** I'm not kidding.

The application, interview, and match process for residency is flawed, but it is what we have. I appreciate the efforts of those who are working to improve it. There is an element of serendipity in the process that none of us can control. Writing a sincere, thoughtful personal statement is one aspect you can.

Reference

1. Jones D, Pittman JR Jr, Manning KD. Ten steps for writing an exceptional personal statement. *J Grad Med Educ*. 2022;14(5):522-525. doi:10.4300/JGME-D-22-00331.1

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