

What to Write

Your first focus in writing a personal statement is to ensure you answer the prompt provided by your specific application service. The prompts are slightly different between AMCAS, AACOMAS, AADSAS, TMDSAS, and quite different for other health professions applications, such as CASPA, PTCAS, etc. You want to look up the exact prompt as provided by your application service for your specific application year (not as provided by a generic online search since the prompts sometimes change slightly year to year) to ensure you fully answer the prompt.

An overview approach of what to include in your personal statement are the following three things, which you should weave throughout your statement:

- 1) Tell your story. Give the reader (who has never met you) a sense of who you are as a person who may join their campus for 2-4 years.
- 2) Make clear why you want to be in your chosen profession. This needs to be specific, as in, “why do you want to be a physician?” not just, “why do you want to work in health care?” In doing so, you must not put down the other health care roles (such as nurse, PA, dental assistant) that your chosen profession will interact with.
- 3) Include details that will make the reader understand what you uniquely bring to their school and to your chosen field. Not to say you are the only applicant with these traits, but what are the skills, aptitudes, and experiences you bring that will make the reader say, “We should pick them.”

Show not tell is key! Telling health professional schools that you are welcoming, intelligent, and can handle stress is not as impactful as giving them examples demonstrating this. For instance, when you quickly built rapport with someone you just met (especially if given the circumstances, they were inclined to not like you for something like a policy you had to enforce) or when you had to work through a challenging problem with no easy solution.

Many of the personal statement prompts will include that if there is other information about you that is important for the schools/programs to know, you should include it here. This can include aspects of your identity if they have influenced your path to medicine/dentistry/etc. and if they will influence the type of professional you hope to become. Also, if you have something on your transcript that you want to explain, your personal statement might be the best place to do so. An example is if you have one very off semester that is quite different from the rest of your grades, you may want to explain what caused that, what you did differently afterwards, and what you learned from that challenge. If you have one slightly lower grade (i.e.: almost all A grades and one B) there is no need to explain that.

The bulk of your personal statement should be about your experiences from the last few years. Even if you have always wanted to be a doctor since you were a young child, you are a different person now than when you were that young child, and hopefully your passion for medicine (or your chosen field) has deepened and matured in that time. Your overall medical/dental school application should list experiences only since you graduated high school. You can include experiences from earlier than that in your personal statement, but only briefly. Keep in mind that the schools are not interested in who you were at age 7, 12, etc.; they are interested in who you are now.

You will want to put similar levels of care that you put into your personal statement into how you write and describe the activities on your application. For applications where you can identify three most meaningful activities, you will get additional space to describe why they are meaningful. You can pick an activity that you include in your personal statement that is also a 'most meaningful' activity, but in that additional space, you should write about a different aspect of that activity. **Do not cut & paste verbatim content between your experiences, the essays (here and in your secondary applications, if applicable), and your personal statement.** Each of these components of your application serves a unique purpose and your content should be tailored to whatever component you're writing. **There is a distinct difference between consistency and redundancy.**

What Not to Write

The bulk of your personal statement should be about you. If you shadowed a dentist who was very influential on you, talking specifically about how you were a changed person as a result is helpful for dental schools. Talking in depth about how great the dentist was is not as helpful, since they are already in the field. This is also true of family members; if you write about your mother's illness or your father's resilience, these should not take the focus away from you and your story/preparation/characteristics.

A common trap is to tell health professional schools what their practitioners do/are. They already know what traits make a great doctor (as one example); instead, you want to show that you have those traits. Along these lines, use "active" not "passive" verbs as much as possible and avoid speculation about how you think you will behave or perform in the future. Show how you have been empathetic, don't tell how important empathy is or how you are sure you'll do it in the future. If you exhibit a trait now, schools will assume you will continue to be the same person in the future. This is what we mean by show don't tell.

Keep in mind that you will be submitting your application along with up to a few thousand other applicants, so if you think you have a unique idea or topic for your personal statement, it's worth reconsidering if it truly is one of a kind? For instance, many applicants write about a time when they, or a close family member, were quite ill and in that moment, a physician had a big impact on easing their worries. If this is an important part of your process of becoming interested in medicine, you can include it in your personal statement, but it should be brief (a sentence or two) since many applicants write

about something similar. Plus, in this case, you were the recipient of care, not in a role where you demonstrate you are prepared to provide care, so this example also breaks what was discussed at the start of this section.

If you have one specific “aha!” moment that made crystal clear why you want to be in your chosen health profession, include it in your personal statement, but you should have more examples beyond that one moment to also include. If you do not have such a moment, that is OK. You have probably engaged in a more deliberate, considered process of reflecting over time about why you want to be in your chosen profession, and including those insights is often more impactful than one “aha” moment.

Applicants sometimes hear they need to have a theme that weaves together their personal statement; while a theme can be helpful, sometimes it can also be a hindrance. If a theme works for you, great, use it. However, if trying to stick to a theme becomes awkward and keeps you from including what seems most important, ditch the theme.

You generally want to avoid attempts at humor and hyperbole. Depending on your exact field, if you apply to 15 or more programs and each program has 2-3 admissions team members read an application that means you could have 30-45 people reading your personal statement. What one person might find funny, another person might find offensive. Similarly, comparing yourself to religious figures or saying it was the most challenging, invigorating, eye-opening, etc. experience ever is not appropriate, because you cannot speak on behalf of all humanity. Avoid the “hero in a white coat” hyperbole.

The Elephant in the Room: AI

It is likely naïve to state that you should not use any form of Artificial Intelligence to prepare your application. These are tools that, like many others, can be used to increase productivity, shape and articulate your ideas, and clean up the editorial process. However, keep in mind that the school does not want to know how well you can use technology to shape a great application package. The school wants to genuinely know who you are and why you are a good fit for their school and the profession. You are doing yourself a disservice if you do not make your personal statement truly personal.

Many schools now have attestations regarding the use of AI in the application and writing process. This is slightly problematic since anyone who uses autocorrect, spellcheck, or the red lines in a Word document is technically using AI. You will need to read those attestations and decide what response is accurate for you. Schools and even individual application readers vary as to how much weight this answer has on their decision.

Many schools are ironically using AI to identify applications suspected of containing AI-generated content. Many readers are also adept at seeing some of the telltale signs like over usage of certain punctuation and certain words or phrases. The bottom line is that you want this to be your best possible work, and if you feel using AI will get you there, that is your choice, but you must be sure the ideas, examples, and writing is your own

and no one else's to be sure you are going into the right profession and the right school for you.

Tips about the Writing Process

The application systems cannot recognize any text formatting, so do not use any bold, italics, underline, etc. in your personal statement. If you want to reference a book or movie title that should include some of these formatting features for proper grammar, you will want to use quotation marks instead.

A personal statement does not need to be structured the way you have traditionally been taught to write essays with an introduction, body, and conclusion (though it can). The personal statement is more personal and is a slightly less formal style of writing while still retaining the professionalism expected in your field. This should not be a simple summary of your experiences/resume; it should be a chance to demonstrate deeper reflection on your experiences. Prompts that can help you as you start writing:

- How have your experiences impacted you?
- How have you impacted others in your community?
- What have you learned from your experiences outside the classroom?
- What skills have you demonstrated in these experiences?
- How have you grown?
- How does this all come together to confirm that your chosen health professional field is the only career that will make you happy?

Your school's writing center and/or pre-health professions advising staff are trained in helping students (and often alumni) write personal statements, and they can help from the very beginning of the process creating an outline and structure for what you want to write about or giving feedback on a draft as you are mid-way through the process. Do not hesitate to get help from these sources!

When you work on your first couple of drafts, do not worry about the exact character limit or going too long. It is much easier to start with too much text and then make it shorter than to do the reverse.

It can be frustrating at times, but applicants regularly go through multiple rounds of major edits and revisions when writing a personal statement. Many applicants will have at least five drafts, and some have up to ten or fifteen. As you make edits, do not delete what you previously wrote, simply save it as a new draft, since in a future version, you may go back and add in some of what you previously removed.

Conclusion portions are often the most challenging part of writing a personal statement. As you edit and review your drafts, be sure to read your conclusion and ask, "Does this represent me, and only me, or could this conclusion be the summary for many other applicants?" If it is too generic, edit it to be more tailored to only you.

As you start making edits and revisions, it can be helpful to get feedback from some of the following: an employee of the writing center, an academic/pre-health advisor, a close friend, a family member, and/or a faculty member who knows you well. At a certain point in the writing process, you will likely start to get conflicting advice. Keep in mind that when you ask for feedback, it is up to you if you choose to incorporate those tips; ultimately, you are the one applying, so you need to submit a final personal statement that pleases you.

When you are done crafting the content of your personal statement, have a friend who is great about catching typos and grammar mistakes read through one last time to ensure your statement does not have any typos or errors.