

The Perfect Personal Statement!

I. Some Words on Structure

Structure refers to how you choose to present the information in your personal statement. Good structure will make your piece flow, and enhance the reader's ability to understand what you are trying to get across.

Some people can write well without thinking too much about structure. They naturally organize their information to be seamless, transitioning well between points and making their comments relevant to a theme. Most people, however, need to work at it a little more. Here are some very basic tips on how to make sure your personal statement has good structure.

Choose a FOCUS

What is it?

Focus refers to the main point of your statement. Sometimes it is called a theme. Most of what you say in your statement will contribute to supporting your focus. In the very broadest sense, the focus of all medical school personal statements is "Why I Should Be Accepted to Medical School,". However, you need to choose something a little subtler and personal to make a positive impression. Your focus should entail a value or an observation that has shaped you as a person. Most of the time a focus is an abstract quality: the desire to help others, the importance of individual contribution, the drive to unite science and compassion.

How to choose it.

Because of the abstract nature of focus, it can seem like a daunting task to choose one for your personal statement. Instead of sitting down and trying to come up with abstraction that you think defines you, it is much easier to come up with a list of experiences that have had an impact on your life. You can then examine the experiences to see what, exactly, about them made them important. This will often yield a good focus.

Here are some tips to consider when choosing an experience to evaluate for a focus:

- It should be unique. It does not have to be life shattering, but you should be able to write about it with conviction, enthusiasm and authority.
- It should be an experience you feel some passion for. You must be able to support it as a "turning point" in your life. Ask yourself, "How did I change as a result of this experience?" For example, did it give you a new perspective or understanding, did it give you a new direction in life, or help you come to an important realization?
- Don't limit yourself to thinking of experiences that can translate well into the moral of " . . . and that's why I want to be a doctor." Choose something that you feel is truly representative of you, and something that you feel you can use to transition to other relevant aspects of your life. Otherwise, your statement may come off sounding staged or strained.
- It should be sustainable throughout your statement. In other words, it has to have enough depth and flexibility to carry you through your statement while avoiding repetition. The details of the event should afford you opportunity to talk about related experiences that you want the people who are considering you for an interview to know.

Can you give me an example?

Perhaps an experience that impacted you was the time you were thrown from your horse and

dislocated your hip on the day before an important riding competition. It was a pivotal experience because it was the first time you were a patient with a serious injury, and because it was the biggest disappointment of your life. While in the hospital, your roommate was a woman who had just had both of her legs amputated due to diabetes. One possible focus that could be derived from this experience is how you learned how to put the elements of your life in perspective. This is a lesson that might have helped you in ensuing experiences, and you could outline ways that it could help you during medical school, or as a doctor.

There are also many ways to use the experience to talk about other issues involved in becoming a doctor. You could talk about how you felt as a patient, and the things about your treatment that you appreciated. Perhaps your doctors were attentive to your deep disappointment as well as to your injury. You could talk about how you used the time away from riding to develop an interest in sports medicine, or volunteering, or riding instruction, or psychology. The possibilities of a well-chosen experience are limitless. As long as the experience was memorable and formed you in some way, it is a good candidate for the production of focus.

Create a FRAME for your FOCUS:

What is it?

When most people think of frames, they think of the structure around a picture, or the structure that holds something up-like a skeleton or building frame. That is a pretty accurate way to think about the frame in writing, too. A frame will give your statement a shape. It will provide a concrete way for you to introduce and talk about your focus.

Most of the time, if you've come up with a good experience from which to draw a focus, you can use details of the same experience for your frame. While the focus is often an abstract idea, the frame consists of concrete details-places, people, action. It provides a means for anchoring your focus by setting a scene.

Many people think of the frame as a story, and in a lot of ways it is. In a personal statement, it usually consists of an anecdote that is introduced at the beginning of your statement and is brought to some sort of closure at the end.

Can you give me an example?

Keeping with the experience we used to derive a focus, here is an example of how frame might function to open a personal statement:

Nothing was more important to me on that warm morning in June than the upcoming competition. I'd been riding horses since I was six, and tomorrow I'd be riding the most difficult jump course of my life. I'd come out early to practice, and although it was sunny, there was still dew in the grass. The first time around the course I heard my horse's hooves click against the top bar of barriers twice. Determined to have a perfect sweep, I sent her into the course a second time without stopping for a breather. My impatience cost me dearly. As my horse gathered herself to clear the third and largest fence of the course, I felt her falter and leaned forward to encourage her. My last minute adjustment didn't help. The barrier caught her at the knees and we crashed down together.

Of course, you don't want to use up too much of your limited space just setting a scene. Make sure your frame serves multiple purposes:

- It introduces the occasion of the focus
- It introduces you
- It is creative enough to spark interest in the rest of your statement

By framing the statement with an anecdote, you provide your audience with immediate access to some aspect of your past, your character, and your personality. Also, you give them incentive to read on to find out what happens next.

Make sure you return, even if it is only in a cursory way, to the frame at the end of the statement. Often, this is a good opportunity to summarize the important points of your statement and tie them together into a concluding observation.

What is a concluding observation?

The concluding observation is a restatement of your focus, but in a way that shows how it has evolved over time from a lesson that you learned as a result of a specific event into a bit of wisdom that you've found useful to apply to other situations in your life--and that will continue to serve you in medical school and as a doctor.

Here is how the frame and concluding observation might function at the end of a statement:

I'm sometimes a bit ashamed when I think that I had to dislocate my hip in order to learn that my approach to life was limiting my horizons. The first day that I returned to the saddle I was too sore to do more than ride very slowly through the fields near the stables. I remember that it was the best ride of my life, and to this day I only ride my horse for pleasure, not competition. To be honest, it's because I haven't had the time! My accident forced me away from a consuming passion and gave me the opportunity to discover other treasures in my life, treasures that to this day I find more rewarding than competitive riding. The foremost of those pleasures has been working at the summer camps for children who have lost arms and legs to amputation. I want to continue to broaden myself in medical school and beyond so that I might encounter yet more treasures along the path to becoming a pediatric surgeon.

Create Strong TRANSITIONS

Transitions refer to the language you use to move from one idea to the next. Most of the time transitions are accompanied by a paragraph break. You should never assume, however, that a paragraph break is enough of an indication that you are leaving one idea behind and moving on to another.

One way to check for clear transitions is to make sure the first sentence of every paragraph is somehow related to the last sentence in the previous paragraph. Even when you need to shift gears pretty drastically, you should find a way to create a "bridge" between your ideas.

If you have chosen a strong focus and frame, your transitions will come much easier. This is because you can use your frame and focus as a sort of hub that is the origin of each new idea that you choose to explore in your statement.

In addition to making sure that you transition well between your ideas, you should also make sure that your ideas are presented in a logical order that your reader can identify and follow. Many students choose to use chronological order. You might choose to order things from most to least important, or use categorize your ideas (e.g. academics, volunteer experience, work experience, etc.) Whatever order you choose, be faithful to it

II. Some Words on Style

Style refers to how you choose to use words to say what you have to say. There are a lot of different styles, and many of them are acceptable for a personal statement. However, you don't want to compromise on several points:

Grammar

Make sure that your syntax is correct. Not only must you be fastidious about basics such as spelling and subject verb agreement, you should pay careful attention to your form. Make sure that you don't have sentence fragments or run on sentences. Use punctuation correctly. Always have someone proofread your statement, and if grammar is not your thing, have someone who is good at grammar check your statement for errors.

Follow Through and Flesh Out

If you bring raise issues, be prepared to follow through on them and offer explanation or background. A common mistake is to make a statement and then assume that the reader will be able to place it as relevant. You must be explicit, and make sure that you round out the issues you raise with supporting details. For example, if you introduce the fact that you are a single mother, you must make sure that it is relevant to your focus, and you should offer details about how it is relevant. If you say that your desire to become a doctor started after your trip to Mexico, you need to tell why this is so. If you say, "I didn't think I'd ever make it at a college like Carnegie Mellon," give the reasons that you felt this way. Sometimes writers rely too much on meaning that they believe to be implicit and leave the reader with questions. Remember, the person reading your essay knows very little about you, your life experiences, your character, or your personality. Be clear.

Show, Don't Tell

This is the most valuable--and most cited--piece of advice given to writers. Writing that is preachy or full of generalities sheds little light onto the character of the writer and, worse, is boring. You can be perfectly technically correct in your prose, but if you're just telling and not showing, you are not communicating.

Here is an example of writing that tells a lot, but really doesn't say much:

The medical profession combines knowledge and wisdom from just about every aspect of life which is directed towards helping humanity. A physician is not just part of the health care team

but the leader of the health care team. He is free to practice broadly or to acquire a specialty of his own choosing. Thus medicine offers the challenges and fulfillment that I am seeking in a career.

These statements profess truths that might be indisputable, but they are also full of platitudes and common knowledge and offer the reader no real information. This sort of general language of telling should be avoided at all costs.

Often when writing personal statements, students fall into the habit of telling and not showing in an effort to squeeze in all their accomplishments, resume-style. They resort to lists:

My desire to work with people is demonstrated by my many interactions as a volunteer. In 1997 I aided elderly and blind residents at the Homewood Retirement Community read their mail and write letters. The following summer, I served food at the local homeless shelter. As secretary of my high school chapter of SADD, I arranged for speakers at several community and school fundraisers. In addition to my volunteer activities, I've held a job since I was twelve. I worked on my uncle's farm until I started ninth grade, at which time I was able to get a position as dish washer at a family restaurant. When I got my driver's license, I took a cashier's job at the gift store at Mercy Hospital in Altoona.

Although these accomplishments might be important to an application to medical school, they shouldn't appear list-like in a personal statement.

The reader doesn't get a sense for why you did these things, or how you felt about them, or what you learned.

Here are some ways that you can be sure to show and not tell:

- Use sensory details to help set scenes. Note what the sky looks like, what color a child's dress is, how the food smells. Make sure your reader is right there with you.
- Share your personal emotions and indicate how your surroundings affected you. This will give the reader a better idea of your individualism and make experiences that are common seem unique.
- Be anecdotal and use examples to illustrate your observations.
- Write with the intention of communicating something original. Don't just put down what you think the reader wants to hear.
- Avoid general commentary.