Personal Statement and Optional Essays – Suggestions and Guidelines

Taken from:
- I Am A Health Professions’ Advisor: The Essential Hurdles, Filo Maldonado, Texas A & M University
- Brown University, Health Careers Office
- AMCAS 2009 Application Worksheet
- University of Michigan Career Center

Applicants quickly come to realize that this essay is not as easy to write as they may have originally assumed in that it requires a good amount of introspection, soul-searching and contemplation. The personal statement should provide an accurate “snapshot” of the applicant - who are you, what are you about, why do you want to pursue medicine? Your personal statement should be composed over a period of time, not in a few hours.

Admissions committees place significant weight on the content of your personal statement. A well written, thoughtful personal statement should be your objective. Within the text of your personal statement, you should include your goals, your philosophy of medicine, your motivation for medicine and any special life circumstances or experiences that have helped to shape your perspective as a medical student and/or future physician. The criteria that are most important for evaluators include, but are not necessarily limited to:

- Consistency of your response
- Expessed commitment to service
- Explanation of any outstanding issues
- Expression of genuine, not contrived, voice
- Communication of depth of understanding
- Specifies unique qualifications

The applicant should focus on one or two illustrative events that can be united by a theme or a thesis. Incorporate specific examples and experiences that discern you from other applicants. Make sure what you include is well written, logical, clear, and concise. Both AMCAS and TMDSAS have character limits:

- **AMCAS - character limit of 5300 with the following prompt:** Use the space provided to explain why you want to go to medical school
- **TMDSAS – character limit of 5000 including with the following prompt:** Explain your motivation to seek a career in MEDICINE. Discuss your philosophy of the medical profession and indicate your goals relevant to the profession.

If you are in the early stages of creating your personal statement, and you are still brainstorming about its content:

1. While it is not necessary, some people like to use themes/messages/images that guide their organization and frame their document. Can you think of any possibilities for your document?
2. Addressing the concept of fit is a crucial step in the personal statement process. What are five ways that you believe that the world of medicine is a good fit for you? Also, what are five ways that you feel you are a good fit for the profession?
3. Because the personal statement is reflective in nature, it is good practice to use experiences and personal values that have impacted your decision to become a physician. However, it is important not to make your personal statement a narrative resume. Brainstorm five experiences and values that you think might give the admissions committee the perspective they need to invite you for an interview.
If you already have a draft:

(1) Because admission committees read thousands of essays each year, they tend to be unimpressed with personal statements that are too general. In order to get a sense for how personal your statement is, take a highlighter and highlight every sentence that anybody could have written.

(2) What do these sentences have in common?

- When I was little I had an aunt/grandparent/parent/sibling who was ill and taking care of him/her made me want to become a doctor.
- I broke my leg/arm/toe when I was in high school and the doctors that took care of me made me want to be a physician.
- I enjoy science and people and pursuing the path of medicine is the perfect way for me to combine those interests.

These are all variations of phrases that are read hundreds of times each year by medical school admission committees. It is okay to write about these stories; however, it is important that you own these experiences in a way that does not come across as too generic, superficial or overly simplistic.

Do you feel like you accomplished telling your story in an interesting and thoughtful way?

Helpful links:
http://www.cmu.edu/hpp/achieve/pstips.html
https://www.aamc.org/students/download/182162/data/2012_amcas_instruction_manual.pdf (pgs 64-65)

Optional Essays - To Write or Not to Write

The Question
“Any ideas about how to address the ‘optional essay’? Some of my students feel that they were able to fully address their interest in medicine in the AMCAS essay as well as more specific secondary questions. Is it frowned upon to not add anything in the ‘optional essay’? Also when the question is something like, ‘Please explain your motivation for wanting to be a doctor and any special experiences you have had that affected your choice’, if the applicant feels there is nothing to add, how is that perceived?”

The Answers (opinions from different Deans and Admissions Officers)

- My advice is to answer it if only to “reiterate” what they have said in their personal statement already. In fact they can say, “to reiterate…..”. in general, leaving something blank, even if it is “optional”, can often be seen as negative.

- I always find it hard to believe that a student can provide everything they want to say to admissions committees in the single page allowed by AMCAS. Reiteration is probably not what they want to do, but rather "flesh out" their earlier personal statement with, perhaps, more examples, illustrations, experiences, etc. My experience is that students find it "hard" to write about themselves, not that they have nothing more to say. I'd encourage students to use all the space provided as widely and fully as possible.

- I strongly encourage applicants to fill out the space with something, preferably a bit different than what is in the AMCAS essay. This is the students chance to link himself with the specific school, even if the question doesn’t ask for that specifically. It is also the place to explain something that is not part of the original “theme” of the primary essay. I read the secondary essay carefully – it tells me a good bit about the student some times. A blank space implies, to me at least, that they didn’t care enough to write something about “our” school. Of note, with many students writing mini-essays with each of their “experiences” on the AMCAS application, there is less of a need to use this space to explain more about one of those experiences. Still, it’s there for a reason, fill it in.