

## Writing Your Personal Essays for Health Care Professional School

The personal essay should be about you and your motivation for pursuing a career in your chosen profession. Why you want to be that particular type of health care provider is different from how you were inspired to become one. Describe your passion for your chosen field with specific examples from your experiences over the years.

**Try to choose a theme** rather than random thoughts. Remember, your job is to sell yourself. The activities section on your primary application provides a list of accomplishments. Your personal essay is an opportunity to provide additional, more in-depth information.

**Concentrate more on actual experiences** rather than speculation about future accomplishments. Take an inventory of your accomplishments before writing. Be selective and choose to discuss the things that are the most interesting and make you stand out. It can be helpful to start by completing the activities section in the primary application, then select one or two experiences that you wish to describe and reflect on more deeply.

**Avoid spending too much of your essay writing about other people.** You might have been greatly inspired by a family member's triumph over adversity, or the amazing bedside manner of a health care provider you shadowed, but the admissions panel is not evaluating these other people for admission. They want to know about *you*.

Although you are writing about yourself, **it is important not to make the essay all about what you want**, and what you hope to gain from becoming a health care professional. Focus on who you are in the context of what you can *give*. Demonstrate a service orientation rather than a selfish one. How will you contribute to your professional school class, be of service your patients, and contribute to your profession in general. Try to vary sentence structure so that you limit the number of sentences that start with "I"

**REMEMBER**, your audience is smarter, has more medical knowledge, and knows what is like to be health care professional. Don't try to impress them with your knowledge of medicine or terminology.

**The essay is also a sample of your writing skills** and should be written very clearly and concisely. It must contain NO spelling or grammar errors. PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD! The quality of your written application is one of the areas you will be evaluated on.

**Get feedback!** Have 3 or 4 people you can trust to be honest with you (professor, health care provider, medical student, parent, advisor, tutor, etc.) read your essay and offer feedback. Your PPA advisor is happy to do this. The Writing Center <https://writingcenter.utah.edu/> is another excellent resource. Do not ask too many people to read it, however. Hearing too many opinions can become confusing.

## **Dos and Don'ts**

- DO answer the questions “Why do you want to be a \_\_\_\_\_”
- DO share your background if it is appropriate
- DO describe meaningful experiences
- DO use all 5 senses as you tell your story
- DO limit the number of “I” statements
- DO pay careful attention to grammar, spelling, and punctuation
- DO NOT summarize or repeat the activity list on your primary application
- DO NOT use overly flowery language or words you do not know how to use
- DO NOT overuse medical terminology or abbreviations
- DO NOT assume everyone knows what you know
- DO NOT try to make jokes
- DO NOT use foreign language
- DO NOT begin your essay with a quote

## **Strategies to Help You Get Started**

**Free-writing** a page or two on multiple prompts over a few weeks or a month before you start actually rough drafting a Personal Statement itself is very helpful to most writers. As you explore the ideas that occur to you in writing your prompts, often your way “in” will present itself. Keep all these exercises in a “compost pile” folder for possible future use.

**Don't limit yourself in your first draft.** It's much easier to have written 5, or even 10, pages and then cut it down to 1 ½ to 2 pages, than to have only written half a page, and not know where to go next; and you will also have more developed drafts to add to your 'compost' folder.

Remember: **if you're applying to a professional school**, there are “secondary” applications which will require additional personal essays for each school. Keep clearly noted copies of every draft, so recycling the parts you didn't use in your 'primary' in drafting are easily identified for recycling for those secondary application essays.

Likewise, **if you're applying for funding or a scholarship**: you're always going to need money! Saving the 'pieces' from draft that you don't use means that you have them available for the next time you need it.

**If you find writing stressful**, you may also find it helpful to have someone objective read through and talk about your pre-writes with you—it's not uncommon for someone with fresh eyes to see your way “in” more easily or more clearly than you, because of your level of stress. Our office is glad to be that objective eye if you like.

### **Pre-Writing Prompts to Help You Reflect on Your Journey**

- Who are the influential *people* in my life?
- What are the influential *elements* in my life?
- Where (or what) have been the “forks” in my road?
- How do *I* describe *myself*?
- How do *others* describe me?
- What are my hopes and dreams? Why?
- Who are my role models? Why?
- What are the *most* important things in my life?
- What makes me unique?
- What are my hobbies?
- What are the 5 biggest lessons I’ve learned in life? Where and how did I learn them?
- What makes me happy? Sad? Mad? Satisfied? Frustrated?
- What does my ideal world look like?
- How have my loved ones influenced my journey?
- What do I bring to medicine that others might not?
- What are my biggest strengths? Limitations?
- What’s the greatest hardship I’ve faced in my life? How did I overcome—or fail to meet—that challenge?
- How do I respond to challenge?
- What have I learned from adversity?
- What part of my life is unrelated to medicine?
- What is my favorite way to communicate?
- What elements of my culture are most personal/influential to me?
- What groups do I belong to and how has that identity influenced me?
- What are the pros/cons of a career in medicine?
- What have I learned in preparing for professional (med, dental, vet, etc.) school?
- What are my aspirations if I don’t get in?

**The real question you are trying to answer is: Why do I want to be a \_\_\_\_\_?**

Start with these prompts to get you thinking about yourself and your life. Themes will likely emerge that you can use to craft your own unique message. With thorough preparation, thoughtful reflection, careful writing, and candid feedback, you can write a personal essay that reflects the best of you—your character, your experiences, and your sincere motivation so serve others as a healthcare professional.