

Writing Residency Personal Statements

1. What is the purpose of a personal statement?

- The personal statement is used by residency directors to find information that cannot be gleaned from the candidate's grades or CV, such as the candidate's character and motivations, or interesting details that would make them want to meet the candidate in person.
- The personal statement is a chance for candidates to highlight qualities and experiences that are particularly relevant to the specialty they are choosing. It also gives them a chance to describe their professional aspirations and the philosophy or experiences that motivate their career choices.
- The personal statement is only one piece of the application package, and generally not the first document residency directors examine when selecting candidates for an interview. In other words, the statement might not rescue an application package that has other flaws. But it might certainly hurt an otherwise good application, for instance because it is too generic or riddled with grammatical and spelling mistakes.

Therefore:

- Don't spend more time over it than it is worth.
- Be safe: don't be too original (unless you are a really good writer or entertaining story-teller) and don't lie or oversell yourself (if you like birds but can only name three species, don't call yourself a "birder", because the person interviewing you might be a real birder.)

2. What should it contain?

In general, residency directors want to know:

- What draws you to the specialty? Make sure your motivation sounds genuine and your view of the specialty realistic.
- What skills or qualities do you bring that will make you succeed during residency and beyond? (Clinical skills, communication skills, experience of specific issues or patient populations, leadership skills, team spirit, teaching or research experience...)
- Personal attributes that make you particularly well suited for the specialty, will help you succeed in your profession and/or will help you withstand the rigors of residency training.
- What are your long-term plans (beyond residency)? What setting would you like to practice in? What kind of professional would you like to become?
- Will you be a good fit for their team? The only way they can tell is if you reveal enough of your interests, qualities and aspirations to give them an idea of what kind of colleague you would be.
- If you are applying to a specific program (rather than through a nation-wide matching system), what attracts you to this particular program?

3. How to make it convincing and interesting:

- Give specific examples of experiences that inform your career choice or demonstrate your skills (avoid clichés and generalities).
- Given the choice, choose experiences from your recent school or clinic years over experiences from college or earlier, to show that you have grown professionally and personally. (Experiences from your private life may be good too, provided they relate convincingly to your professional goals or motivations.)
- Draw personal conclusions from your experiences—show your ability to reflect on an experience with professional maturity.
- Make it personal: Talk about what you believe, what you like about the specialty, what interests you, what you find rewarding and why. (Avoid lecturing your reader on what the profession should be.)
- Try to include details that will distinguish you from other applicants: perhaps you have had an unusual training experience; perhaps you have an unusual way of thinking of the specialty (yet one that will resonate with others in the specialty).
- Don't just repeat everything that is already in your CV: choose a few examples that make interesting, important, and separate points.
- For instance, highlight things that illustrate your interest in the specialty, ability to work hard, dedication to patients, or anything else that shows you went beyond the curricular requirements of school.

4. Writing the Personal Statement

There is no single recipe for how to write the Personal Statement.

- Some people lead with an anecdote that encapsulates why they like this specialty or what kind of health professional they want to be.
- Others lead with a statement of their beliefs or professional aspirations. Some people pepper their whole statement with arresting stories.
- Others prefer abstract concepts. Any of these models can work, as long as they address the concerns a Residency Director may have (see section 2 above).

That said, here are a few strong recommendations:

- To find inspiration, read the samples (included an annotated sample) provided on the OCPD website (career.ucsf.edu)
- Organize your essay in a thematic rather than chronological fashion. That's because your essay has to answer several questions in the mind of the residency director, rather than documenting all the chronological steps that led you to choose a specialty. (Review Section 2.)
- Dedicate one paragraph (at most two) to each theme. The exact themes are up to you, but they should allow you to deliver the kind of information a residency director is looking for. Start each paragraph with a topic sentence that lets the reader know what theme the paragraph is developing. (An exception to this rule is the first paragraph, which may start with an anecdote, and end with the theme: "And that's why I want to specialize in X.")
- The specialty you are applying for should appear early in your essay—ideally in the first paragraph, at least by the second paragraph. Otherwise, your reader might lose interest or wonder whether you are applying to the right program.
- First write, then revise. Your first draft will probably cost you a lot of effort and it will probably be bad. But once you have written it, you can start revising it according to the principles listed above.
- Show your draft first to someone who can comment on its content (a peer or an advisor), second to someone who can help you improve the writing (an editor), and finally to someone who can correct your spelling or grammatical mistakes.

5. Common Problems:

- Residency statement is a barely updated version of the medical/dentistry school application essay.
- At this point in your career, you don't have to justify your interest in medical school or dentistry school. Rather, you have to make a strong case for why you would be a great, fit for the specialty.
- Presumably new things have happened in the past 4 years that inform your decision to choose your specialty or career path, or that illustrate your dedication, leadership and teaching skills, ability for empathy, etc. Use these more recent experiences as a way to show your professional maturity.
- Statement is too steeped in the past, not looking to the future enough.
- The personal statement is the only document in your application where you can discuss your vision of your future. Take advantage of it!
- Avoid spending the whole essay documenting the steps that led you to choose a specialty. Leave room to talk about your current interests and future aspirations, in residency and beyond.
- When reflecting on a past experience, say how it will affect your practice or future career decisions, not just how it changed you at the time.
- Be careful not to disclose information that may make the reader question whether you are fit for their program. For instance, if you choose to talk about your personal experience with illness, show how this experience will be an asset rather than a source of vulnerability.

6. Next Steps:

OCPD has several resources and services to support you during the residency application process including:

- Online samples of personal statements and CVs donated by former UCSF students and located at career.ucsf.edu.
- Individual counseling appointments for review of your application and interview practice To make an appointment, please call 476-4986, Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.- 5 p.m.