

Composing Personal Statements for Admission to Schools of Human Medicine

Personal statement(s) support the admissions selection process. While admissions committees place varying weight on these narrative submissions, they all want to learn more about who you really are and why you want to study medicine. Through them, you demonstrate your ability to reflect on your life with perspective and communicate well in a written format.

An effective statement will illuminate your distinctive background, experience, motivation, and preparation for a medical field. How to start? Review your responses to the 20Q. Here are some rhetorical choices you could make:

1. Focus on a central theme that demonstrates your personal contribution to your world. Show how that theme prevails across different experiences.
2. Pick one to three responses to the 20Q and develop them, using concrete examples from important experiences or events in your life.
3. Pick a single response in the 20Q. Reflect on the question you answered and refine the question so your response sheds the best light on your own experience. Deepen the focus and expand the breadth of that response.

You will prepare a succession of personal statements throughout the admissions process. Here are the most common ones:

1. Health Careers Evaluation Committee (HCEC) Personal Statement (PS)

This statement carries no specific length constraints. There is no specific topic for the HCEC personal statement, but your PS will probably address the final question in the 20Q. What would you like the HCEC to know about you that will help it to produce a comprehensive HCEC Letter?

The HCEC PS is your opportunity to start thinking now about how to best portray yourself in a distilled narrative form. The statements you submit during the application process may not resemble your HCEC PS, because your thoughts will evolve as you proceed through the admissions cycle. However, it is a “first final draft” of your eventual statement to the schools.

The HCEC PS is used by Committee members and HCEC staff. It is not sent to medical schools. The HCEC does not quote directly from the PS in the HCEC Letter.

2. Application service (AMCAS, AACOMAS, AADSAS, OPTOMCAS, etc.) statements

Some application services require narrative statements. They send them to the schools that you designate. These statements must be more generic, as many different schools will evaluate them. Statements of this kind must be well-drafted and polished compositions. They have length and topical constraints.

3. Individual schools' secondary or supplementary application essays

After they receive your contact information or your verified application from the service, many schools will request that you complete their supplementary application, which may include writing additional statements. These statements allow you to address your motivation for attending that specific school.

4. Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)

These timed writing samples assess your ability to develop a central idea, synthesize concepts, and present thoughts cohesively and logically. The essay should follow accepted practices of grammar, syntax, and punctuation. You can find sample questions on the Internet. Practice writing under timed conditions.

The writing section of the MCAT will be phased out in 2013. It now contains two essays that together produce a Writing Sample score, which all the schools receive. Medical schools do not automatically receive the actual essays; however, they may request them.

Resources and Tips

For more information on personal statements, attend the briefing, "Writing the Personal Statements and Essays for the HCEC and for Application," given each spring, or listen to the session on our web site.

The CCS Library, 103 Barnes, has reference books containing sample statements.

For composition help, go to the Walk-in Service of the Writing Workshop. Bring a draft. The tutors will read, suggest, and question you in order to guide your writing process.

For picking up problems in the flow of words, ask someone to read the statement aloud. Pauses and hesitations by the reader indicate problems with the clarity of the idea presented or the writing.

For an opinion on the topic and its relevance to your admissions outlook, see a health careers advisor.

For comment on the quality of your final draft, ask an unbiased person familiar with current medical school admissions to give a candid assessment.