

# Crafting a Personal Statement for Health Profession Programs

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## Steps to Writing a Personal Statement:

1. Understand the personal statement.
2. Contemplate your knowledge, motivation, influence, and goals.
3. Identify your strongest attributes.
4. Begin to write:
  - a. Start with the body of your statement.
  - b. Add the introduction.
  - c. Finish with the closing paragraph.
5. Review, edit, repeat.

## 1. Understand the Personal Statement

Most health profession programs require that students submit their primary application through a centralized application system (i.e. AMCAS for MD programs, PTCAS for DPT programs, etc.). One aspect that is common of all centralized application systems is a personal statement, which will be read by the admissions committee. The personal statement is generic (not specific to one individual school) as the same essay sent to all programs you plan to apply to through the centralized application system.

The personal statement/essay is an opportunity to share your story, motivation, and what you have learned about yourself. Good personal statements entice admissions committee members to want to meet the student for an interview.

Generally speaking, the personal statement should answer the following two questions:

1. Why should they pick you?
2. Why are you a good fit for [medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, etc.]?

### Primary Application- Personal Statement Length & Prompt (as of 2020)

**AMCAS (MD)**- 5,300 character limit; no prompt

**AACOMAS (DO)**- 5,300 character limit; no prompt

**TMSAS (Texas MD & DO)**- 5,000 character limit; no prompt

**OTCAS (Occupational Therapy)**- no character limit; no prompt

**PTCAS (DPT)**- 4,500 characters limit; prompt: "Every person has a story that has led them to a career. Since there are a variety of health professions that "help" others, please go beyond your initial interaction or experience with physical therapy, and share the deeper story that has **confirmed** your decision to specifically pursue physical therapy as your career."

**PharmCAS (PharmD)**- 4,500 character limit; no prompt

**CASPA (Physician Assistant Programs)**- 5,000 character limit; no prompt

**OptomCAS (OD)**- 4,500 character limit; no prompt

**VMCAS (DVM)**- 3 prompts with a 2,000 character limit for each prompt:

1. There are many career choices within the veterinary profession. What are your future career goals & why?
2. In what ways do veterinarians contribute to society and what do you hope to contribute?
3. Consider the breadth of society which veterinarians serve. What attributes do you believe are essential to be successful within the veterinary profession? Of these attributes, which do you possess and how have you demonstrated these in the past?

## 1.a. Secondary Applications/Essays

When applying to individual school you may be asked to complete a secondary application, which tends to include one or more secondary essays. These, unlike the personal statement listed above, ARE specific to the program you are applying to. You may be asked to log into a new system to complete your secondary applications and secondary essays OR your primary application may expand to include a secondary application section for each school you select.

It is important that you dedicate the same amount of time and energy to these secondary essays that you did for the primary essay.

## 2. Before Writing: Contemplate your Knowledge, Motivation, Influence, and Goals

Before you can begin to write, you must know the profession and yourself. Consider the following questions:

1. What do you know about the profession?
  - a. What are the day-to-day challenges and how is the profession evolving?
  - b. What are the skills needed? Why are they needed? How will social aspects like population demographics, social determinants of health, and medical advances impact your future role?
2. What motivated you for this career?
  - a. Be sure that you have mature rather than pediatric reasons! (*pediatric reasons: because I like to help people, because I am good at science*)
1. How did your family/early experiences influence your life?
2. What experiences do you have that make the reader certain this field is the proper career? What did you learn from these experiences?
3. What are your long-term goals?

## 3. Identify your Strongest Attributes

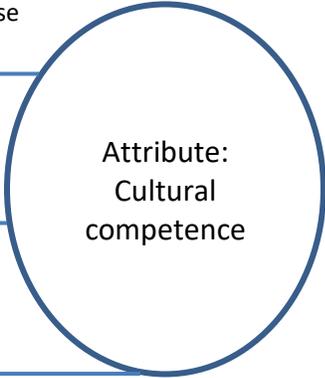
Using the template on the next page, consider your strongest attributes and the experiences/activities you have participate in/been exposed to that support this attribute.

### EXAMPLE

**Supporting example:** Working for my Senior Service Project exposed me to people of many different socio-economic levels that were at first, daunting. I learned to love what I was doing and show compassion to these people because they are truly just people. They deserve that dignity.

**Supporting example:** I speak French and I am approximately 85% fluent. I love talking with people and exploring their culture and what it has to offer. After learning the French language, I would like to continue learn Spanish and about their culture. It is not just about the language, but also the people and their customs.

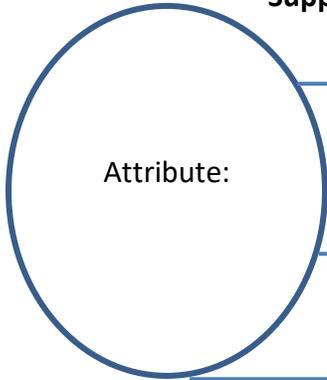
**Supporting example:** I have a desire to travel and to explore what is unknown to me, even if the situations are not the best situations. I enjoy visiting areas that put me out of my comfort zone, such as the time when I visited Fatima in Portugal. I have plans to go on a mission trip in the next year to better understand other's ways of life and focus on ways I can make a difference in their lives.



Attribute:  
Cultural  
competence

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Use the space below to explore your top 6 attributes. Start by filling out an attribute in the middle of the circle. Then, think of personal examples to support your claim to that attribute as in the example above. If you need more than 6 circles, copy the second page. After completing this exercise, identify what you believe to be your top 2 or 3 attributes, before moving on to the next step.

**Supporting example:**



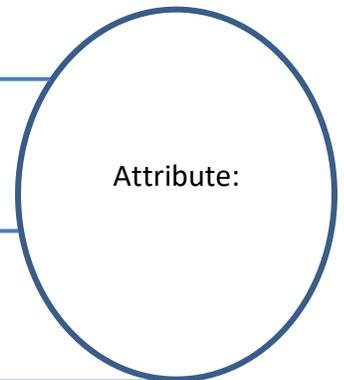
**Supporting example:**

**Supporting example:**

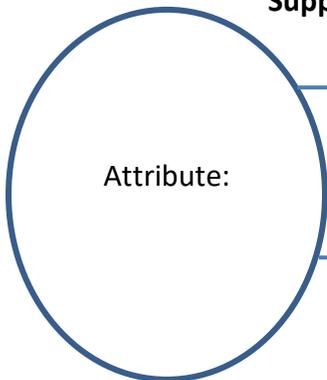
**Supporting example:**

**Supporting example:**

**Supporting example:**



**Supporting example:**



**Supporting example:**

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Attribute:

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Attribute:

## 4. Begin to Write

A personal statement should have a clear beginning, middle, and end.

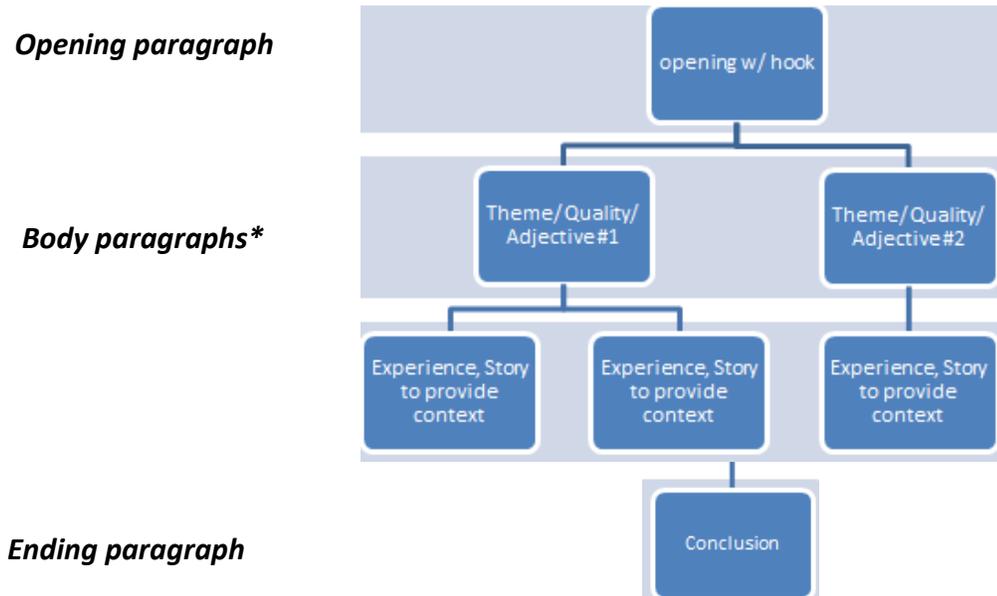
**Consider starting with the body of the statement** before moving on to the opening paragraph and then the closing.

**Using your top attributes identified in step #3, you should attempt to craft one paragraph for each attribute.** You do not need to use all of your supporting examples, but these should you identify things to write in your statement. These paragraphs should make up the body of your statement and the main themes addressing “why they should pick you” and “why you are a good fit for the profession.”

Once you have developed the body with clear themes, you can then move on to the opening paragraph. The opening should be strong (consider a hook), set the tone for the entire essay (written equivalent of a first impression), be positive, and introduce the themes (attributes) highlighted in the body of your statement.

Finally, you should craft your ending paragraph. The conclusion should reiterate your themes (attributes) and clearly articulate both your interest and fit.

### Sample Outline



*\*Note: you may have more than two themes/attributes*

## 5. Review, Edit, Repeat

Pretend you are an admissions reviewer, after reading the statement, are you left with 2-3 **very clear** qualities? Are they strong/impressive? Is humanism highlighted? What sets you apart from other applicants?

*Examples:* maturity, passionate, enthusiastic, logical, committed, able to relate to diverse cultures/cultural competence, compassionate/empathetic, genuine, leadership skills, self-awareness, ability to persevere/commitment, service orientated, strong communication skills (oral and written), teamwork skills, ethical responsibility, reliable/dependable, resilient/adaptable, having a capacity for improvement, critical thinking skills, aptitude for scientific inquiry.

Check for spelling and grammatical errors. How is the flow? Transitions? Clarity? Ask a few individuals, knowledgeable about the personal statement process, to review your statement.

Make revisions until you feel you have a solid draft.

## Do:

- a. Tell YOUR story.
- b. Have multiple drafts- most quality statements have gone through at least 7 drafts over a period of *many* months!
- c. Proofread, proofread, proofread.
- d. Be concise (“Brevity is the soul of wit”).
- e. Include recent experiences.
- f. Use active voice, use strong verbs, and vary your sentence structure.

## Do Not:

- a. Simply list, like a resume, your activities and accomplishments.
- b. Wait until the last minute!
- c. Begin every sentence with “I”.
- d. Fall into the traps listed below.

## **Themes to avoid (borrowed from John Hopkins Pre-Professional Programs & Advising):**

- a. **Clichés:** How many times do you think admissions committees have read the phrase, “I want to become a physician because I like science and I want to help people”?
- b. **The “epiphany into medicine”:** Your pursuit of the health professions should be the result of a series of thoughtful, conscious, and reflective decisions, NOT an instantaneous realization.
- c. **Manifest Destiny:** You have not “always known” that you want to be a physician (or dentist, etc.). See above. Similarly, who cares if “everyone has always said that I would make a good physician.” What do they know?
- d. **“I know what it is like to be a physician from [shadowing, volunteering, etc.]”** No, you do not. That is why you are hoping to go to medical school – so you might be lucky enough to find out one day.
- e. **Grandiosity:** Claiming that you plan to cure cancer (or HIV, or healthcare disparities, or anything else) shows a grave lack of understanding of whatever problem you are planning to solve.
- f. **Negativity:** No one likes a complainer. In particular, do not be negative about your school, your professors, or healthcare providers.
- g. **“I am special”:** Of course you are special. But claiming “you probably do not see many applicants like me” is not only arrogant but is also likely untrue. Admissions committees have seen it all.
- h. **Anything potentially inflammatory or controversial:** You do not know the values, beliefs, and background of the person who is reading your essay. Additionally, your beliefs are not the only “correct” beliefs. Furthermore, some people – including admissions officers – have personal biases and prejudices. For these reasons, it is advisable to avoid making any strong statements regarding politics, religion, and other polarizing topics. Be extremely cautious to avoid expressing any views that could be construed as derogatory to any group.
- i. **“I am a victim”:** Victims are never attractive candidates. If you have experienced difficulties, explain your experiences dispassionately and focus on how you overcame these difficulties, what you learned from your experiences, and how you are a stronger person because of your experiences.
- j. **Excuses:** In general, there are better uses for your personal statement than explaining away and justifying poor grades, incidents of misconduct, etc. However, if you choose to address these subjects, be sure to focus on what you have learned from those incidents and how your experiences have made you a stronger person. Never, ever blame anyone else for your mistakes.
- k. **Lies:** This includes information that may be factually accurate but is presented in a misleading way.
- l. **Leading with a quotation written by someone else:** They are interested in what you have to say.
- m. **Any unusual formats:** Do not submit artwork, photographs, collages, videos, etc. in lieu of a written essay. Likewise, do not write your personal statement in verse, limerick, haiku, etc.

## **Ready for a Review?**

Once you have at least one full draft, make an appointment with the Health Professions & STEM Career Development Center to review your statement! Visit <http://www.flsouthern.edu/pre-health>.