

Personal Statement Workshop
Dean Strome
Office of Student Affairs

Session goals and objectives

1. Know the role and purpose of the personal statement in the residency application process.
2. Understand the basic structure and format of an effective personal statement.
3. Know how to open the essay and the types of experiences that are more likely to leave the reader with a positive impression, as well as what to avoid.
4. Know what to include in the body of the essay and the ideal conclusion that gives program directors confidence in you as an applicant.

Podcast link:

<https://mediaserver.uthsc.edu/uthscms/play/692176429dd748789796e286a96753fe1d>

Overview of residency application and match

What you should be doing now:

- Look at programs where you want to do an away rotation
- How do you pick programs for an away rotation? Ask yourself these questions:
 - How do I learn best—in a big group? Or a mentored setting w/ small number of faculty.
 - Use the program's webpages, M4s, and interns who have gone through this process.
 - Do you have geographic preferences to where you want to end up?
 - If you're interested in a more competitive specialty and you want to end up somewhere random *i.e.* California, you either need to be from there or do an away rotation there.
 - Are you couples matching? Do you want to be near (or far) from your family? Family can be great support during residency, and these points are important to consider.
 - What do you like to do outside of residency?
 - Do you like city life, or do you prefer things outdoorsy activities?
 - You'll want to pick a place that you can be happy outside of residency, when you're not working.
 - Probably not worth doing residency in NYC if you hate city life...
- The number of JI's & aways you do depends on the specialty
 - Consider away rotations as interviews.
 - You're being evaluated starting with the first interaction you have with the program director, and even the assistant who helps set everything up.
 - Also consider doing your JI at home before doing aways.
- Mentors: you need someone to help guide you through this process.
 - Reach out to Student Affairs if you still need help finding one.
 - Doesn't have to be the most senior person, but someone who you relate to can get to know.

Personal statement

Basic structure and format

- Personal statement should be 1 page, standard 12 pt font.
- Five structured paragraphs
- It should give the reader something to help focus the conversation during an interview
- It should be a story that makes your CV come alive.

How Dean Strome (ENT) evaluates applicants

- Letter of recs → Essay → board scores

Classic mistakes

- The essay tells the reader about something he/she already knows. i.e. regurgitates the CV
- Avoid clichés:
 - DON'T start with a story about how you fell in love with the facial nerve the first time you saw it in the OR and that's why you want to do ENT.
 - Or, I worked with a deaf child and he inspired/ profoundly impacted me.
 - These stories don't really tell the reader anything about you personally and aren't that original as lots of people will write about things like this.

What to include

- First part: What is the most important thing you have you done in your life that you are the proudest of?
 - Don't say getting into medical school... We all did this...
 - Open with something catchy that will hook your reader from the beginning
 - "I woke up underneath a mosquito net"
 - "I was at the bottom of a medical ship when"
- Second part: Start telling your story, ideally one that sets you apart from everyone else.
 - Don't talk about the 100 different things you did to pad a CV
 - Good examples:
 - Worked in college with underprivileged youth and continued to do so in med school, working with Clinica.
 - College girl spent a summer in Africa chasing zebras for research → this trip was the result of X and this integration with other people was important to personal growth.
 - Come up with a theme that can help connect everything in the essay.
 - Examples:
 - Sports – team vs Individual pursuit
 - Humanism – giving back reaching out to underprivileged populations
 - Farmer – grew up on a farm, dad died from melanoma at age 16, had to take care of siblings.
 - Think about what you have done with your life and ask others what they think about you that makes you special.
- Third part:

- You should include a paragraph about your research, not necessarily to focus on what you actually published, but rather what you learned in the process and what your role was.
- It's OK even if it didn't work out, didn't get published if you took something away about the process.
- **Competitive specialties**:
 - Some schools may ask for a short paragraph about why you want to go to this school.
 - **If you don't write this, they won't look at you.** How else would you expect them to narrow down their search for 30 people to interview from 400 applicants for 3 spots?
 - Bad example to write about: You want to go to UTHSC b/c you like BBQ and love Corky's.
 - Better example: Find something specific about the program that interests you.
 - You're interested in doing X research that this attending does and this would value my training.
 - I would really value your mentor system or your extensive trauma experience.
 - Start thinking about and writing now when you have more time rather than wait until summer when we're doing JI's, studying for Step, etc.
- Closing paragraph: resiliency.
 - Recognize that medicine and residency are tough and persuade your reader that you'll be able to overcome the obstacles.
 - You can talk about family values, someone important in your life, or give an example of something you've overcome in your life.
 - Use this paragraph to give the program directors confidence you have what it takes to make it through residency.

Other tips

- NO SPELLING ERRORS
- Have several other people read it.
- Avoid passive voice, use an active tense
- Be concise. Why use 3 words when you can use one
- You should write it, but have someone else read it to have make absolutely sure

Q&A:

- Should I talk about why I chose this specialty in the essay?
 - There are differing opinions on this, but Dean Strome says not to focus on this.
 - You can mention if you want, but don't take up the whole essay. Think 1 sentence rather than a full paragraph.

Timing:

- You want to start writing as soon as possible
- Will need time to go through each draft, have several people read it.
- Especially important if you're doing something competitive and will need to write something specific for each school.

Letters of recommendation

- Does NOT have to be from the most senior person.
 - What matters most is that whomever writes your letter knows you.
 - Better to have a letter from a junior faculty who gives glowing reviews rather than a chair who say something generic like “We were privileged to have X rotate with us. Our faculty said he did a good job.”
- Letters from other specialties other than the one to which you’re applying?
 - Probably not the best idea.
 - It’s better to get a letter from someone in the specialty you’re going into.
 - There’s a good chance your reader will know or be familiar with that person in the same field.
 - Also might raise questions. Why did X (applying to med-peds) have a letter from optho? Did he have a bad experience and couldn’t find letters in Med-Peds?
 - If you do aways, get at least 1-2 from your away rotations
- SOCIAL MEDIA: THEY LOOK.
 - Residents will look you up and make sure you don’t have any red flags
 - GET RID OF THOSE SKELETONS NOW!

Away rotations

- Most important factors that programs look for during these rotations:
 - Is this person a team player?
 - Do the residents like you and want to work with you?
- Interview them back and see if these are the type of people you want to work with.
 - Do I like this program?
 - Are the residents happy? Do they get the fellowships they apply for?
 - What’s the department’s flavor? Do I like it? Would I fit in?
- Make sure you contact your chair and that he/she knows who you are.
 - You want someone who can make that phone call on your behalf, help get your foot in the door.
- Number of Letters: want at least 3
 - Chair & program director letter
 - This is usually a combined letter, but sometimes a separate letter from chair and program director.
 - You should engage the chair or program director now so they get to know you.
 - Most important thing is that whomever writes the letter knows you well.
 - Attendings you’ve rotated with
 - School will write dean’s letter (now called MSPE: medical student performance evaluation)