

SOME HINTS FOR WRITING MEDICAL APPLICATIONS v7/28/04

- I. The AMCAS or AACOMAS application requires all students to write a personal statement. Which they entitle, Your personal Comments. The statement is to tell why you have selected medicine as a career and what strengths you would bring to it. It can allow you to discuss your extracurricular activities, research, medical related work and other work-related activities in more detail. It can also carefully explain perceived weaknesses in your application such as a poor grade, a poor semester, or some other problem (academic probation, death in the family, financial difficulties - but there is a fine line between helping and hurting.) However, don't discuss the only C grade that you received as this will just call attention to it. Some hints before you begin writing - it will be one of the more important things you write and probably the most difficult and challenging portion of the process.
 - A. Before you begin writing, determine and outline the message messages you wish to convey. Some questions to ask yourself in doing this are: Who are you? How did you get where you are? How do your values fit into a medical career?
 - B. Begin the statement with a catchy line (but not a cute one) - something that will grab and hold the reader's attention. Make the reader eager to read on since they read hundreds even thousands of essays so it needs to be interesting. If you are explaining some weakness, make the statements as positive as you can and what you might have learned from the experience. Take responsibility for your actions; excuses create a negative impression.
 - C. Do not use the statement to reiterate achievements noted elsewhere in the application.
 - D. Write the letter in much the same way as you would write a friend - conversational with appropriate humor, anecdotal material, and rich details. Anecdotal material can bring out the compassion rather than you stating that you are compassionate, or understanding or have a sense of humor. In other words back up statements with reality. Don't write about things that you are not prepared to discuss in an interview as it may raise a question of credibility about your application. Be yourself and write about your best points.
 - E. Project any personal qualities like leadership, altruism, scientific curiosity, and compassion. Try to portray yourself as a unique person. Cover topics in depth and discuss them. Don't try to get everything you have ever done in short sentences. They do not need to be only about medicine but need to show some relevance - show you as a leader, self-disciplined, etc.
 - F. Write your own statement but have it reviewed by others. I have reviewed and critiqued numerous such statements over the years and am merciless. Watch grammar, syntax (arrangements and relationships among words and phrases), and spelling (spell check). Most early drafts have serious problems with construction and could cause an admissions committee member to question the written communications skills of the individual. Review, rewrite and rewrite again. You might want to have it typed professionally. Make additional copies of the page so that if you ruin it with smudges, etc. you have additional pages to use. The letter is part of the one time impression about whether you get an interview or not in competition with all the others. It needs to be flawless.
 - G. AMCAS requires that the statement fit on one page. Do not make the font so small that it is difficult to read. Keep 10 or above, cut out superfluous materials - there is always chaff
 - H. Another opinion: keep it simple. Don't try to get too exotic or flowery, and don't worry if it sounds like everyone else's. The simplest approach is usually the best. The risk in making your personal statement stand out enough to be unusual is that physicians are usually rather conservative and anything odd or unusual may be regarded as negative - something cute, flippant or crass. It may be different if your life story is unusual.
 - I. More often than not the personal comments contribute negatively to the application rather than the other direction due to grammar, sounding contrived or insincere. You do not need great wit or deep profundity. Admissions people want to get a glimpse of who you are and how you think. As a last check, ask yourself if you were on an admissions committee would you be interested in interviewing the person who wrote the essay?

- II. Letters of evaluation: A borderline student can be given an interview because of excellent recommendations. You usually need at least three to five such letters to be a part of your composite letter written by the Health Profession's Adviser. At least one or two from science professors who can speak to your science capability, then other non-science faculty, important work-related personnel (D.O. applications require one from a D.O. as well) or senior faculty can be important - those who have past experience in recommending you.
- A. It is helpful to get to know your professors - not as difficult in a college like Gordon. You need recommenders who can give insight into things like your character, integrity, motivation, self-discipline, maturity, interpersonal and communication skills, potential for professional growth, energy, and leadership potential. High grades will not make up for these qualities. Some medical schools can fill their classes with people with 4.0 or close to 4.0; otherwise you would all simply be chosen by computer - grades, school, MCATS, etc. bingo!
- B. When you ask a person to write, ask if they believe that they can write about you in a positive way for medical school. Ask if they believe that they know you well enough or cannot write enthusiastically. If they cannot, thank them politely and ask someone else. Send thank you notes to people who have written you letters. They will remember that in the future.
- C. A few other hints:
1. You can collect letters of recommendation soon after the course and put them in your file.
 2. Prepare an autobiographical sketch for your letter writers. Make an appointment with them and discuss your career goals. Tell them why you want to enter medicine.
 3. Give them a lot of lead time!!! Keep track of your evaluations. Make sure that they are in but be polite when asking.
- D. Letters from physicians, family friends, peers, clergymen, etc. are character references rather than faculty evaluations and are often counterproductive. Such letters may not be helpful as well as those from politicians which tend to be favors to constituents rather than endorsements on personal knowledge. Letters from former employers or research project director can be helpful if they address personal characteristics. Finally a supervisor over a health care facility where you volunteered would be helpful. Concentrate on getting letters from people who think you are great
- E. If someone would like to know what should be in a letter of recommendation tell them the following: How and how long have you known the individual? Who is the recommender? Discuss the individual's scholastic record. Discuss the individual's personal characteristics. Summarize.
- F. Waiving or retaining the right of access to your file.
1. Admission committees do prefer to receive confidential letters since they assume that they are more candid.
 2. However, the right of waiving is also a civil right and there are many things in your favor.
 - a. You have chosen the evaluators - if you chose wrongly then that says something about your judgment of people.
 - b. If you allow your file to remain confidential, then it shows that you have confidence in your abilities and in the evaluation process.
- II. Secondary applications: Almost all schools send these to you five to six weeks after your application has been processed and each medical school has their own. They usually request some of the same information that you have already included plus some additional details; more essays and money. You need to complete them as quickly as possible and get them back.