

## AMCAS Essay Advice

*(an appendix from St. Olaf's Guide for Premed Students, 2007)*

### Some Dos and Don'ts

#### Dos

1. Do accentuate the positive.
2. Do be confident in your statements: facts are facts.
3. Do speak of motivation and interest in medicine.
4. Do say what there is about medicine that makes you suitable for it. For example, do you like the mix of science and people?
5. Do use specific examples as evidence of what you have said.
6. Do fill up the page (but don't overfill or add extra pages) even if you must double space and bring in the margins.
7. Do use a portion of this space to explain anomalies and other parts of the application if it is important to do so (consult with members of the Premed Committee).
8. Do make it grammatically correct and literate; check your spelling.

#### Don'ts

1. Don't call attention to negatives; don't make excuses. (There is a difference between this statement and number 7 above.)
2. Don't, whatever you do, leave this space blank.
3. Don't come across as being arrogant or overbearing.
4. Don't belabor a single point.
5. Don't try to be witty. Although you may be the class wit, this is not the place for it.
6. Don't try to use language (phrases, vocabulary) that you're unaccustomed to.
7. Don't get too personal about such matters as religion, politics, your education or lack of it. This is not the place for an emotional catharsis.
8. Don't say you want medicine because you want to help people and leave it hanging there. Many occupations let you help people. Why not go for a master's degree in social work?
9. Don't say something just for the sake of saying something. This can be easily detected and will certainly not be in your best interests.
10. Don't repeat yourself.

From: Preparing for Medical School by Brice Corder, Ambleside Pub., 1983

### The Personal Statement for Medical School

#### Ideas for Getting Started

- Pretend you are writing to a friend, not an admissions committee.
- Describe those people and events that have influenced you.
- Ask a family member or friend what qualities or experiences distinguish you from other applicants.
- Develop a theme or thesis to organize your essay; you can repeat or reinforce common

elements or images to unify your story.

- Describe a time when you had a positive impact on another person. How did you and the person change as a result?
- How do you know (not simply why do you know) you want to be a doctor?
- What were major turning points or decisions in your life?
- How has your interest in medicine developed and changed over time?
- What challenges did you face growing up?
- What are your goals? Why?

#### **DO.....**

- ...make it interesting. Use specific anecdotes, concrete examples.
- ...provide information not included elsewhere in your application.
- ...let the reader draw a conclusion by giving evidence of strengths and attributes.
- ...be clear about your message.
- ...describe experiences in terms of what they meant to you.
- ...ask family members and friends for feedback.
- ...use strong action verbs and vivid images.
- ...let your personality come through.
- ...allow time to write, revise, leave for awhile, and revise.
- ...be obsessive about proofreading.

#### **DON'T.....**

- ...just list activities.
- ...tell the reader that you are compassionate, motivated, intelligent, etc.
- ...focus only on childhood experiences.
- ...lecture the reader.
- ...make excuses for poor grades.
- ...succumb to the "I" disease.
- ...overwork the essay to the point of losing your own voice.

From Harvard Website – Office of Career Resources

### ***AMCAS Essay***

One of the most important parts of the AMCAS application is page 2, the autobiographical sketch section. This is where intangible selection factors that will be discussed in the chapter on extracurricular activities can really stand out and make the admissions committee take notice. This is also the part of the application that could convince a medical school that, regardless of some other shortcomings, you have what it takes to become a good physician. Take a good deal of time on this part. Don't just write an autobiographical sketch and expect it to be acceptable the first or even the second time around. Read and reread it several times, making changes and corrections as you read. Put it aside for a few days and then come back to it again with fresh ideas and better ways to phrase sentences. Many times, when you go back to something you've written several days earlier, mistakes will literally leap out of the page at you. As you rewrite your sketch, emphasize key ideas and don't try to be too modest. Your sketch is one of hundreds

– maybe thousands – of autobiographical sketches and needs to be better than any other.

I can't emphasize enough how very much this area of the selection process could mean and how you should do everything you can to ensure that, after reading your autobiographical sketch, an admissions committee will be convinced of your potential as a medical student. After you've written the best sketch you can possibly write, have an English major read and edit it for grammatical errors. A blatant error can make the most understanding committee member have second thoughts about your conscientiousness. Some items to be included in your autobiographical sketch that committee members specifically look for are:

- Unique background and life history. Don't dwell on your family background too much unless it's interesting enough to catch a committee member's attention.
- Unusual experiences such as travel abroad, service in the armed forces, etc.
- Unique work experiences such as laboratory research or scientific projects. Always include where you did your volunteer work as well as when you did it and what exactly you did.
- Publications of any kind. If you have an unpublished manuscript, tell what the title is and give its status (in preparation, in press, etc.).
- Volunteer work at a hospital or a social organization that served the needs of individuals or the community. Make sure you mention where you did you work and what it was that you did.
- Statement of future goals, aspirations and objectives.

Medical schools like to have a diverse student body with varied experiences and unusual backgrounds. Try to convince the admissions committee that you're the kind of individual who will add something special to the incoming freshman class. Without being obnoxious, make yourself stand out among the other applicants so that the admissions committee will feel compelled to grant you an interview and find out a little more about you. Many times, the decision of whether or not to grant an applicant an interview is based on the contents of his or her sketch. If you're on the borderline, make your sketch work for you by giving it all the attention it deserves. A good friend of mine who interviews many medical school candidates had the following to say about autobiographical sketches:

“When I read an autobiographical sketch, what I don't want to see is a long exposé about why the student wants to become a doctor. I want to read about his or her accomplishments. After all, a 21-year-old individual has no real experience in medicine so I don't care to read about medicine. I want to see whether that person is caring, motivated, an independent thinker who inspires others to act. Medicine is a very heavy-pressure career, and a person who chooses medicine must have demonstrated the ability to make decisions, be independent, and assume a good deal of responsibility. Those are the qualities that need to shine through on the autobiographical sketch. One sketch I remember well was written by a student who was in charge of a school cafeteria. He supervised 60 students and was responsible for scheduling work assignments and vacations and had to make sure everyone knew what to do during the work day. When I interviewed him several months later, we spent most of the time talking about his work at the cafeteria! I knew from his sketch and the ensuing interview that ... he would make a fantastic doctor.”

When you're writing your autobiographical sketch, don't make the mistake of thinking that personal accomplishments don't mean much to an admissions committee member – many times they mean everything! If you've done anything that shows you to be a creative, take-charge, responsible person who leads and inspires others to accomplish goals, include that in your sketch. Any committee member who reads about a person like that would be crazy not to think, "Hey, medicine could use someone like that."

From: The Complete Medical School Preparation & Admissions Guide by Andrew Goliszek, Ph.D.

### ***Addendum to Instructions on Autobiographical Essays***

1. Try to have an interesting introductory paragraph. Write something, which will pull your reader in and make them WANT to read the rest of the essay (even though they have to).
2. Remember that it is likely that an admissions officer has read hundreds of these. The more readable it is, the easier you make their job (and the more they like you).
3. In considering what experiences to include, it is best to mention four or five experiences in a little bit of detail rather than 10 or 20 in the form of a list. When you describe your experiences, you should mention what you learned in general, what you learned about yourself, how it made you feel, and what you liked or disliked. While this is not an exact formula, these kinds of things reveal a lot about you.
4. Include experiences, which describe the breadth of the characteristics, which you possess. Don't just focus on one area.
5. Include the factors or circumstances, which led to your being interested in medicine.
6. If you happen to discuss activities, which relate to Christianity, you may wish to use neutral terms, which don't convey religious emphasis. For instance, instead of Small Group Discipleship leader, say you were the leader of a small support group for students. Sometimes Christians use a lot of lingo and non-believers don't even understand what they are talking about. A "calling" may not be understood by a secular admissions committee.
7. Related to #6, be careful in emphasizing missionary service too much. Remember that medical and dental schools consider financial aspects in their admissions process. Each student represents a financial obligation, either from their private funds or from the state or federal government, for part of the cost of the medical or dental education. The prospect of a student receiving such support and promptly leaving for a foreign country with degree in hand can cause the admissions committee to question letting you in the first place. State-supported schools may be especially sensitive on this issue.
8. When you have re-written your essay, let someone whose opinion you value read it and critique it. A parent, your pastor, a professor, or perhaps a close friend can give valuable suggestions or provide insight. When you are content with the final content, form and style, go with it!

Modifications of David Bruce's comments by Robert Waltzer, Health Professions Coordinator, January 1991