



Personal Statement

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The Weight of the Personal Statement

The common saying is that your personal statement “cannot make you, but it can break you.” Unless you write a Pulitzer Prize-worthy essay of an epic event that led you towards a neurosurgical career, your statement will not be a determining factor to get you a residency interview.

However, a poorly written essay or one about a controversial or odd topic does, in fact, have the potential to ruin your entire application. The purpose of reading a personal statement is to get personal; that is, to learn something personal about the applicant that is not present anywhere else in the application. By way of this, it also serves as a mechanism to assess the applicant’s written communication skills.

Time for Writing

Give yourself a satisfactory amount of time to plan and write your personal statement. As each individual has his or her own writing capacity and skills, anywhere from 1-3 months of intermittent writing should lead to a great final product. At the very least, ensure that no spelling or grammatical errors are present in your writing – such mistakes show a lack of effort and convey to the reader that you did not care enough to ensure that your essay was an adequate final product.

Do not underestimate the benefits of working on the statement for brief periods of time and taking a break before revisiting it. The fresh

perspective will illuminate what a first-time reader may be thinking. In addition, it is helpful to have several other people read your personal statement to review grammar and content, and to comment on whether it has achieved the intended effect.

What to Write about

Innumerable resources about writing personal statements as well as general tips for essay writing can be found online, so elaborating on them here is unnecessary.

When brainstorming about ideas, ask yourself: What is it about me that I want the reader to know and understand? What makes me unique? What is important to me but not listed anywhere else on the ERAS? Why did I choose to pursue a career in neurosurgery? Start with a sentence or paragraph that captures the reader's attention: perhaps a patient or personal vignette, or a case. Action and vivid imagery catch the eye. Throughout the first paragraph, build a theme and return to it by the end of the essay, employing logical and smooth transitions between paragraphs.

Length

Limit yourself to one full page. Neurosurgeons are busy people, especially the ones reading through hundreds of applications. It is fine to be creative with your writing, but do not attempt anything too artistically novel or humorous. Show that you can write effectively without standing out as bizarre or obscure, or resorting to literary gimmicks to make your point.

Editing

As mentioned before, make sure you have had several different people read over your essay. In general, three individuals from three realms of your life would be ideal: for example, a close friend or

family member, a professional peer, and a neurosurgical mentor such as a resident, attending or program director.

You should only give a final product to the latter, as their time is likely limited and if you are interested in joining their specific program, then they will naturally judge your work on first glance.

Personal Statement and Interviews

You should be prepared to address anything you have written about in your personal statement (and anywhere else in your application, for that matter) during the interview. In our experience, anywhere from zero to about half of the interviewers at a given interview day bring up the personal statement; if your essay is interesting, you can expect that more faculty will mention it or ask you about it, and vice versa.

You should also be prepared to face an interviewer who has not read it at all, giving you an opportunity to use the material in your personal statement in your arsenal of interview topics to discuss.

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