



Writing an Effective Personal Statement: A How-To Guide for IMGs

The purpose of a personal statement is to tell a story - your story. The story needs to provide the reader with insight into your life that they cannot get from looking at all your other documents. After they read your personal statement, readers should feel that you are the type of person they would want to get to know better and to work with at their residency program.

- IMGPrep Residency Program Personal Statement Development Outline©

When it comes to writing a Personal Statement as part of an application for US-based Residency Programs, many International Medical Graduates (IMGs) find it helpful to seek guidance on how to get started. Even for the best of writers who have native fluency, it can be awkward and daunting to compose a full-page essay about oneself with confidence and with skill. While there are many how-to articles on the internet, the fact is that the official guidelines for writing a personal statement are minimal and mostly pertain to logistics rather than content. Thus, applicants are mostly on their own to determine for themselves how to proceed. (See the opening quote above for insights on how to approach the task.)

Medical students have a lot of writing to do for study and work, but they are not always good at writing about themselves. Some do not even see the point of having to write a statement about themselves as part of the application and they tend to view it as a difficult chore. But it is important to remember that Personal Statements are one of the most important parts of the Residency Program application. Thus, it is essential to create a great statement that grabs the attention of the reader and conveys your passion and dedication in an effective way. As with any writing assignment, it is important to prepare. This guide helps you through the process and answers some basic how-to questions.

The Personal Statement in your application package helps others learn more about you as a whole person – someone who is more than test scores and facts and figures or what others say about you. That is why the Personal Statement is

so important; it is the one place in your application where you can relate personal details about yourself: your life challenges and struggles as well as your dreams and aspirations. Dry facts and figures are often hard to retain, especially for a person reviewing many applications. But a personal story with a compelling narrative that has emotional impact is memorable. Such a well-crafted statement is what helps you stand out in the minds of the program directors and review committee members. Nowhere else in your application will you have the opportunity to “tell your story” in such a powerful and impactful way. So, it is definitely worth spending time and attention to do it well.

The Personal Statement is usually listed in the top five documents that program directors look for in considering a candidate for admission to their program. According to an [annual survey of residency program directors](#) by the National Residency Match Program, as many as 78 percent of the program directors responding to the survey (regardless of specialty) indicated that the Personal Statement was an important consideration in determining whether to schedule an interview with an applicant. For Family Medicine residency programs, it was much higher; 87 percent of survey respondents cited the Personal Statement as important for interview selection.

FOUR STEPS FOR WRITING AN EFFECTIVE RESIDENCY PERSONAL STATEMENT

STEP 1: Gather ideas and input.

Just as there are no two applicants alike, each personal statement is a unique reflection of that person’s story. While there is no single way to start, one possibility is to talk with family and colleagues and remind yourself of the stories you already tell about your choice to pursue medicine. Was there a moment in your childhood or younger life that was pivotal? Or was it a slow process that evolved over time? After putting together some notes, you might get new insights into how to proceed to a written draft. Don’t be afraid to just start jotting things down – even in bullet-point style – to capture the elements even before you decide on an overall storyline. Some of those notes will make it into your Personal Statement and some will not, but they can help you start to see the shape of a basic outline.

STEP 2: Organize your ideas and notes into a story

There are several ways to structure your narrative to help hold the reader’s attention. Whether you start with a pivotal moment in your childhood or with some words of wisdom from a special person who inspired you, it is important to have a compelling start that “hooks” the reader and brings them into your story. After a strong opening, it is important to remember to include a description of why you chose your specialty. A strong and inspiring finish is

also important. In between, the challenge is to provide specific details that tell the reader more about you than what is elsewhere in your application.

Some applicants use a chronological approach. They might start with a moment in their childhood and then talk about how their insights expanded during school, medical school, and rotations. They might end with their vision for the future. Another way to organize is to start with an inspirational quote or some words of wisdom from a mentor or other important person that were especially influential and proceed from there. Others see a theme or pattern in their life experiences. For example, “overcoming adversity” might be a theme that has helped shape who they are today. Another theme might be “wanting to help alleviate pain and suffering” or “experiencing personal growth and meaningful insights.” These themes can help to structure an overall narrative that has a strong start, a satisfying ending, and a well-connected flow throughout. The most important thing about a Personal Statement is the accuracy and the quality of the content, so especially when you begin, it is not necessary to be too concerned about length – just focus on getting a good first draft. Once you move to the editing stage, however, there are some limits on the length to keep in mind. Most IMGs think that the PS should be no more than one written page. But that way of looking at it can be misleading when working on your laptop or desktop where the length of a page can vary according to margin settings, font sizes, etc.

It is good to understand the bigger picture of where this statement will be positioned in your application package. Since you are most likely applying through the ERAS portal, your final statement will be copied and pasted into a box of the ERAS application that is an entire page of that online form. If the pasted text is too long, then the box will not accept the last few lines, which will be cut off, and the program director will miss the ending to your beautifully written narrative. So, you want to make sure that the entire statement will fit properly. The ERAS Personal Statement section correlates to no more than approximately 750-850 words of text, so a good rule of thumb is to aim for around 800 words for the final draft. As for a minimum length, IMGPrep recommends that the statement be at least 650 words.

STEP 3: Ask for and get constructive feedback.

Find people (experts) to review your draft and offer advice on how to improve the overall story. While input from friends and family might be helpful at the beginning, this is the stage when you want to find those who are “in the know” about what residency program directors in your specialty are looking for when it comes to compelling Personal Statements. Editing services such as those provided by IMGPrep LLC can provide invaluable assistance from professional writers, editors, and medical program experts.

STEP 4: Polish and edit your work.

Again, as with any writing assignment, you will want to use good grammar, make accurate references to names of people and organizations, and avoid empty phrases or clichés. Also, this is the stage where you will want to ensure that the statement's length is appropriate – not too long or too short. For applications via ERAS to Residency Programs, the recommended length is between 750-800 words, which is usually around one page (depending on font size, etc.). If the statement is too long, it will not fit in the ERAS online form / box when you copy and paste it in, so make sure the last few lines are there for the reader. While there is no minimum length, a Personal Statement generally should be more than 650 words or it might be considered too short by the reader.

Because the personal statement is of limited length, the applicant must choose what to include and what not to include in the narrative. While it is not always possible to include everything about yourself, at a minimum, you should keep in mind the following:

Be specific. Use details and actual examples of encounters with patients, mentors, teachers, family members, and colleagues who influenced your life's path.

Add emotional impact. This is not a dry recitation of facts and figures. Rather, this is an opportunity for the reader to get to know you, your interests, and your passion for your chosen field. Relate why you chose your specialty and what attracts you to your chosen field. Residency program directors want to know who they will be working with, and they will appreciate knowing about your dedication and your insights. Consider including details of your life outside of work, including hobbies, pastimes, and volunteer / community service work. This shows a well-rounded person, and again helps the reader see you as more than a recitation of test scores and job titles.

Anticipate potential questions the reader might have about you and your application. Determine whether and how to address any "issues" in your credentials. For example, if there are gaps in your education or if there were extenuating circumstances to help the reader understand test scores or number of attempts, the Personal Statement is a good place in your application to do that. It also is the place to highlight honors, achievements, and high moments in your life.

Of course, it is important to edit for clarity and to use good grammar. Also, make sure to use your own words. Even with input from others, this is ultimately your Personal Statement and should be in your own voice. It should reflect who you are and offer the reader an interesting and accurate depiction of you, your experiences, and your dreams for the future.

For more information, the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) offers some advice on [Writing a Personal Statement for Residency Application](#). See also this article on [Personal Statement Do's and Dont's](#) from the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG).