



EFFECTIVE STUDENT ADVISING SERIES

Fourth Year Advising Project: Writing the Personal Statement

Introduction

Students frequently struggle with the personal statement (PS) more than any other aspect of the residency application. Faculty advisors can help students significantly by guiding them through the process and providing feedback. Many students find the PS difficult to write because it requires them to engage in self-reflection and commit to writing the many thoughts and feelings that resulted in the decision to enter a specialty. It also seems high stakes to them because it is their only opportunity to communicate directly with the residency program selection committee. Students should view the PS as an opportunity to highlight their personality, interests and strengths.

Preparing to write

Students should be encouraged to begin the personal statement process with self-reflection exercises, reflecting on why they have chosen ob-gyn as a career, as well as their personal and professional motivation and goals. Advisors should prompt students to begin this exercise early in the application process, since meaningful self-reflection requires time and effort. It may be helpful to give students a template for self-reflection (Table 1). Advisors may want to meet with the student to review the template before writing begins, and to clarify students' reasoning and goals. Once a student has outlined their reasons for career choice, plans, goals, strengths, and core beliefs and values, the PS becomes easier to organize and write.

Review the Outline/Draft

Once a student has a draft of the PS, the advisor can meet with the student to give first-round feedback. It is important to avoid writing or re-writing the PS; this is the student's work and needs to reflect who the student is and how he/she wants to represent his/herself. Feedback should be directed at helping the student organize the essay in a logical, coherent, and concise fashion that tells a convincing and moving story of who they are. The PS should explain to a reader why the student deserves an interview, and why this student is desirable for the program and as a future colleague. Although most students should perform editing themselves, the advisor

should identify significant grammar or spelling mistakes; students for whom English is a second language may require more assistance in this area.

Dos and Don'ts for Personal Statements

Students should be encouraged to use the PS to highlight strengths that are not apparent in the rest of the application packet. The focus of the PS should be the student. Residency PDs read hundreds of personal statements, and an original story that stands out from the crowd may help the student be offered an interview. The PS should not be a recitation of the CV or ERAS application, but should feature as the central theme the student's life story, goals, and aspirations. Students should explain why ob-gyn is their chosen specialty and what they bring to the program. Students have the option of tailoring the PS to an individual program; if choosing to do this, the student can highlight personal connections to the program and explain why they want to match there. Advise students not to say they are tired of the snow/heat and looking for better weather. If a student does tailor the essay for a given program, it is imperative to ensure the correct version goes to each program! The PS will not get a student an interview, but a poorly thought out and written PS may prevent him/her from getting the interview.

Common mistakes to avoid include focusing on irrelevant topics or those that do not add information about the student as an individual. For example, although a patient story can be moving, the essay should not spend more time on a patient story than on the student. Additionally, students do not need to explain why they entered medicine as a profession; rather they should explain why they are entering ob-gyn as a specialty. Students sometimes moralize about what ob-gyn or medicine should be, and this can come across negatively. A better strategy is to explain what the student hopes to achieve as a leader. Similarly, discussing financial or lifestyle reasons for entering a field can be misconstrued, and should be avoided. Essays should be concise and tightly written, avoiding repetition. Finally, exaggeration, falsehoods or outright plagiarism clearly must be avoided. The PS should be the work of the student and no one else.



Students may wish to use the PS to explain any weaknesses in their application. It is important to approach this in a humble and growth-oriented manner, avoiding excuses or blaming others for mistakes, poor grades or other concerns. Explaining how an adverse experience resulted in resilience, re-dedication or commitment to improvement can turn what might have been a barrier to success into an opportunity.

Suggestions

You and/or the department may want to sponsor writing workshops or editing sessions. This may be run by faculty, residents or students themselves. Students often welcome peer editing. Advisors should prompt students to have the personal statement reviewed by someone who knows the student well and is willing to give feedback for the writing and the content.

Table One
Self Reflection Exercise for Students

Career: Specialty/Fellowship?	
Academic Medicine Career?	
Global Health/Community Health?	
Geographic Location	
What are your strengths?	
What are your goals for residency - academic program, community program, rural health, urban, diverse population, Ryan program?	
What do you bring to a program: background, research experience, public health, other degrees, etc.	
What is your personality like- introvert, extrovert? Who are you- hobbies, interests, how do you spend your time?	



Table Two
Dos and Don'ts for Writing Personal Statements

DO	DON'T
Be concise, coherent and eloquent	Rely on automated spelling or grammar programs
Tell your story	Talk more about others than yourself
Tell a positive, future-oriented story	Criticize the profession, institutions or individuals
Check grammar, spelling and punctuation	Ramble or repeat yourself
Vary your sentence structure	Lie or exaggerate
Get feedback from a friend or advisor	Recite your CV accomplishments
Read your statement out loud as part of your review	Use clichés, jargon, abbreviations, excessive quotes

References

The preceding recommendations are based on a review of ob-gyn medical education literature, the AAMC Careers in Medicine, the NRMP website and expert opinion.



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This publication is part of the APGO Effective Student Advising Series. Advising medical students on a career in women's health can be one of the most fulfilling things that a medical educator does. Many physicians find themselves in the role of faculty advisor without any formal background or training in advising. The APGO Effective Student Advising Series pamphlets are intended to educate medical educators and learners about best practices for advising medical students on a career in women's health.



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