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[Danielle Jones](#), *Emory University*

[J Pittman](#), *Emory University*

[Kimberly Manning](#), *Emory University*

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Ten Steps for Writing an Exceptional Personal Statement

Danielle Jones, MD

J. Richard Pittman Jr, MD

Kimberly D. Manning , MD, FACP, FAAP

Background

The personal statement is an important requirement for residency and fellowship applications that many applicants find daunting. Beyond the cognitive challenge of writing an essay, time limitations for busy senior residents on clinical rotations present added pressure. Objective measures such as scores and evaluations paint only a partial picture of clinical and academic performance, leaving gaps in a candidate's full portrait.^{1,2} Applicants, seemingly similar on paper, may have striking differences in experiences and distances traveled that would not be captured without a personal narrative.^{2,3} We recommend, therefore, reframing personal statements as the way to best highlight applicants' greatest strengths and accomplishments. A well-written personal statement may be the tipping point for a residency or fellowship interview invitation,^{4,5} which is particularly important given the heightened competition for slots due to increased participation on virtual platforms. Data show that 74% to 78% of residency programs use personal statements in their interview selection process, and 48% to 54% use them in the final rank.^{6,7} With our combined 50 years of experience as clerkship and residency program directors (PDs) we value the personal statement and strongly encourage our trainees to seize the opportunity to feature themselves in their words.

Our residency and medical school leadership roles position us to edit and review numerous resident and student personal statements annually. This collective experience has helped us identify patterns of struggle for trainees: trouble starting, difficulty organizing a cogent narrative, losing the "personal" in the statement, and failing to display unique or notable attributes. While a bland personal statement may not hurt an applicant, it is a missed opportunity.^{4,8} We also have distinguished helpful personal statement elements that allow PDs to establish candidates' "fit" with their desired residency or fellowship. A recent study supports that PDs find unique applicant

information from personal statements helpful to determine fit.⁴ Personal statement information also helps programs curate individualized interview days (eg, pair interviewers, guide conversations, highlight desirable curricula). Through our work with learners, we developed the structured approach presented here (FIGURE 1). Applicants can use our approach to minimize typical struggles and efficiently craft personal statements that help them stand out. Busy residents, particularly, have minimal time to complete fellowship applications. We acknowledge there is no gold standard or objective measures for effective personal statement preparation.⁹ Our approach, however, combined with a practical tool (FIGURE 2), has streamlined the process for many of our mentees. Moreover, faculty advisors and program leaders, already challenged by time constraints, can use this tool to enhance their coaching and save time, effort, and cognitive energy.

Preparing

Given word count and space limitations, deciding what to include in a personal statement can be challenging. An initial brainstorm helps applicants recall personal attributes and experiences that best underscore key strengths (Step 1).¹⁰ Writing explicit self-affirmations is challenging, so we recommend pairing with a near peer who may offer insight. Useful prompts include:

- What 3 words best encapsulate me?
- What accomplishments make me proud?
- What should every program know about me?

Reflecting on these questions (Step 2) helps elucidate the foundations of the narrative,¹⁰ including strengths, accomplishments, and unique elements to be included. Additionally, the preparation steps help uncover the "thread" that connects the story sequentially. While not all agree that personal or patient stories are necessary, they are commonly included.⁵ One genre analysis showed that 97% of applicants to residency programs in internal medicine, family

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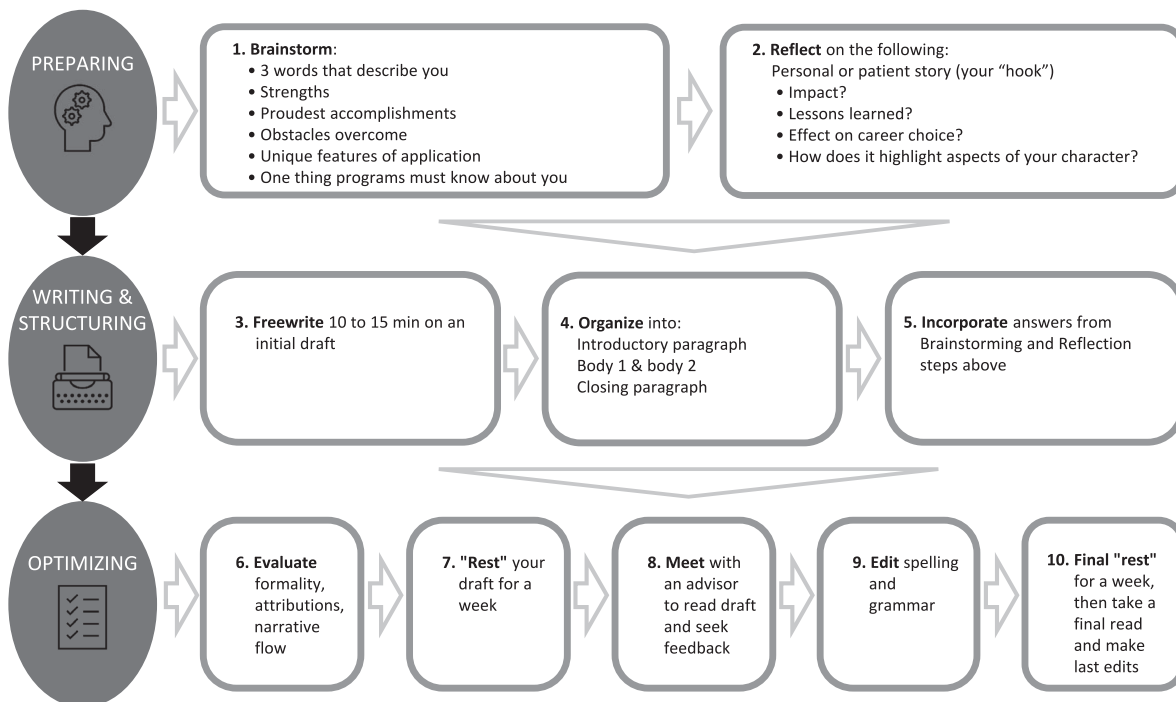


FIGURE 1
Structured Approach to Writing a Personal Statement

medicine, and surgery used an opening that included either a personal narrative (66%) and/or a decision to enter medicine (54%) or the specialty of choice (72%).⁹ Radiology PDs ranked personal attributes as the second most important component in personal statements behind choice of specialty.⁹ Further, a descriptive study of anesthesia applicants’ personal statements ranked those that included elements such as discussion of a family’s or friend’s illness or a patient case as more original.³ We feel that personal and patient stories often provide an interesting hook to engage readers, as well as a mechanism to highlight (1) personal characteristics, (2) journey to and/or enthusiasm for desired discipline, and (3) professional

growth, all without giving the impression of being boastful. Sketching these Step 2 fundamentals prepares applicants to begin writing with intention.

Writing and Structuring

Once key elements are identified, the next steps assist with the actual writing. Utilizing information gleaned from the “Preparing” steps, start with a freewriting exercise (Step 3), an unrestricted association of ideas aimed at answering, “What experiences have cultivated my strong interest in pursuing [_____]?” At this stage, ignore spelling and grammar. Just write, even if the product is the roughest, rough draft imaginable.¹⁰ Setting a timer for 10 to 15 minutes establishes a less intimidating window to start. Freewriting generates the essential initial content that typically will require multiple revisions.¹⁰

Next, we recommend structuring the freewriting content into suggested paragraphs (Step 4), using the following framework to configure the first draft:

- *Introductory paragraph:* A compelling story, experience, or something that introduces the applicant and makes the reader want to know more (the hook). If related to a patient or other person, it should underscore the writer’s qualities.
- *Paragraph 2:* Essential details that a program must know about the applicant and their proudest accomplishments.



FIGURE 2
Ten Steps for Writing an Exceptional Personal Statement: Digital Tool

Note: Use the QR code to download the digital tool and follow the 10 steps highlighted in FIGURE 1.

- *Paragraph(s) 3-4:* Specific strengths related to the specialty of choice and leadership experiences.
- *Closing paragraph:* What the applicant values in a training program and what they believe they can contribute.

Evaluate what has been written and ensure that, after the engaging hook, the body incorporates the best pieces identified during the preparation steps (Step 5). A final paragraph affords ample space for a solid conclusion to the thread. Occasionally the narrative flows better with separate strengths and leadership paragraphs for a total of 5, but we strongly recommend the final statement not exceed 1 single-spaced page to reduce cognitive load on the reader.

Optimizing

This part of the process involves revising the piece into a final polished personal statement. Before an early draft is shared with others, it should be evaluated for several important factors by returning to the initial questions and then asking (Step 6):

“Does this personal statement . . .”

1. Amplify my strengths, highlight my proudest accomplishments, and emphasize what a program must know about me?
2. Have a logical flow?
3. Accurately attribute content and avoid plagiarism?
4. Use proper grammar and avoid slang or profanity?

While not as challenging as the other steps, optimization takes time.¹⁰ At this stage, “resting” the draft for 1 week minimum (Step 7) puts a helpful distance between the writer and their work before returning, reading, and editing.¹⁰ Writers can edit their own work to a point, but they often benefit by enlisting a trusted peer or advisor for critiques. Hearing their draft read aloud by a peer or advisor allows the applicant to evaluate the work from another perspective while noting how well it meets the criteria from the tool (provided as online supplementary data).

A virtual or in-person meeting between applicant and mentor ultimately saves time and advances the writer to a final product more quickly than an email exchange. Sending the personal statement in advance helps facilitate the meeting. Invite the advisor to candidly comment on the tool’s criteria to yield the most useful feedback (Step 8). When done

effectively, edits can be made in real time with the mentor’s input.

We bring closure to the process by focusing on spelling and grammar checks (Step 9). Clarity, conciseness, and the use of proper English were rated as extremely important by PDs.^{3,9} Grammatical errors distract readers, highlight inattention to detail, and detract from the personal statement.^{3,9} Once more, we recommend resting the draft before calling it final (Step 10). If the piece required starting over or significant rewriting based on feedback received, we also suggest seeking additional feedback on this draft, ideally from someone in the desired residency or fellowship discipline. If only minor edits (eg, flow, language) were incorporated, the personal statement can be considered complete at this time.

Summary

Writing a personal statement represents a unique opportunity for residency and fellowship applicants to amplify their ERAS application beyond the confines of its objective components.³ Using this stepwise approach encourages each personal statement to be truly personal and streamlines the process for applicants and reviewers alike. All stakeholders benefit: applicants, regardless of their scores and academic metrics, can arm themselves with powerful means for self-advocacy; PDs gain a clearer idea of individual applicants, allowing them to augment the selection process and curate the individual interview day; and faculty mentors can offer concrete direction to every mentee seeking their help.

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All authors are with Emory University School of Medicine. **Danielle Jones, MD**, is Associate Professor of Medicine, Associate Section Chief of the Division of General Internal Medicine Grady Section, and Associate Program Director, Internal Medicine Residency; **J. Richard Pittman Jr, MD**, is Associate Professor of Medicine, and Program Director, Fourth Year Internal Medicine Sub-Internship; and **Kimberly D. Manning, MD, FACP, FAAP**, is Professor of Medicine, and Associate Vice Chair, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Department of Medicine.

Corresponding author: Kimberly D. Manning, MD, FACP, FAAP, Emory University School of Medicine, kdmanni@emory.edu, Twitter @gradydoctor