



A Guide for Writing Your AMCAS/AACOMAS/AADSAS/VMCAS/CASPA Essay

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Almost all health professions schools require that applicants write one or more essays. This handout is intended to provide guidance as you work on your essay.

A very important part of the application is a page where you are asked to give "personal comments". Most people find this personal statement to be the most difficult part of the application. It can take a great deal of time to write a good statement -- don't wait until the last minute to begin work on it. Some college pre-health programs require submission of a draft essay one year prior to its submission. Also available may be Peer Review of essay drafts sponsored by your Advisor. Use all the resources that are available to you.

Remember that in many cases, the application essay will be the only statement the medical/dental/physician assistant school will have from you. In all cases, it will be one of the first things reviewed and remain in your application file for a year. Also, bear in mind that you may be asked to comment at length on any activity or interest you mention in your personal statement when you're having interviews.

The essay is the part of your application where you have a chance to let an admissions committee know something about you as a person and why you, rather than someone else, should be admitted into their schools. Therefore, you shouldn't use it merely to list things which will appear in other parts of the application such as grades, extracurricular activities, honors, etc. Rather, you should use the essay to provide a more personal perspective.

Think of the essay as an opportunity to distinguish yourself from all other applicants. What is it that you would like the schools to know about you that they may not have been able to get from the rest of your work experience, volunteer positions, and any number of significant experiences such as travel or work abroad, a year "out", etc. Certainly, you will want to mention your motivation for medicine. Be as specific as you can, avoiding general statements like "I want to be a doctor because I enjoy working with people and I like biology". **How** do you know you like working with people - **what** have you done to "test" this interest? What is it about medicine that appeals to you? Be specific!

Characteristics Admissions Committees Look for in Your Essay

If an Admissions Committee is looking at your essay, they have probably already decided that you can handle the academic load in health professions school. Therefore, they are probably reading your essay to see whether or not they think you will be a good physician/dentist/physician assistant. What they generally look for are:

- ... a positive self-concept
- ... the ability to realistically assess yourself
- ... the ability to deal with diversity
- ... long-range goals (rather than short-range ones)
- ... whether or not you have someone on whom you can depend if trouble arises
- ... leadership ability



- ... a desire to work with people (rather than test tubes)
- ... demonstrated medical/dental interest

Some Questions You Should Try to Answer in Your Essay

In addition to trying to demonstrate the above abilities, you should also try to write your essay so it answers the following questions.

- ... **When** did you decide you wanted to become a doctor/dentist/physician assistant?
- ... Did you have any exposure to **role models** who influenced your decision to become a doctor/dentist/physician assistant?
- ... **How** have you demonstrated your interest and commitment to your decision to become a doctor/dentist/physician assistant?
- ... **How** have you demonstrated the personality qualities and character that are ideally necessary and sought for in a future physician/dentist/physician assistant?

How do you go about structuring your essay? The following steps indicate the priority of tasks and the order in which they should be attacked.

1. Select no more than about eight topics you wish the Admissions Committee to know about you. What you leave out is just as important as what you put in, so you are making value judgments about these topics.
2. Put the topics in an outline form so that one topic flows into another and the sequence of ideas makes sense to you.
3. Now that you have an outline, develop each idea into a rich paragraph (or even two).
4. Take each sentence and focus on making each word count. Many students have difficulty writing clear, concise, direct sentences. Don't be redundant. A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself whether each sentence could have been written by someone other than yourself. If so, or if you are telling the reader what you believe a health practitioner "should" do or be, then this has no place in a "personal" statement. Craft each sentence with care and ask others to tell you what they think about ideas in your essay. Another common problem is that you, the writer, who has the greatest knowledge of yourself may skip pertinent background information. You assume that the reader knows what you know, and that may not be the case.
5. Now that you have a first draft essay, go back to correct all technical parts of its structure, such as grammar, usage, spelling and punctuation. Get an expert's opinion (an English faculty may be a good choice of expert).
6. This next step may be the most difficult of all - discerning the **tone and attitude** of your essay. Although it is crucial that your essay be "personal", if every sentence begins with "I did..." or "My interest is..." the Admissions Committee may perceive you not to be terribly interested in the welfare of others. So, now you need to edit your essay to provide the tone that reflects your personal philosophy and add "sparkle" to it.
7. Your very last consideration should be length of the essay. Generally, early drafts should be longer, and these can be edited to shorten the essay to the correct length.



Before you begin to write, let's consider the outline of an essay which provides an informative profile of the applicant.

- a) It is helpful to begin with a paragraph that introduces aspects of your background that are **unique** to you. This may be information about your family structure, jobs you have done, extracurricular interests or hobbies, difficulties you may have overcome or some important accomplishment in your life. There are many starting points - select the one that best epitomizes your uniqueness. Not only will this provide important information to the reader, but it will encourage the reader to read your entire essay with interest.
- b) You need to tell the story of your path to the health profession you are hoping to enter. Depending on your age and background, your "story" may be one to three, or even four paragraphs long. Be certain to explain what specific event(s) caught your interest in the profession, why "you wish to be a health professional", and what activities you have accomplished to test your motivation, e.g. working in a medical or dental clinic, becoming a certified phlebotomist, etc.
- c) It is important that you describe specifically what you feel you have gotten out of these activities, what changes have occurred in your attitudes, what decisions you may have made and what you have learned about yourself from having participated in these activities. Just listing, "I did a, b and c" has no place in a personal essay.
- d) Tell **vignettes** about your experiences. Your goal is to bring into vivid color these experiences and your feelings about them for the reader. Tell them about specific instances which made a deep impression on you and why. Health professions schools are looking for people who are interesting and committed.
- e) You should discuss parts of your life outside of your interest in a health profession. For example, if you play sports, are involved in theater, music or have been a leader of organizations, initiated programs, carried off a successful event, etc., tell the reader **what** you did, **why** you did it, and what were the **outcomes** or impact on people.
- f) Many students must also work significant number of hours per week. If this is your case, explain in very specific terms how you spend your time outside college and how it may have affected your academic achievement. If there are any irregularities in your academic record, or below-average grades, give a succinct explanation. This information belongs about two-thirds through your essay, after the reader has gotten to know you a bit.
- g) End on a positive note about how you feel about being a health professional. AMCAS provides a separate "vision" statement. For other applications, state your vision as the ending for your essay.
- h) The AMCAS "Vision" statement: an explanation of where you see yourself in the profession 10 years from now. In 2001, medicine is in the primary care Generalist Physician model, with dentistry, veterinary medicine and podiatry becoming increasingly in specialized. There is also a great need for health care professionals to practice in rural settings. Be clear about your



future focus, which may be working in an inner city neighborhood or the barrio where you grew up. Or, you may wish to specialize in a discipline or combine research with a clinical practice, or...? Tell the reader what you are thinking now. This does not mean that upon application to residency programs in three years, you cannot change your mind. You should also be aware that there are several loan and scholarship programs which require a primary care path in medicine.

In general:

1. Always be positive. There are many ways to tell why, for example, you took a year away from college to support a family member. If you have weathered adversity, tell how you have overcome the disadvantage, but don't dwell on the disadvantage.
2. Give the readers enough information to come to the conclusions you wish them to make. It is better if you don't just say, "I have demonstrated leadership qualities by... Instead, you should talk about what you have accomplished in such a way that the person reading your essay will recognize that you have developed the qualities listed above.
3. Your goal with this essay is to entice the reader to want to know more about you.

Other Essays

In addition to the major essay required by AMCAS/AACOMAS/AADSAS/CASPA, most schools also require one or more essays when you submit secondary materials. These essays often ask specific questions which you can answer by elaborating on points in your primary essay or an autobiography that you have written. If they do not ask specific questions, try to focus your essay so that it tells why you want to go to that particular school. Since the school already has your primary application, you should write the secondary essay so it is related to, but differs from your primary application essay. That is, try to avoid the look of duplication by saying the same things in different words.

Reference:

Reference:

Jackson, E. W. and H. Bardo. 2005. Write For Success: preparing a Successful Professional School Application NAAHP.

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