

The Anatomy of a Fellowship Personal Statement

It is now time to prepare your personal statement for your fellowship application. Trying to describe your self succinctly in a page can be difficult. Where do you begin? Well, I hope the following helps you to prepare a knockout, top-notch personal statement. The first thing that you need to know is what is the purpose of a personal statement?

The purpose of the personal statement is to get you the fellowship of your choice. Is that all you need. Absolutely NOT! However, you must write a personal statement to complete your application so lets get going.

Remember that most people who are applying for fellowship are smart. Most people are sending excellent letters of recommendation (only a fool asks somebody who is not impressed with him or her to write a letter of recommendation). Also, remember only a few people have actually done meaningful research. Even fewer published something in a prestigious journal. And even fewer were first author. So basically, the personal statement is your chance to distinguish yourself as an individual. So let's begin. In my opinion the personal statement is divided into five paragraphs.

Paragraph number one: Why you decided to become a physician.

This paragraph should begin with "I always knew I wanted to be a physician, or "it wasn't until my fourth year of college that I realized that I wanted to be a physician." You can link this with your hobbies, your family or whatever is unique about the way you came to decide to become a physician. And, by the way, if you decided to become a physician because you were good in science and you like people, that's okay too. Everybody is good in science and hopefully likes people. This is a short paragraph.

Paragraph number two: When you decided to become a specialist (this can apply to any specialty).

This paragraph usually talks about that clairvoyant moment... "the moment the cardiologist told me my father was going to make it... or during my internship I had the opportunity to work in the CCU; I knew immediately that I was destined to be a cardiologist. Describe what you like about the field—what excites you about the field—you can talk about the ability to apply pathophysiology and anatomy and do procedures. This can be a really fun paragraph. It will also help you to clarify why it is you want to be a specialist in...

Paragraph number three: What unique experiences do you have that makes you a good candidate for this fellowship? What makes you a competitive candidate?

This paragraph is the paragraph where you get to describe the research you did with the Chief of the Division of cardiology or the physician who ran the endoscopy lab. You can discuss your poster presentations or work in the community with diabetic patients. You can talk about specific experiences before medical school or previous careers. If you

have additional degrees, for example a Master of public Health this is the place to reveal them.

Use this section to also discuss your unique talents and attributes. For example, you could say, “during my Infectious disease rotation I found that I excel in chart review and reading other peoples handwriting.” Actually, discuss you talents and personal strengths. Remember, this paragraph should not be modest. In fact the entire personal statement should not be modest. You are trying to sell yourself. In fact, the personal statement is a tool to do that. Nevertheless, you should not sound boastful. **Try to be humble and sell yourself.** I had one student who wanted to go into Plastic Surgery and he was a sculptor. He said his background was in the fine arts and that as a sculptor he would have a true appreciation of the three-dimensionality of anatomy allowing him to really understand cross sectional anatomy. He said he felt it made him “uniquely talented to be this kind of surgeon.”

Paragraph number four: What kind of program are you looking for?

Remember, you are trying to get into a fellowship; do you really want to say that you are only interested in one kind of program? Do not say you are driven to research and then apply to community programs that primarily emphasize clinical care. Think about what you want in a fellowship. Is it research? If so is it clinical or bench work? If you are not at all interested in research, take note: all fellowships require scholarly work. You will have to do some project or research. Be careful about closing doors. Do want to be in an underserved area? It looks foolish if you then apply to affluent suburban programs. Do you want diversity? Why are you applying to programs in Kansas? Do you want sick patients? Not everyone does. You have to be careful.

You do not want to contradict yourself or to sound less than intelligent. **When you write this paragraph you will need to decide what it is you are looking for in a fellowship and be consistent in your applications.**

“I am looking for a program that will provide opportunities for meaningful research” or, “I am looking for a program that will expose me to a broad patient base and provides opportunities for to do cutting edge procedures.” You might say, “I am looking for a program that will train me to become an academic gastroenterologist.” Whatever you say here should describe the program you are looking for. Think about what you really want and make sure the programs you are applying for jive with what you are really looking for. I had one student who was fluent in Spanish and wanted a program that served the Hispanic community. She put it in paragraph four. Seriously, what everybody wants is a program that gives him or her an outstanding foundation that will allow a graduate from that program prepared to practice their specialty in whatever venue is right for them be it practitioner, academician, educator or researcher.

Paragraph number five or the *last* paragraph

This is that terrible final part which is supposed to be just great. “I hope you will strongly consider me as a candidate because I am the best person for this job or actually because I am deeply committed to excellence.” You want to mention excellence or outstanding or some other similar descriptor here. **I hope there is nobody among my advisees that wants to aim for anything less than excellence.** Finally, sum it up with some wonderful closing sentence.

Does what I described sound insincere. No, it is not! So let me give an example. Basically I decided to become a physician when I was a teeny tiny tot. In fact as long as I can remember I wanted to be a physician. My whole life was directed towards that goal. I could describe that my parents have been the strongest influence in my life. I could put down in paragraph one that I decided to be a physician because I saw how my father’s patients loved him and how enthusiastic and excited he was about the practice of medicine. I knew that’s what I wanted. I wanted a job that I could love, that I could throw myself into and that was fulfilling. This is not self-serving, this is exactly how I feel.

Next I could talk about my deciding on Internal Medicine. I could describe my love of problem solving which I discovered during Year Three and which became solidified in Year Four. What about my attributes? Well everybody has different attributes. Sure everybody is smart, you don’t get into medical school if you are not smart. What are my attributes? Man, can I talk. I don’t know if I would write that on my personal statement but I might have said I am good communicator and that I am enthusiastic. Now, what about the program? I wanted a very academic program that would push me to achieve my personal best and that demanded excellence. What I have found is excellence comes mostly from personal drive; it comes from within (although I think I would have liked to have been pushed a little bit more during my residency). But, some people don’t want to be pushed. Others thrive with a little external structure and pressure. Is this kind of personal statement brown-nosing? Definitely not!

So there you have it, the personal statement in five paragraphs. Good luck!