



Essays That Worked for Medical Schools: 40 Essays from Successful Applications to the Nation's Top Medical Schools

By Emily Angel Baer, Stephanie B. Jones

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Discover why admissions officers from the nation's top medical schools selected these essays of worthy applicants

With only a limited number of spaces available every year to the thousands of qualified applicants to the nation's top medical schools, a serious candidate must find

a way to set himself or herself apart from the crowd. The essay is your one chance to

highlight the personal qualities and achievements that the application and MCAT scores do not reveal.

As **Essays That Worked for Medical Schools** demonstrates, there is no such thing as

the perfect submission. The winning essays cover a wide range of interesting topics. If there is any similarity, it is that they are written from the heart. One applicant writes about his work as a counselor for mentally ill adults and teens. Another tells about the life-changing experience of delivering much needed supplies to a leprosy village in West Africa. And a third applicant talks about time spent volunteering at a local senior center. From the thousands submitted each year, the essays in this book were considered some of the best by admissions officers at the nation's top medical schools.

With creativity and effort, you can turn almost any topic into an effective, successful essay for your medical school application!

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

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An Interview with a Dean

Medical schools have many methods for reviewing applications, though we found that most schools use a similar procedure to reduce the number of applicants to a reasonable pool from which to draw their incoming classes. This is not an easy task, since most schools receive thousands of applications for a first-year class of around 200 or fewer.

According to a recent U.S. News & World Report, the average acceptance rate for the twenty top medical schools is about 7 percent, with quite a few of the schools accepting only 3 percent of their applicants. With daunting figures like these, we asked med school deans and advisors about the importance of the essays in this competitive process.

Here's our composite version of an interview with a dean:

What is the difference between application essays for medical school and the essays we wrote to get into college?

The essays for medical school are more limited in scope. The college admission essay can often be about anything in the student's life, and applicants are encouraged to be creative, to have a "hook" that holds the reader. The essay for medical school, however, should be pointedly topical to medical issues. Essays that take the biggest risk are those that use creativity to do something different or unusual. This is usually not wise. Since it can be a turn-on or a turnoff, it's not worth the risk.

How are essays evaluated? By whom?

At selective medical schools, the process will be something like this:

There is a two-tiered system. First, the application materials are screened to determine who will be invited for an interview. Vanderbilt School of Medicine, for example, receives about 3,500 applications for 104 slots. No medical school can offer an interview to every applicant. This primary screening committee, composed of the dean, the director of admissions, and one or two faculty members, utilizes the on-line application AMCAS (American Medical College Application Service), which contains one essay. For those students who have less than stellar numbers—i.e., less than a B average—the essay is moot. But for all candidates whose numbers are competitive for admission, every bit of the application is read.

The second tier—those invited for the interview—must complete the secondary application, which can require up to three more essays. A school may ask for a two-page autobiography, in which the student might say whatever he wants, and two shorter essays concerning any research experience the applicant has had and what it has meant to him, and any special skills that the applicant could bring to the medical school. A committee of three faculty members and perhaps one student will read these essays carefully, along with the rest of your credentials, and then, you hope, become your advocates. At this point, there can be some heated debate if there's a problem with the essay.

Do you want a description of a person, anecdotes of real-life experiences, or just a listing of accomplishments?

Descriptions and anecdotes, if they are relevant and well done, can have a positive effect on the overall quality of the essay. Since the accomplishments have been listed on the vitae sheet, rehashing them would not be useful, unless you make the right case. A good essay might very well repeat some accomplishments, but the difference will be in the treatment. You are writing a good essay if you are providing further description of exactly what you did, elaborating on what you got out of the experience, and defining what the experience meant to you.

Should this essay be about medicine?

It is important to link your essay subject to medicine. You may write a fascinating essay about your college baseball career, but it will be useless to your application if you don't make the connection to medicine.

There is room for some creativity here. For example, use college baseball to show the admissions reader how hand-eye dexterity, dedication, and teamwork are vital to becoming a useful member of a surgical team, a contributor in a research lab, or a person with the stamina for long hours on rotations. Tell us how your experiences will help you fit at our med school and become a great doctor.

Are there any hackneyed topics that applicants should avoid?

There is no stereotypical bad essay, but anything other than a straightforward narrative that responds to the question is risky. I'd say half of the essays I read concern a relative with a catastrophic disease. And these usually create the same problems: First, is the story true, or has the applicant exaggerated? And if it is true, these essays often reduce a major life turning point to maudlin clichés and trite generalizations. There's nothing inherently bad about the "disease essay," but applicants should consider carefully how they present the story.

Should applicants try to entertain you?

It depends. If you write well, if your narrative is full of details, if you can make your experience come alive for the reader in a way that's fresh and interesting, if it's relevant to your choice of a career in medicine—then it will be entertaining.

Here's what's not entertaining and therefore not smart: using or composing poetry inappropriately for an essay topic; talking about yourself in the third person, for example, "the future Dr. Quackensack"; describing your life through a book of fiction. And while we're on the subject of bizarre approaches, do not send CDs or videos.

Is motivation important? Do you want to see what an applicant plans to do with the degree?

No. An applicant should write about what's important to him, not what he thinks the med school wants to hear. The prospective student hasn't done rotations yet; he doesn't really know what's involved in each specialty, and until he does know, he shouldn't guess.

There are exceptions. For example, if your roommate has AIDS, and as a result, you have volunteered for AIDS-related service, worked in AIDS research, and perhaps published an article or written a senior thesis on the topic, then it has become part of your life and your credentials. Under such circumstances, it would make sense to write about your specific medical interest.

Do you want a good writer or a good person?

Yes to both. You are applying to a professional school; everything about your application should reflect that professionalism. A poorly or carelessly written essay will sabotage your chance for admission.

As for being a good person, most applicants say something about their desire to improve the quality of life. But if you present yourself as a person of compassion, be sure your records indicate the proof. If you talk the talk, show us that you've walked the walk. If your goal is to open a free clinic to provide health care to indigent patients, be sure in your vitae that all the volunteer work you've done with the homeless is clearly evident. Don't emphasize your compassion for humanity if the only volunteer work you've done is to dial a telephone for a fund-raiser.

One advantage to having a student on the admissions committee, as some selective schools do, is that the students can smell "folder filling" better than the faculty does. Your portfolio of activities should include the quality and quantity of volunteer service that reflect the person you seem to be in your essay.

What are you looking for in the application essay? Do you really consider applicants with liberal arts majors the same as applicants with science majors?

The answers to these two questions are related. They are connected by passion. The major is irrelevant, but it should be one about which you are passionate. Choose a major that excites you, then bring that excitement and that passion to the essay. Your passions should be coupled with what you have done with your life, and the essay is your best opportunity to convey that to the admissions committee.

The essay is also your opportunity for explanations. There are many nontraditional applicants to medical school: people who have chosen other careers before coming to medicine, students who have taken time off, or maybe traditional students with anomalies in their transcripts. Anything in your records that might raise a question with your readers should be addressed in the essay. You'll also have a chance in the interview, but the essay is still the best place to address a weakness.

For example, if you had a bad freshman year and the result is that your cumulative GPA is not where it should be, tell the committee the reason. An illness? Financial problems? A death in the family? If you don't explain, the weakness remains an obstacle to your admission. If you've taken time off after graduation, explain what you've been doing and how it brought you to medicine. If you've pursued another career, tell the committee about it.

If you have a perceived weakness in your application, make it your strength by addressing it head-on. If you don't, you have limited your chance of admission.

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