

## WRITING THE MEDICAL SCHOOL APPLICATION ESSAY: PROBLEMS AND CURES

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Writing the medical school application essay, condensing all that is unique about yourself into a single page, allowing your personality to show through every word, demonstrating in a small space all the motivation, eagerness, and joy you will bring to the medical profession—this work creates an anxiety that builds with every rewrite. Although this task will never be simple, it need not be an unguided, unstructured labor. Having worked with many pre-med students to find their voice amid a welter of words, I have developed a set of common errors. To add a touch of humor, I have created a set of medical writing problems and indicated possible cures for these mythical maladies.

### LOST-ITIS

Symptoms:

Statements have no apparent format. They have great ideas but no focus or apparent structure. Statements come to an abrupt end as though something is lost.

Cure for Lost-itis:

· *Provide a framework.* If you took the Mona Lisa out of her frame, she would be a nice woman, but your eyes might wander to another picture. Framed, she becomes the center of attention. The movie *Presumed Innocent* begins and ends with a similar scene: a deserted jury box with a disembodied voice presenting evidence. This repeated idea provides a frame for the movie.

· *Have the first and last sentence refer to the same topic (frame).* Since the medical school application essay is only one page, it needs to have a focus—perhaps a single word that sums up all your qualities, or a single scene that triggered your desire to become a doctor. Such a framework ensures a sense of completeness to the essay.

### SPANISH OCUL-ITIS

Symptoms:

An "I," problem because every sentence begins with this word. If you read the first word of every sentence and you get "Aye I eye I aye," you have this problem.

Cure for Spanish Ocul-itis:

· *Have some sentence variety.* Look at the next few sentences:

**Ex. 1** I have always wanted to show how I could become a first-class doctor if only I could have a chance. I would show how I could aid the suffering in my community when I had my medical degree. I think the medical profession is one in which I want to excel, so I have spent all my spare time studying so that I would have all the knowledge that I need.

If you read the first word of these three sentences, you will read I, I, I (and sound egotistical). In total, there are 11 instances of this word. Yes, the essay is about you and your achievements, but overusing the first person singular is fatal. This "I" problem makes your reader's eyes start counting. Too many of this little word and those eyes start rolling and those I's turn to Z's (ZZZZZZ!). However, the solution is simple—start your sentence with something else.

· *Start with a verb form and put the "I" in the middle (-ing, to+ verb, -ed/-en).*

**Ex. 2** Gaining a medical degree would allow me to practice.

**Ex. 3** To spend all my free time studying would not be a chore, it would be a pleasure.

**Ex. 4** Given the chance, I could become a First-class doctor.

· *Begin with a pronoun (my).*

**Ex. 5** My ambition to become a doctor started when...

· *Begin with a subordinating conjunction (after / before / although / even though / even if/ because / since / unless / until / when / as / if).*

**Ex. 6** If I could enter medical school, I would like to specialize in geriatrics.

## **WAFFLE-ITIS**

Symptom:

Paragraphs are not clear or coherent.

Cure for Waffle-itis:

· *Use the IDEAS' prompt to get you started.* This prompt, besides being easy to remember, will allow you a great deal of freedom within a well-organized framework.

**I** =the main idea for the paragraph. It reveals the focus and shows your purpose.

**D** =the development of that idea—choose format such as example, comparison, analysis

**E** =example—provide clear instances of your idea claim. Make sure that the example is relevant.

**A** =analysis—show how your experience will help you become a first-rate medical person.

**S** = sum up- finish off your paragraph and provide a connection to the next paragraph.

**Ex. 7**

I Responsibility remains high on my list of priorities for character building.

D My family has held to this belief even through difficult times and has developed my commitment to this idea.

E For instance, when I was 15, I promised the superintendent of a hospice in my neighborhood that I would substitute for one of the volunteers who

A/E was going on vacation. Little did I know at the time it was the same week my family was going to Disney

A World. Although I shed a few tears, I

E/A stayed with a friend and fulfilled my promise. The volunteer had a

E wonderful vacation, and she gave me her frequent flyer miles so that I went

S skiing at Christmas. By keeping my word, I found a reciprocity in the world that I have noticed many times since then.

## **VERBOSITY**

Symptom:

Verbal diarrhea. Usually this affliction happens when people are nervous. It is difficult to cure when you are talking, but writing is another matter. You can always cut it out.

Cure for verbosity:

- *Count the number of words in each Sentence.* As a general rule of thumb, start with a short sentence (about 9-12 words). The next sentence can be longer. However, try not to go over 30 words. The average sentence length should be about 15-20. Remember the old KISS principle—keep ideas short and simple.
- *Eliminate as many "BE" forms and prepositions as you can.* Be simply means to exist. Take that as a given and eliminate the "be" forms. These forms include the following: *am, are, is, was, were, be, been, being.*

**Ex. 8a** I was given an extensive examination by the doctor. (9 words)

**Ex. 8b** The doctor gave me an extensive examination. (7 words)

## **POMPOSITIVITY**

Symptom:

Elongation of the didactic words (too many Latinate words).

Cure for Pompositivity:

· *Simplify your words.* Keep all your words to an appropriate diction—don't try to show off. It sounds unnatural.

**Ex. 9a** The excrescence secreting from the impairment... (awkward-sounding)

**Ex. 9b** The pus oozing from the wound... (better)

## COMMA-OSITY

Symptom:

Loss of control of commas—either too many or not enough.

Cure for Comma-osity:

· *Use commas before: for, and, nor; but, or, yet, so, if both sides are complete sentences.*

**Ex. 10** The patients all waited in silence as the afternoon grew steadily overcast, *but* they were not prepared for the thunder clap that followed the ominous calm. (Use a comma between these two complete sentences.)

**Ex. 11** The patient waited in silence as the afternoon grew steadily overcast *but* screamed when the thunderclap made the room shake. (Do *not* use a comma between these two sections because the phrase after the *but* conjunction begins with another verb—the patient *waited* but *screamed*.)

· *Always use commas after however, moreover, furthermore, therefore, nevertheless, nonetheless, consequently therefore, hence, thus, as a result.*

**Ex. 12a** The patients waited in silence as the afternoon grew steadily more overcast; *however*; they were startled into screams of shock when the thunderclap deafened them.

Notice the semi-colon/comma use here. This sentence with the *adverbial* conjunctions has many other possibilities:

**Ex. 12b** The patients waited in silence as the afternoon grew steadily more overcast. *However*, they were startled into screams of shock when the thunderclap deafened them.

**Ex. 12c** The patients waited in silence as the afternoon grew steadily more overcast. They, *however*; were startled into screams of shock when the thunderclap deafened them.

· *Use commas after "which" and "who" (if the subject is specific) never after "that." Use the word "who" exclusively with people. Never use "which" for a person (the person might be a witch, but it would not be politic to draw attention to the fact), and never use*

"that" with a person—you are killing off that person and making him/her an object. The simple rule here is "if you don't know, don't use commas."

**Ex. 13** Madame Francesca, who checked quietly into the hospital, had swallowed a quarter.

You do know the identity of the woman—Madame Francesca—so you do use commas.

**Ex. 14** The woman who walked into the hospital had swallowed a quarter.

You don't know the identity of the woman, so you don't use commas.

· *Use "which" exclusively for specified, named, known objects—and always use commas.*

**Ex. 15** The Golden Gate Hospital, which was built in 1978, has received a face- lift as a gift from an unknown benefactor.

· *Use "that" with a non-specific, non-named, non-definite object—and never use a comma.*

**Ex. 16** The hospital that was built in 1978 has received a face- lift as a gift from an unknown benefactor.

Quick Tip:

In order to simplify and cut out words, we have a simple trick known as WHIZ deletion (if you say WHO IS very quickly, it sounds like WHIZ). In other words, if you use WHO or WHICH or THAT followed by a BE verb, you can, if you choose, delete the words (getting rid of a BE form).

Thus, in Ex. 15 and 16, the words "which was" and "that was" could all be omitted. However, the comma still needs to be present in example 15.

## **SOME FINAL THOUGHTS**

In these few, short pages, I have tried to show the most common problems made by applicants to medical school. Remember, the application essay is only one page, but you have to present yourself elegantly, forcefully, pragmatically, interestingly to those who have to read such applications by the thousands. Give yourself a sporting chance—and the readers a pleasant break—by writing a concise, cogent, coherent, comma-fault free letter that reveals the true you.

Why do I spend a considerable portion of this advice on picky matters such as commas? I put it to you this way. Your letter is the only indication the admissions board has of your attention to detail. Doctors have to write prescriptions with exact dosages. Every period and comma has to be in the right place; otherwise, your patients might

receive the wrong dose from the administering nurse or pharmacist. Your punctuation, in this instance, could literally be a matter of life and death. Sloppiness in your application letter could mean sloppiness in your career, and you have no chance of meeting the admissions committee in person to rectify this mistaken impression. Your essay is all that stands for you. It is the most important statement.

Start the essay early because one draft will not suffice. Share your statement with friends, enemies, acquaintances, professors, writing center personnel, and get pertinent, relevant feedback. Try not to have a family member be your critic – they have vested interest in your future and cannot be impartial. Good luck and clear writing...