

Craft Your Personal Statement

A Brainstorming Workbook

Designed to help you
write the perfect
personal statement



My Application Coach
Expert Medical Career Guidance

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Dear Residency and Fellowship Applicants:

Thank you for downloading my “Crafting a Personal Statement” - A Brainstorming Workbook, *second edition*. It is written with gratitude for the perspective and knowledge I have gained from medical students, residents and IMGs over many years as a Program Director and more recently as a dedicated career application coach.

Please note that while this workbook certainly can stand alone as an aid for the conception and drafting of well organized and impactful personal statements, it is best used as a supplement to the personalized services I offer on my website.



My Application Coach
Expert Medical Career Guidance

Welcome!



Most people struggle with crafting a personal statement for their ERAS application. But it doesn't have to be that way. I know it can be tough to know where to start, what to write, or how to write it, but I'm here with a formula that can make it easier. By taking a few hours to brainstorm your ideas, you're on your way to creating a statement that truly captures why you're applying for residency training and emphasizes the strengths that you bring to the table. And I'm here to help every step of the way.

Let's Begin!

Greetings!

I am an Internal Medicine physician who spent over two decades as a Program Director. From my years of service, I developed a keen understanding of the residency application and recruitment process. I have interviewed thousands of residency applicants and have been responsible for review of countless ERAS applications. I have a particular interest in helping each candidate to tell their unique story in the personal statement and shine during the interview process. My goal? To ensure that every candidate's application for residency or fellowship is polished, professional and has a distinctive voice. My signature strengths include coaching expertise, writing excellence, attention to details, compassion for my clients and a well-defined sense of purpose.



Are you ready?

Miriam Parker MD, FACP, CIC, CSC
Owner, My Application Coach LLC

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**You can't edit a
blank page.”**

– Jodi Picoult.



01

General Comments.

02

Paragraph One - A Compelling Hook

03

Paragraph Two - Your Journey

04

Paragraph Three - Your Strengths and Skills

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Error-Proof your Statement, Tips and a
Case Study

GENERAL COMMENTS

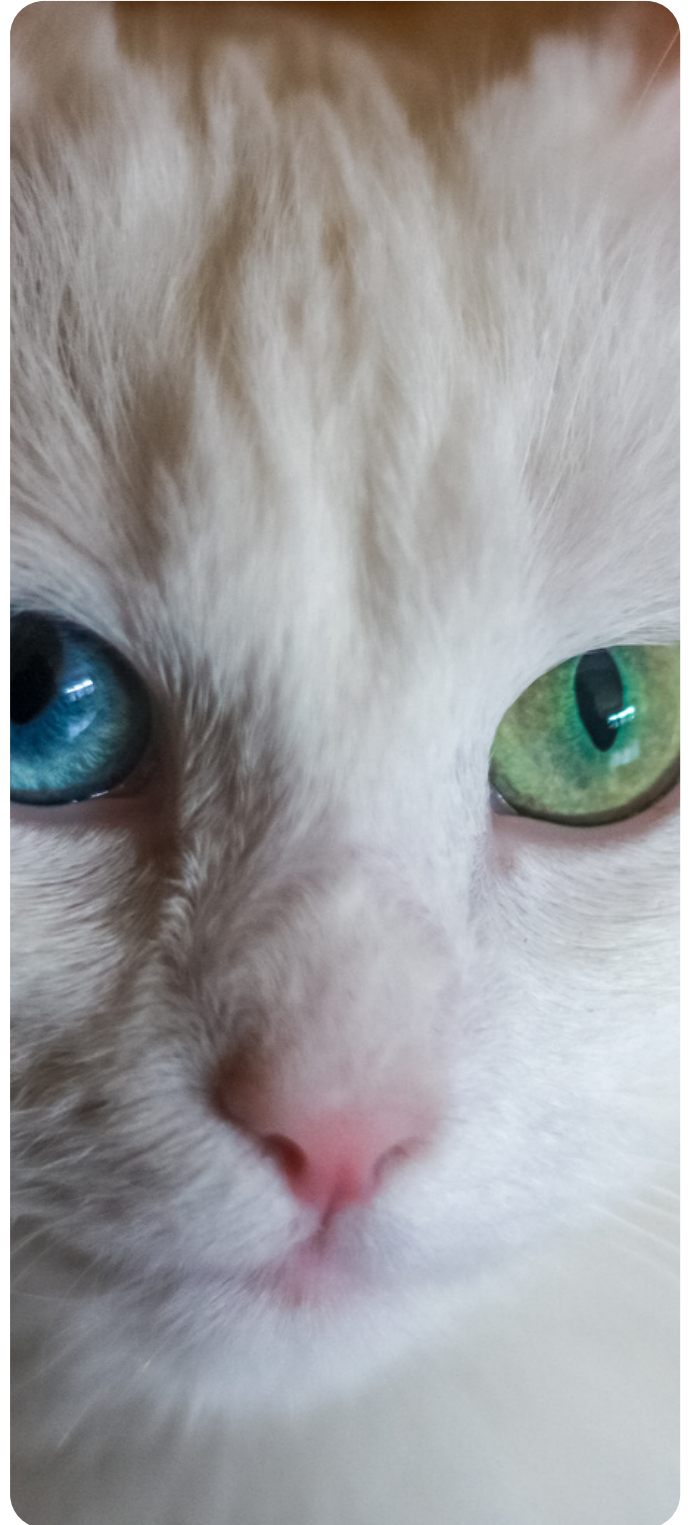
Who, What, Why.

The Personal Statement remains a critical component of your ERAS application. While it does not “screen” in or out your application for further consideration like your USMLE Step 2 score or year of graduation, it is likely to be closely read should you pass the first elimination round. It must be professional and polished, but that’s not sufficient.

A personal statement is a glimpse into who you are, what you have done, and why a program should strongly consider your candidacy. Just as you are unique, so too must your personal statement. To get the attention of its reader -- usually the program director or member of the Recruitment Committee -- it must stand out from the sea of other applications.

**Why fit in when
you were born to
stand out?**

– Dr. Suess



Think of that blank page waiting for your personal story as a great opportunity for you to teach your reader who you are.

What must you do first? You must convince yourself that your story is worth telling. That's not easy for a lot of people. They have a hard time seeing why they might be different or more deserving from any other applicant who is trying to earn a residency slot.

Believe me when I say that everyone has a wonderful story about their life's journey that can engage each reader and have them rooting for you. You will need to invite them to walk briefly in your footsteps by selecting the right material and telling it in an authentic and compelling fashion.

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“Be yourself — not your idea of what you think somebody else's idea of yourself should be.”

— Henry David Thoreau

One of the difficulties in writing personal statements I hear often is that it sounds as if I am bragging if I put too much emphasis on my accomplishments. Let's think about that for second.

You are applying for a job. That is exactly what an ERAS application means. When one applies for a job, is it not reasonable to showcase your skills and accomplishments? If not, what does an employer use to judge your candidacy?

The ERAS application is no different. You **MUST** highlight your accomplishments, but do so in a humble voice. Think of your personal statement as you would a persuasive essay.



Crafting an essay that resonates with your reader is no easy feat. Here are four key components to enjoy success:

- **Hook:** Engage the reader with a compelling opening.
- **Journey:** Take the reader on a journey by incorporating essential details of your steps towards residency.
- **Strengths:** Highlight your achievements and what sets you apart with clarity and humility.
- **Conviction:** Convey why you are the preferred candidate for residency training and what you are seeking.

Remember, every word counts, so make sure it adds value to your essay. Writing is an act of rewriting -- again and again. I know it's hard, but don't become too attached to any sentence or paragraph even if it seemed brilliant moments earlier. Such attachment will hinder you as you must be able to discard ideas that don't work.

Having said all that, there are times when I have read a compelling essay which broke some of these rules and was absolutely outstanding. If you are one of those people who can generate such an essay, it's not likely you are reading this. Kudos to those who are able to break through convention and write a winning essay, but trust me, they are few.

Please also understand that I don't suggest you try a particularly untraditional approach as it may backfire. Nonetheless, it's always your choice. Just realize that many physicians are somewhat conventional and your personal statement is probably not the best place to push creative boundaries.



"Get it down. Take chances. It may be bad, but it's the only way you can do anything really good."

— William Faulkner

A COMPELLING HOOK

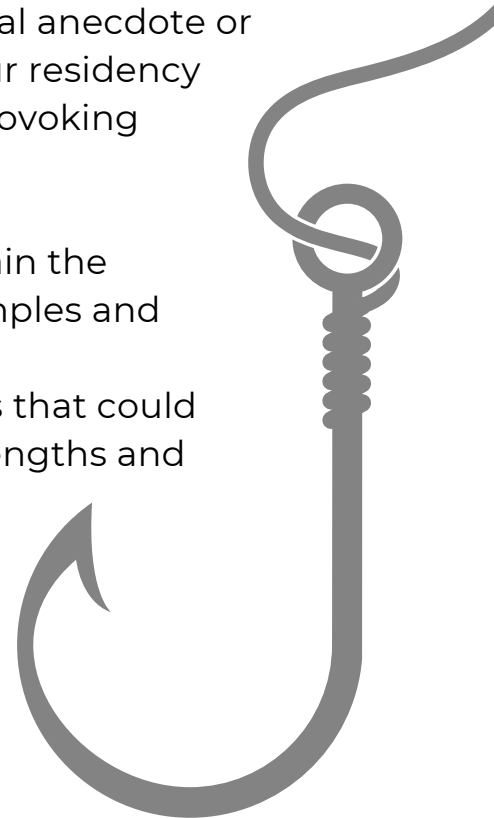
An Essential Step

Every piece of writing is one-of-a-kind. The first paragraph sets the tone for the rest of the text, so it must be captivating. This is where the hook comes in. What exactly is a hook? Simply put, it's the bait that reels in the reader's attention. From famous novels to renowned essays, the hook is that unique spark that leaves you wanting more.

A hook should come early. The first sentence is preferable. Program directors and members of application committees read hundreds of applications every year. If their interest is not captured early, your application may find its way to the rejection pile.

Crafting a compelling hook requires creativity and attention to detail. It should be a concise, attention-grabbing statement that sets the tone for the rest of the application. One common approach to capture the reader's interest is to begin with a personal anecdote or a vivid description of an experience that relates to your residency journey. Another method is to start with a thought-provoking question or a surprising statistic.

Once you have a strong hook, it's important to maintain the momentum throughout your essay. Use specific examples and concrete details to illustrate your qualifications and accomplishments. Avoid vague or generic statements that could apply to anyone. Be sure to highlight your unique strengths and skills that set you apart from other applicants.



A COMPELLING HOOK

Some Examples

Let's take a look at a few hooks compiled from recent personal statements I have read in the past few years while reviewing applicants' materials for mock interviews. While each of these is different, each draws the reader in quickly.

- "Life is marked by unexpected twists and turns. During a night shift as a general practitioner at a referral hospital, I was confronted by a startling revelation. An unconscious patient admitted for hepatic encephalopathy turned out to be a childhood friend".
- Early in my teenage years when I joined the local Red Cross for First Aid Training, I was deeply inspired by learning how chest compressions can bring back a dead heart".
- "My mother was a high school dropout and had her first child by 18. She endured constant criticism and was called 'an embarrassment'. But this was not how my siblings and I saw her".
- "In fighting for my dream of becoming a doctor, I have shed blood, sweat and tears. In my family, a woman's education ends after she graduates from high school. She then marries and starts a family. That is not, however, what I wanted."
- "With a blank page as my canvas, I began drawing strokes of lines and shades turning into a beautiful scene of mountains, forests and serene waters. Since a young age, I have enjoyed all forms of art, from drawing scenic pictures of nature to pressing flowers on glass frames. Hailing from a quaint but limited town in Sudan, my love of art was not an avenue for creative expression only, but also ignited a desire in me to dream of endless possibilities."
- "My son's teacher told me once they had a discussion about heroes in class and my son spoke about me. He said I was his hero because I worked very hard, studying late into the night until my eyes turned red to be the best doctor. Hearing that my child thought of me as a hero made me feel unbreakable."

A COMPELLING HOOK

A few more details...

A compelling hook leads into the rest of your first paragraph which typically describes why you chose medicine or how medicine chose you. You must choose the story around which your hook revolves carefully and such requires a commitment to brainstorming that I describe a bit later on. You will need to consider various options and keep an open mind.

As you can see from the examples I've listed, a hook can be anything! You can bring in individuals from various aspects of your life that were inspirational (parents, family members, mentors, teacher, sports coaches etc.), discuss how extracurricular activities or volunteerism may have molded you into who you are today, discuss a particular adventure, a book/movie which has impacted you or a philosophical perspective you have adopted. It doesn't have to directly relate to medicine but must be connected to your practice or your interest in medicine.

One thing that I will advise each of you frankly is this: Try to refrain from describing the illness of some family member and use it to explain why you wanted to be a physician unless you cannot find anything else that drew you to medicine. I have read countless essays which detail the illness of a parent or grandparent and how such illness was the impetus for the applicant to become a physician. It's not that you can't do this or that it's wrong per se, but just recognize that it's commonplace and will not set you apart. I would conservatively say that at least 35% of the personal statements that I have read over the years use some version of this as their unimaginary opening. If you are going to use this as the story behind your hook, you must at least get creative in how you present it.

YOUR JOURNEY

Stated Briefly and Selectively....

The following 1-2 paragraphs must provide your reader with a glimpse of your journey from high school to medical school and beyond. It must be chronologic yet selective, conveying what drew you to medicine and why it is irresistible to you. Include important details that tie your story together, such as your passion for pathophysiology, desire to help others, and the opportunity to make a difference in your community. Remember, it's not about lecturing your reader about medicine, but rather sharing what makes this vocation so special to you.

This is one areas of many applications where I usually find a lot of filler words and sentences which do not add much, if at all. As with all your writing, ask yourself if a given sentence really enhances your application and conveys something significant about you. If it does not, I would strongly suggest using your eraser or hitting the delete button.



YOUR STRENGTHS & SKILLS

What You Will Bring with you

This part of your personal statement is used to bring in your strengths and skills. It is important to separate strengths from skills.

Strengths are beneficial qualities which are integral to you as a unique human being. Sometimes we use the term “signature strengths” to define those personal characteristics that are so deeply embedded in each of us and without which, we would not be who we are. For some this is deep compassion. For others, it may be a well-developed pragmatism. The choices are myriad and one group of strengths is not better than another. All strengths when applied in excess can have negative consequences. I believe that it is important to distill what you believe are your signature strengths, both for the purpose of writing your personal statement and later for your interviews. It will take some time and introspection to do this. As much as we might like, we cannot own every wonderful quality but must be content to select a few of those which we believe describe our best virtues.

Skills are better described as competencies and are related to such things as interpersonal skills, language, public speaking, provision of feedback to others, clinical and/or surgical skills.

Strength:

A good or beneficial quality or attribute of a person.

Skill:

Encompasses the knowledge, competencies and abilities to perform operational tasks. Skills are developed through life, work experiences and study.

YOUR STRENGTHS & SKILLS

Something that might interest you

If this part of the process creates a dilemma for you, I would highly suggest that you visit the VIA Institute on Character website. The VIA Institute owes its origins to the movement of Positive Psychology (Seligman) and provides a Classification of Strengths and Virtues which can be incredibly helpful. You can take a free survey and learn about your top five character strengths or dive deeper if interested and better understand all 24 Character Strengths. Signature strengths are essential to you as person. Using these strengths feels natural and will uplift and energize you, promoting greater balance.

Each character strength is housed under one of five (5) virtues. For instance, Under the Virtue of Justice, there lies Teamwork, Fairness and Leadership. Under the virtue of Wisdom, there lies Creativity, Curiosity, Judgment, Love of learning and Perspective. And, so on and so forth. Those who embody the character strength of judgement for instance, are critical thinkers, able to think things through and are open-minded.

<http://www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths>

”
**The art of
writing is the art
of discovering
what you
believe.**

– Gustav Flaubert



WHY CHOOSE YOU

Defining Your Strongest Assets

This last paragraph is an opportunity for you to tell your reader exactly what you will bring to a program and what you are looking for in a program. You have to tell them why you are an exceptional candidate for their program and what you will bring with you of value. You don't want to provide a laundry list of too many assets, but rather a carefully curated group - each of which you have discussed in your preceding paragraphs. This amounts to a restatement of personal qualities and skills that you could positively contribute to the program.

If you are interested in a small community program with attention placed in training excellent primary care physicians, say so. If you desire a program which will afford you teaching and research opportunities, let them know. If you are applying to a variety of different programs, you may need to be less specific so as not to risk excluding yourself from any given program. Some people use different versions of their personal statement to get around this.



BRAINSTORMING

Thoughts without Censorship

Brainstorming is an essential step in figuring out how to tell your story. It's an opportunity to generate ideas, both big and small, that can help you create a vision of who you are, where you have been, and where you are going. It's essential to be vulnerable during this process and let your thoughts flow freely without fear of judgment.

Think about the experiences that have shaped you as a person and a professional. What motivates you to pursue a residency position? What skills do you bring to the table? What sets you apart from other candidates? These are just a few questions to consider as you begin your brainstorming sessions.

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers when it comes to brainstorming. It's a time to explore your thoughts and ideas and let your creativity shine. Don't try to censor what gets put down on paper. Just write.



Brainstorming Worksheet

#1 ~ *Your Successes*

While this may not be the hardest place to begin, start here with writing down a list of your accomplishments. This is the place to add awards, scholarships, class placements etc, but consider other achievements OUTSIDE of academics - e.g., your soccer league's win at the tournament, the languages you've learned, your completion of a 5k race. It doesn't matter. Jot down everything you can think of since you were a kid even if you are not sure it had much significance.

Brainstorming Worksheet

#2 ~ *Your Failures*

Yes, you read that correctly. I want you to consider times in life when you failed or ended up with a disappointing result. Again, these can be academic or non-academic. Allow yourself to be vulnerable. Failure can truly be a beautiful thing which gives us a path to ultimate success. Jot down everything you can think of since you were a kid even if you are not sure it had much significance. Why are these important? If they've led to a growth mindset, they often can provide the best of all hooks!

Brainstorming Worksheet

#3 ~ *Falling in Love with Medicine*

Think about when you really fell in love with medicine. Why did you really decide to pursue medicine? Think about mentors, experiences, rotations, volunteerism etc. Your decision may have been sudden or gradual, marked by clarity or uncertainty.

Brainstorming Worksheet

#4 ~ *Meaningful Activities*

Consider any meaningful activities (often but not exclusively volunteerism) which have truly impacted you in your journey towards residency and why?

Brainstorming Worksheet

#5 ~ Major Obstacles

Consider the major obstacles which have stood in your way of your dreams. How did you overcome the obstacles placed in your path? What did you ultimately learn?

Brainstorming Worksheet

#6 ~ *Why are you a great fit?*

Consider why you are a great fit for the specialty and for a given program. What do you bring with you in terms of attributes, skills and experience that is notable and/or unique. What are the assets you own that the program can leverage to their benefit? Note that your description of why/how you are a great fit for a given residency program may not be the same for each program to which are applying- particularly if the programs are quite different.

THE WRITING PROCESS

Step-by-Step

01

Brainstorming Sessions

Devote ample time to brainstorm and jot down your initial ideas on paper. You are not yet committing to anything. Take a break and step away, allowing yourself to come back with fresh eyes and new ideas.

02

Revisit Brainstorming Ideas

Circle those ideas which you think will have the most impact and relevance. Begin to add some details to bring richness. Organize your ideas into the appropriate sections of your personal statement by creating a roadmap.

03

Select the Story for your Hook

Your hook could come from any one of your brainstorming worksheets. It could be a devastating failure that propelled you to greater things, an important achievement, or something your mother/father/coach taught you.

04

Paragraph One

Start writing using the material you've decided will form your hook. It will take several iterations.

THE WRITING PROCESS

Step-by-Step

05

Paragraph Two

Write about your journey from the bullet points you've decided upon. Draw from those parts of your journey which have the most meaning.

06

Paragraph Three

What are your strengths? Your skills? How did you hone them? You can speak about clinical skills, leadership, teamwork, research alongside your character traits.

07

Your Final Sales Pitch

This must articulate why the program should strongly consider you as an applicant. It is a restatement of your best assets and a compelling description of how you are a great fit for them. Recognize that you may need to adjust somewhat for different programs.

08

Rest. Review. Edit. Repeat

It will take multiple revisions even if you are a good writer. This is just the nature of writing. Accept and enjoy the process. Hopefully you've learned a lot about yourself.

Personal Statement ERRORS

Things you must avoid

01

Reliance on AI. This is the biggest error you can make.

02

Grammatical and/or punctuation errors

03

A disorganized structure;

04

Failure to describe why you are an excellent candidate

05

Reiterating the main theme multiple times

06

Use of informal language and/or cliches.

07

Inclusion of an overused famous quote.

08

Insincerity, dishonesty, and/or lack of humility

09

Reluctance to discuss an obvious issue with your application

10

Leaving a significant amount of the allotted space blank or exceeding one page.

Personal Statement TIPS

For your consideration

01

www.Grammarly.com is available to help you avoid embarrassing grammar mistakes, but not to rewrite your essay using AI.

02

Use an on-line Thesaurus (www.thesaurus.com) to help you make better word choices and avoid redundancy.

03

You will need to get your ideas onto paper first. Please don't start with AI. Note that use of AI directly is prohibited by ERAS. If you do feel compelled to use AI to get some ideas, you will need to carefully edit and make it your own. Personal statements that are written by AI are blatantly obvious.

04

There are some excellent college web sites with examples of great personal statements. It's worth looking at them. Search "personal statement for residency". DO NOT, however, plagiarize from these essays - not even one sentence.

05

Give yourself time to write your personal statement. It cannot be done in a day or even a week. It's normal to have multiple revisions before you are content with the final product.

06

Have a native English speaker review your writing. Even better, a writing or residency application expert.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

A Case Study with Annotation

Author: Ademidun Ayoade MD

In Yoruba culture, left-handedness dominance has been associated with negative connotations. The left hand is frequently thought of as the sinister, dirty hand. You eat, greet, give and receive with your right hand, and you cleanse your body and perform unhygienic tasks with your left hand.

As a child, I was told that I was naturally left-handed, but I was forced by my teachers in elementary school to switch to my right hand due to these cultural beliefs. The transition was not an easy one, and it took a toll on my academic performance and self-esteem. I needed extra lessons to catch up with my peers and these sessions, usually during break time or after school, heightening my separation and sense of alienation. I was often seated apart from the rest of the class, which created insecurities that I have had to deal with and work through. It was tough, but I knew it was necessary if I wanted to succeed in life. After graduating from elementary school and beginning my transition to middle and high school, my academic performance began to improve.

Lovely hook. It is personal and creative. It leaves you wanting to learn more.

Elaborates on left-handedness as a personal major obstacle. Describes hardships, alienation and impact (self-esteem, academic performance) but ultimately is able to overcome and enjoy success. Note how without stating the term resilience, it is beautifully described.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

A Case Study - Continued

At the conclusion of high school, I exceeded expectations and was at the top ten percentile of my class. This improvement in my academic performance was a result of my unflinching determination, perseverance and hard work. I dedicated myself to studying, seeking help when needed, and setting goals for myself to constantly strive for excellence. Yet, a new obstacle arose just when I was beginning to believe that I had everything under control academically. My failure to achieve the necessary cut-off scores, precluded my admission to medical school.

I decided to take this setback as an opportunity for personal growth. I focused on improving my academic skills and sought out additional experiences in the medical field. I volunteered at a local hospital and took advanced courses in relevant subjects to strengthen my application for the next admission cycle. This paid off, and I was eventually admitted into medical school, where I learned the value of balance and the importance of participating in extracurricular activities. I was involved in a variety of activities, including being the soccer team captain and volunteering as a student tutor, all while meeting my academic obligations.

Documents success quantitatively. Describes the qualities that allowed for such: Determination, perseverance and hard work.

Obstacle #2. Demonstrates pragmatism. Recognizes his application's weakness. Demonstrates self-awareness and chooses a Growth Mindset - seeing potential for growth in "failure".

Also hints at his team leadership (soccer team leadership) and teaching interest.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

A Case Study ~ Continued

During my internal medicine rotations, I was constantly impressed by the incredible skills and knowledge possessed by my internal medicine attendings. Their ability to diagnose and treat a wide range of conditions was truly remarkable. I was amazed by how they applied pharmacology and pathophysiology to provide accurate diagnosis and effective treatment for their patients. Their thorough review of laboratory results was also incredibly impressive. I was always in awe of how they used this information to improve the health and outcomes of those under their care. It is this level of dedication and expertise that inspired me to pursue a career in internal medicine.

In my training as a doctor, I have built resilience, formed a culture of discipline, and enhanced my ability to communicate clearly and coherently in a way that ensures comprehension and learned the importance of collaboration and teamwork. I am compelled to apply to your institution because of the emphasis placed on personalized training beyond the syllabus and your track record of producing well-rounded doctors equipped with the right expertise and a readiness to bring about global change in medicine. I look forward to my residency training years with excitement. I understand the expectations, and I am confident that I will be wholly invested in the training process and be a valuable addition to your team in the residency program.

Focus now shifts to why Internal Medicine. Articulates nicely his attraction and passion for the specialty.

Why me? Resilience (uses this word for the first time), discipline, communication, collaboration.

Discusses what he is looking for in a program.

Displays confidence and affirms his commitment to the program.

Thank You!



To each and every applicant who placed their trust in me and from whom I have gained some measure of wisdom to make this workbook possible, I offer you my deepest appreciation. Special thanks to those who helped with manuscript review and graciously allowed me to incorporate their writing.



About Me

Miriam Parker MD, FACP, CIC, CSCC

I am a board-certified Internal Medicine physician who spent my entire career in Graduate Medical Education. I have served as a Program Director for over twenty-five years and am a certified interview coach and student career coach. It has been my great pleasure over the years to work with those aiming for admission to medical school, residency and fellowship.

- I know how hard you've worked to get here.
- I know how much it means to get into medical school or matched to a residency or fellowship spot.
- I understand the importance of a professional application - one that sets you apart instead of diminishing your accomplishments -- and know how to ensure yours does this for you.
- I've vetted countless ERAS/AMCAS applications and edited hundreds of individual personal statements.
- I've interviewed applicants for over twenty years and know how to help you stand out and avoid mistakes you can't afford to make.

I'd be honored to help polish your application, teach you critical interview skills and make you shine brighter. It's what I do every day. It's what I love.



My Application Coach
Expert Medical Career Guidance

For further guidance:

My services are available individually and as packages. Please feel to contact me for general mentoring, AAMC application, Personal Statement review, CASPER support, secondary applications and mock interviews.

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My Application Coach

Expert Medical Career Guidance

