

The Expert Panel:

Twelve Top Ranking PA School Administrators Explain What They Want in Your Personal Statement

TIRED OF THE GUESSING GAME?

You've finally finished your personal statement and it's perfect!

There's not a grammar or spelling error in sight. Your mother/best friend/barista at the local coffee bar all think it's a winner.

The character count is right. There's just one thing to consider before hitting the "send" button — will it meet the admission team's expectations?

How will you know? CASPA guidelines are vague — "Write a brief statement expressing your motivation or

desire to become a physician assistant.” School websites aren’t generally more helpful.

Do they want to hear that you’ve dreamed of becoming a PA since you were five and loved your toy stethoscope? Are they interested in your volunteer work at a homeless shelter? Will it help that you’ve been a science nerd since 9th grade Biology? How should you tell your story? Should it read like a textbook, a novel, or something in between?

The fact is there hasn’t been much guidance.

UNTIL NOW!

Admissions directors and faculty from PA programs across the country have shared their thoughts on personal statements — what they hope to see, what they wish they’d never see, and tips to make an essay shine. Each school has a unique perspective, but common themes arise.

First things first

Before writing one word, think about your audience. Ask yourself the following questions: Are you applying to several programs? Or are you targeting a specific school, like Wake Forest University, which focuses on building

future leaders in the PA profession? Or Emory, which values clinical experience and community service? Does your preferred program use clinical, hands-on training like Georgia Regents University?

“I encourage applicants to research programs in depth. Go to open houses if possible,” says Janie McDaniel, BSMT, Assistant Professor, Wake Forest School of Medicine. “A lot of programs look at non-cognitive matters or take a holistic approach, using a rubric of GPAs, GRE scores, patient care hours, and personal statements. Others have a minimum GPA requirement. Know what the program is hoping for in an applicant.”

If applying to a specific program, highlight your experiences, training, skills, and traits that relate to the school’s preferences.

“Clinical experience and community service are very important to us. We love for applicants to describe what they’ve done clinically. Take a patient or two and tell us about them, says Allan Platt PA-C, MMSc, Director of Admissions, Emory Physician Assistant Program. “We also want to know about your involvement in community service even if it’s not medically related. Have you gone on a mission? Worked with a homeless population? Tell us how those experiences impacted you.”

If your targeted program uses CASPA, or if you're applying to a number of schools, no worries. "A well-written essay will speak to all programs," says Darwin Brown, MPH, PA-C, Associate Program Director and Director of Clinical Education at UNMC.

It was a dark and stormy night in the back of the ambulance

Universally, interviewees mentioned the use of drama in essays, and not in a positive way.

"A lot of people start with a dramatic paragraph. I personally find that too scripted. I'm not looking to be entertained. I'm looking for a heartfelt, thoughtful explanation of why the PA profession is a good fit for you," says Terry O'Donnell BS, MAT, MHS, Associate Professor and Chair of Physician Assistant Studies at Quinnipiac University.

"Over the top drama doesn't wow. It does the opposite," says Audra Perrino, MS, Director of Admissions at Stony Brook University Physician Assistant Program.

“Go for the heart, not the drama,” says Lori Palfreyman, MS, PA-C, Faculty Chair of the Admissions Committee at Rutgers University PA Program.

“Our faculty has different opinions on story telling aspects. But everyone agrees — if your personal statement is superficial, then you have a problem,” says Grace Landel, MEd, PA-C, Program Director □ Joint MSPAS/MPH Program, Touro University California.

When I was 10 I had my tonsils removed

The whole point of the personal statement is to educate admissions personnel about the subjective factors that grades and test scores can't reveal. Everyone wants to know the journey that brought you to this point, with a caveat. No one wants to hear about that stethoscope you played with as a five-year old or how you spoon-fed your sick grandmother (as heartwarming a story as it is).

Tim Quigley, MPH, PA-C, Director of Student Affairs at MEDEX NW Division of Physician Assistant Studies, explains. “We'd rather hear about your work with patients than about a family member's illness. Not to say it's unimportant, but we expect you've gone on from that and done other things. Talking about more recent events

shows a certain level of maturity and experience. Avoid first person family stories and focus on real patients.”

“It’s common for applicants to start the essay with a childhood experience. It can be a starting point, but move on quickly,” says Judith Stallings, EdD, MHE, PA-C, Associate Director of Admissions at Georgia Regents University.

“It’s not impressive when someone writes paragraphs about personal experiences — they shouldn’t be the overriding theme of the essay. If a family member was sick and that was your first care-giving experience, mention it in a sentence or two. The day-in and day-out details are unnecessary,” Palfreyman says.

“Some students talk too much about their personal stories and not enough about their professional experiences. The essay should be about experiences with patients,” says Leah P. Baldwin, Associate Director of Graduate and Professional Programs Admissions, Pacific University.

“What we’re looking for is a passion for the profession and patients. Sometimes when the word ‘I’ appears frequently in a statement, it tells me the applicant is not as concerned about the profession as he is himself,” O’Donnell says.

“If every sentence starts with “I,” you’re missing the opportunity to tell us what we get out of accepting you into our program,” Palfreyman adds.

“I have a passion to serve”

Platitudes waste space. You wouldn’t be applying to PA school if you didn’t have a passion/calling/desire for the profession. Generalizations don’t help admissions personnel discover the factors that set you apart from someone else with similar grades, scores and experience.

“One of the first things we look for is their motivation to be a PA. We want an essay that’s personal, not generic. Don’t give us the definition of a PA or quote from our website,” Quigley says. “The writer needs to remember we get 1,000 applications, so the essay needs to be unique enough to catch an eye. It’s important to highlight why your experiences would make you a great PA.”

“My perspective is that this is the opportunity for applicants to show us who they really are,” Brown says. “We want to know who you are and how you got here. Often those with healthcare experience offer too little insight into what they’ve gained from their work. We want to know why those experiences are important.”

“Common platitudes like, ‘I want to help people,’ aren’t useful. We want people who can communicate with patients, so write about those experiences. We use the essay to see what’s unique about this individual and how they got to this point. What’s their journey? Why have you chosen to be a PA? How did you confirm your interest and why is it important to you?” says Wayne Stuart, MD, Director, DeSales University Physician Assistant Program.

“The essay needs to be about the applicant. When three-quarters of an essay describes a PA’s job, we don’t learn anything about the applicant,” Landel says. “Instead focus on what you’ve done that has led you to seek out the PA profession. Key in on the experiences that brought you to the fork in the road and tell us why you took the path to PA.”

“Applicants need to tell a real story about how they got to the point of applying, based upon numerous events that led to this career choice. Come up with a list of personality traits needed in healthcare work — empathy, a desire to help others,” Perrino says. “Tie events in your life to developing the attributes and traits that will make you a good PA. One sentence is often enough. For example, ‘I was an athlete and learned to work with a team.’ We like to hear about the individualized journey. You

need to show me who you are and what you have to contribute. It can be as simple as developing the list of your traits into sentences.”

“This is the opportunity to express how you connect with patients on a human level. It’s the subjective part of the application — the part that grades and work history don’t explain,” Palfreyman, says. “If one of your reasons for wanting to be a PA is connecting with patients on a deeper level, show what you’ve learned or describe your traits that will help you fill that role.”

“You should include something about your personal strengths to show that you are highly organized or a hard worker,” Stallings says.

“The essay should show some level of maturity and understanding about the physician led-PA team. Why does the profession apply to this applicant? Most applicants will have worked with a PA. Those experiences are the ones to write about,” says Dennis Brown, PA-C, MPH, Clinical Assistant Professor of Physician Assistant Studies, Director of Physician Assistant Program at Quinnipiac University.

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If you’re invited to write a supplemental essay, **DO NOT** simply cut and paste your CASPA personal statement.

“That won’t impress us,” Platt says.

What? You could have been a doctor!

It should be a no-brainer. But it’s omitted often enough for interviewees to mention it — they need to know why you’ve targeted this profession and not another healthcare related job.

“Why have you chosen PA school and not medical or nursing school? What happened in your journey to bring you to this decision? If you want me to understand how you reached this point in your life tell me about your motivations,” Perrino says.

“If someone talks about passion for the profession in the essay, but they haven’t done much, there’s a real disconnect. The strongest essays are where I really get a feeling for why a person has chosen this profession in a non-text book like description,” O’Donnell says.

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