

Creating a Residency Application Personal Statement Writers Workshop: Fostering Narrative, Teamwork, and Insight at a Time of Stress

Bruce H. Campbell, MD, Nancy Havas, MD, Arthur R. Derse, MD, JD, and Richard L. Holloway, PhD

Abstract

Problem

Every graduating medical student must write a personal statement for the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS), yet there are no widely available resources designed to aid the writing process, causing stress among applicants.

Approach

The authors offered every Medical College of Wisconsin senior student in the Classes of 2014 and 2015 a voluntary self-contained two-hour Residency Application Personal Statement Writers Workshop. The session included the selection of writing prompts, speedwriting, and a peer-edit critique. Data were gathered

before and after each workshop and at the time of ERAS submission.

Outcomes

One hundred nine students elected to participate. Of the 96 participants completing a preworkshop questionnaire, only 28 (29%) were comfortable with creative and reflective writing. Fifty-four students completed a follow-up survey after submitting their ERAS application. Fifty-one (94%) found the session effective in getting their personal statement started, and 65 (70%) were surprised by the quality of their writing. Almost all could trace some of their final statement to the workshop.

Forty-six (85%) found working with other students helpful, and 49 (91%) would recommend the session to future students; 47 (87%) agreed that the workshop was “fun.”

Next Steps

The full workshop will be repeated yearly. Workshops will also be offered to residents preparing fellowship applications. A shorter version (without the peer-edit critique) was used successfully with the entire Class of 2016 to help them reflect on their initial clinical encounters. The authors will seek further opportunities to enhance reflection for students, residents, and faculty with these techniques.

Problem

For many medical students, preparing the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) personal statement is a dreaded and lonely component of the application process. They realize that residencies use the statements in selecting candidates for interview but not for final ranking¹; in fact, emergency medicine program directors reported that personal statements were the *least* important factor in the resident selection process, just below extracurricular activities and basic science course grades.² Students understand that residency programs expect personal statements to reflect

common themes, such as an applicant's motivation for the specialty and personal attributes, but also know that eloquence is less important than basic, grammatically correct, error-free writing.³

In addition, students discover contradictory advice online. “Don't be afraid to be creative.”⁴ “Avoid showing too much creativity.”⁵ “Avoid using quotations.”⁶ “Capture their attention from the beginning by using ... a quote.”⁵ “[Get] help [from] experienced editors available through residency personal statement services.”⁷ “Definitely, don't use a service that will write your personal statement for a fee.”⁶

The time, energy, and—for some—money spent preparing essays is not insignificant. Each year, 34,000 active applicants prepare a personal statement for ERAS and submit rank order lists through the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP).⁸ Many, if not most, share drafts of their statements with mentors who, in turn, invest time and energy in edits and suggestions.

The personal statement is a hurdle to be cleared by every senior medical student

despite stress, the uncertainty of the essay's significance, and conflicting advice. At the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW), we used this ambiguity as an opportunity to employ medical humanities techniques to engage senior medical students with reflection, speedwriting, and peer editing. We hoped to launch them toward crafting a satisfying and insightful personal statement.

Approach

Prompts, speedwriting, and peer-edit critique are common tools in many levels of education. Prompts and speedwriting⁹ stimulate creativity and overcome “writer's block.” MFA (masters in fine arts) programs use peer editing among creative writers and poets to build teamwork, enhance writing, promote self-reflection, and provide feedback for works-in-progress.

With logistical support from the associate dean for student affairs, in 2013 and 2014 each fourth-year student in the Classes of 2014 (n = 188) and 2015 (n = 189) was invited to attend a Residency Application Personal Statement Writers Workshop.

Please see the end of this article for information about the authors.

Correspondence should be addressed to Bruce H. Campbell, Medical College of Wisconsin, Department of Otolaryngology and Communication Sciences, 9200 W. Wisconsin Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53226-3522; telephone: (414) 805-5583; e-mail: bcampbell@mcw.edu.

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Students were told to expect a two-hour session tailored to the preparation of their residency application essay. All participants were asked to complete a research questionnaire during the workshop, and an online survey around the time they submitted their ERAS application. The anonymous research questionnaires and online survey were approved by the MCW institutional review board. Participation in the research was not a prerequisite to participating in the workshop.

Components of the workshop

Workshops were offered in June and July, two to three months prior to the mid-September ERAS submission deadline. All sessions were held at the end of the workday in a classroom with tables set for small-group work. No advance preparation was necessary. Optional follow-up workshops were offered in August.

Enrollment was limited to 30 participants per session, although sufficient numbers of opportunities were offered so that every interested student could participate. Students self-selected into groups of four to six. A preworkshop questionnaire was administered. The workshop outline is shown in Chart 1.

Prompts. The facilitator guided the students through a process of selecting their own personalized writing prompts by reading a list of specific incidents or examples of personal experiences (Chart 1) and asking the participants to jot down a word to two about each. The students then picked the one or two experiences that were most immediately compelling to them. These would be the prompts for speedwriting.

Speedwriting. After an introduction, the participants were timed for 20 minutes of speedwriting—writing continuously and without editing, focusing on narrative, story, and action. They were encouraged to work without stopping (“If you can’t think of anything, write ‘I can’t think of anything’ until something comes to you. Just keep going!”).

After speedwriting, the students spent five minutes reworking what they had written; cross-outs, arrows to indicate reordering, and basic editing were now permitted. When ready, they stacked their essays with those of the other group members. Each table handed the stack to a facilitator for photocopying. Enough

Chart 1

Format of the Medical College of Wisconsin Residency Application Personal Statement Writers Workshop

Time in minutes	Activity
Initial Workshop	
15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preworkshop questionnaire • Presentation: “Good and Bad Personal Statements”
10	<p><i>Exercise:</i> Select Your Writing Prompts</p> <p><i>Instructions</i> (visible throughout the exercise): Jot down a note or two about each of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two recent incidents that made you stop still and pay attention • Two patients who changed how you view medicine • An experience that changed your life forever • Two moments where you couldn’t stop laughing • An activity, hobby, or career you would have pursued if you had not gone to medical school • What you remember about the circumstances when one of your mentors did or said something that convinced you to choose your field • What you were doing the moment when you decided you wanted to enter your chosen specialty
20	<p><i>Exercise:</i> Speedwriting</p> <p><i>Instructions</i> (visible throughout the exercise):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write without stopping. No edits. Don’t worry about spelling. Just keep going! • Write based on one or two of the writing prompts. • Concentrate on description, facts, events, story more than reflection. • “I saw” & “I did” >> “I felt” & “I think.” • Use more than one page, if needed, but write on only one side of the paper.
5	Edit for clarity
15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer-Edit Critique demonstration • Photocopying of draft statements • Break
30	<p><i>Exercise:</i> Peer-Edit Critique</p> <p><i>Instructions</i> (visible throughout the exercise):</p> <p>WRITER:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read aloud clearly with a minimum of “drama” • During feedback time, LISTEN <p>LISTENERS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During the reading, make notes on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Which portions are effective? Weak? Confusing? Inconsistent? ◦ What did you like? What surprised you? What made you want to know more? ◦ Where are opportunities for improvement? • After the reading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Take a couple minutes to complete your written comments ◦ Complete the sentence, “This essay seems to be about...” • During the discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Go around the table ◦ Provide verbal and written feedback ◦ Watch the time • Return all copies to the writer
10	Discussion
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postworkshop questionnaire • Distribution of resource guide
Optional Follow-up Workshop	
10	Introduction and preworkshop questionnaire
5	Instructions and review of Peer-Edit Critique technique
45	Peer-Edit Critique
10	Discussion
5	Postworkshop questionnaire

copies were made so that every group member would have a complete set of essays for the peer-edit critique.

Peer-edit critique. While the photocopies were being made, the facilitators demonstrated the peer-edit critique. The “writer” read his or her essay aloud while the “listeners” followed along, marking their copies where their interest was piqued or where they found wording unclear. After the reading was completed, the listeners spent a few minutes adding written comments, including completing the phrase, “This essay seems to be about...” Once all of the listeners had completed their written comments, the listeners went around the table, taking turns and discussing the essay while offering observations and encouragement. The writer sat quietly and without comment, taking notes and paying attention, but refraining from answering, defending, or explaining. Then the group returned all copies to the writer and shifted to the next essay. The process was repeated with each student taking a turn as “writer.” Thirty minutes were allotted for the peer-edit critique portion of the workshop.

After 30 minutes, the peer-edit critique was paused. Students discussed what they had discovered, and the postworkshop research questionnaire was administered. Any groups that had not completed peer editing then continued for as long as needed.

Optional follow-up workshop

In mid-August, an optional follow-up session was offered to interested participants. The students brought five double-spaced copies of their draft ERAS personal statement and self-selected into student-only or facilitator-led groups. The groups participated in a peer-edit critique which lasted 45 minutes. Session-specific pre- and postworkshop questionnaires were administered.

Online questionnaire

Students who provided permission received a link to an online questionnaire shortly after September 15 to coincide with their ERAS submission. The questionnaire asked whether the workshop was effective in kick-starting their personal statement, whether it was a good use of their time, and how much of their final statement grew out of the workshop essay. Free-text comments were encouraged.

Outcomes

Six workshops were offered (three each to the MCW Classes of 2014 and 2015). Three optional follow-up workshops were offered (one to the Class of 2014 and two to the Class of 2015). A total of 109 students elected to participate in one of the initial workshops: 42 (22%) from the Class of 2014 and 67 (35%) from the Class of 2015. Thirteen students left after the introduction

and prior to any writing, usually without explanation. Three left after completing the preworkshop questionnaire but before the session; these students’ responses are included in the preworkshop questionnaire results. The remaining 93 students stayed for the entire workshop. Two students who completed the workshop did not provide an e-mail address to be contacted for the online questionnaire. Eight students in the Class of 2014 and 7 students in the Class of 2015 participated in the optional follow-up workshop.

Therefore, 96 students completed pre- and 93 completed postworkshop questionnaires. All 15 participating students completed the pre- and postworkshop questionnaires at the optional follow-up workshop. Fifty-four students completed the post-ERAS submission online survey.

Slight modifications in logistics were made between the sessions, although the instructions, format, and questionnaires were unchanged. One author (B.H.C.) and at least one coauthor facilitated every session.

Preworkshop questionnaire results are shown in Table 1. Only 28 (29%) of the participants strongly agreed or agreed that they were comfortable with creative and reflective writing, and only 20 (21%) strongly agreed or agreed that

Table 1
Pre- and Postworkshop Questionnaire Responses From the Medical College of Wisconsin Residency Application Personal Statement Writers Workshop, 2013 and 2014

Questions	Strongly disagree, no. (%)	Disagree, no. (%)	Neutral, no. (%)	Agree, no. (%)	Strongly agree, no. (%)
Preworkshop questions (n = 96)					
I am comfortable with creative and reflective writing.	12 (12)	33 (34)	23 (24)	23 (24)	5 (5)
Compared with my medical school peers, I took more than the average number of English or writing courses in high school and college.	11 (11)	35 (36)	29 (30)	12 (12)	8 (8)
My medical school peers view writing, reflective, and narrative exercises as a waste of time.	0 (0)	16 (17)	34 (35)	41 (43)	4 (4)
In general, I view writing, reflective, and narrative exercises as a waste of time.	10 (10)	40 (42)	26 (27)	15 (16)	3 (3)
I am anxious about writing the personal statement for my residency application.	0 (0)	8 (9)	9 (10)	41 (44)	38 (41)
Postworkshop questions (n = 93)					
I was surprised by the amount, quality, and/or insight of my writing during this session.	0 (0)	4 (4)	24 (26)	51 (55)	14 (15)
I am less anxious about preparing a personal statement than I was prior to the session.	0 (0)	4 (4)	18 (19)	61 (66)	10 (11)
A follow-up session in a few weeks would be helpful.	0 (0)	8 (9)	21 (23)	36 (39)	28 (30)

Table 2

Responses of 54 Medical College of Wisconsin Residency Application Personal Statement Writing Workshop Participants on a Follow-up Online Questionnaire Administered in September to Coincide With the ERAS Submission Deadline, 2013 and 2014

Questions	Strongly disagree, no. (%)	Disagree, no. (%)	Neutral, no. (%)	Agree, no. (%)	Strongly agree, no. (%)
The workshop was effective in helping me get my personal statement kick-started.	1 (2)	0 (0)	2 (4)	25 (46)	26 (48)
The workshop was a good use of my time.	0 (0)	1 (2)	1 (2)	33 (61)	19 (35)
I was surprised by the amount, quality, and/or insight of my writing during the session.	0 (0)	2 (4)	15 (28)	21 (39)	16 (29)
Prior to the workshop, I was anxious about creating a personal statement.	0 (0)	6 (11)	5 (9)	18 (33)	25 (46)
The workshop made me less anxious about the personal statement.	0 (0)	4 (7)	8 (15)	27 (50)	15 (28)
The timing of the workshop (8–12 weeks prior to NRMP date) was appropriate.	0 (0)	3 (6)	0 (0)	28 (52)	23 (43)
Working in groups with other students was helpful.	1 (2)	1 (2)	6 (11)	28 (52)	18 (33)
Having other people read my writing was intimidating.	1 (2)	9 (17)	11 (20)	21 (39)	12 (22)
The workshop was fun.	0 (0)	3 (6)	4 (7)	33 (61)	14 (26)

Abbreviations: ERAS indicates Electronic Residency Application Service; NRMP, National Residency Matching Program.

they had taken more English or writing courses than their peers. Eighteen (19%) participants agreed that reflective and narrative exercises are “a waste of time,” whereas 47 (49%) believed that their medical school peers felt that way. Eighty-three (86%) strongly agreed or agreed that they were anxious about preparing their personal statement.

Postworkshop questionnaire results reveal that 65 participants (70%) had been surprised by their own productivity, and 71 (76%) felt less anxious about their statement.

Fifteen students returned for the optional follow-up workshop. When asked about the requirement to read their essay draft aloud during the initial workshop, seven (47%) said that this had caused them discomfort (data not shown).

Fifty-four (59%) of the students who provided e-mail addresses completed the online questionnaire after submitting

their ERAS application (Table 2). Fifty-one (94%) indicated that the workshop had been effective in getting their essay launched and that it had been a “good use of my time.” Forty-two (78%) agreed that the workshop had made them less anxious. The technique of working in groups with other students was helpful to 46 (85%), although 33 (61%) found it intimidating. Forty-nine (91%) would recommend the workshop to future students, and 47 (87%) agreed that the workshop was “fun.” Fifty-one (94%)—all but 3—reported that some of the writing generated at the workshop was included in their final essay (Table 3).

Free-text comments were positive:

- “The workshop actually helped me decide on which specialty I was going to choose.”
- “I liked the free writing. It is not something I would have ever done on my own but surprised me in how much it helped just getting thoughts on paper.”

- “Really enjoyed being able to listen about others’ thoughts without needing to defend/explain my writing. Easier to see ways to improve.”
- “I think this was really helpful, especially the peer analysis part.”
- “Great insights from fellow students.”
- “Working with our peers actually turned out to be really helpful despite most of us being very nervous to read our speedwriting paragraphs out loud!”

Students found the “most difficult task” to be reading aloud and getting started. The “most helpful task” was sharing and receiving feedback.

Next Steps

The full workshop (prompts, speed-writing, and peer-edit critique) will be repeated yearly at MCW. We were encouraged by the jump in participation between the two years and hope that this is attributable to word of mouth.

Table 3

Responses of 54 Medical College of Wisconsin Residency Application Personal Statement Writing Workshop Participants on a Follow-up Online Questionnaire Administered in September to Coincide with the ERAS Submission Deadline, 2013 and 2014

Question	0%, no. (%)	10%, no. (%)	20%, no. (%)	30%, no. (%)	40%, no. (%)	50%, no. (%)	60%, no. (%)	70%, no. (%)	80%, no. (%)	90%, no. (%)	100%, no. (%)
Approximately what percentage of your final personal statement grew out of the writing you did during the workshop?	3 (6)	11 (20)	13 (24)	10 (19)	4 (7)	3 (6)	2 (4)	2 (4)	5 (9)	0 (0)	1 (2)

We learned that reading aloud was the most intimidating aspect of the workshop and were concerned that some of the students who left prematurely did so because they were unwilling to share with their peers. For some groups of students, therefore, a shorter, “nonthreatening” version (prompts and speedwriting only) is appropriate. We used this shorter approach successfully with a large-group gathering of the entire Class of 2016 to help them reflect on their clinical rotations in December and June of their third year.

We hope to offer workshops to residents preparing fellowship applications and will seek further opportunities to expand this approach to groups of students, residents, and faculty.

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B.H. Campbell is professor of otolaryngology and communication sciences and a faculty member, Center for Bioethics and Medical Humanities, Medical College of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

N. Havas is associate professor of family and community medicine and a faculty member, Center for Bioethics and Medical Humanities, Medical College of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

A.R. Derse is Julia and David Uihlein Professor of Medical Humanities, professor of bioethics, professor of emergency medicine, and director, Center for Bioethics and Medical Humanities and Institute for Health and Society, Medical College of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

R.L. Holloway is professor of family and community medicine, associate dean for student affairs, and an affiliate faculty member, Center for Bioethics and Medical Humanities, Medical College of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

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