

# Medical School...the MD

## Why Medical School?

Information provided by [Kaplan Test Prep - Kaptest.com](http://Kaplan Test Prep - Kaptest.com)

The decision to become a doctor is probably one of the most intimidating you can make. As a premed student, you will be working for at least two years without guarantee of a spot in medical school. It means publicly stating that you want something that in 1997 only 35 percent of those applying received - a position in medical school. And then after an arduous application process, that decision means committing yourself to a labor-intensive course of study, including four years of medical school and three to twelve years of residency and fellowship.

### Physician, Know Thyself

One important element of preparing your application campaign is articulating why you want to be a doctor. This also involves demonstrating that you have glimpsed the reality of what it is to practice real medicine, not the glamorized versions on Chicago Hope or ER.

While some students have a clear epiphany they can movingly relate regarding their career goal, for many applicants, the decision to enter a medical field isn't as easily conveyed. Some find themselves daydreaming in organic chemistry class, still trying to decide two years into the prerequisites if this is the career for them.

The point is that you need to gather as much information as possible, immerse yourself in it, and then think long and hard about whether a career in medicine is right for you.

## Admission Requirements

Information provided by [Kaplan Test Prep - Kaptest.com](http://Kaplan Test Prep - Kaptest.com)

The key to medical school admissions success is planning based on correct information. Research the schools in which you are interested. What are their admissions requirements? And, keep in close contact with your pre-med advisor. Are you taking the proper classes now? By knowing all of the information before hand, you will avoid the extra scrambling and aggravation upon finding out that you do not meet all of the necessary prerequisites.

### Required Coursework

Most schools agree on the basic elements for pre-medical education. Minimum course requirements for most U.S. medical schools include one year of each:

- Biology
- General (inorganic) chemistry
- Organic chemistry
- Physics
- Related lab work for each science course

In addition, many schools require English and math courses.

**KAPLAN QUICK TIP:** The best sources for admissions requirements for specific medical schools are the Medical School Admissions Requirements (MSAR) and the College Information Booklet.

### Selecting a Major

While science majors are certainly more common, medical schools stress their interest in well-rounded students with broad-based undergraduate backgrounds. In fact, regardless of your major, your undergraduate transcript is a vital part of the admissions decision.

If you are not majoring in a science, your work in both science and non-science courses will be evaluated. However, with fewer courses on which to judge your science ability, your grades in the core science subjects will take on greater importance.

Bottom line? Don't choose a major because you think it will get you accepted to medical school. Choose a major in a subject in which you are really interested. You will probably get better grades.

### The MCAT\*

For nearly all schools, the MCAT\* carries significant weight in the admissions process.

Administered by the Association of American Medical Colleges, the MCAT\* is a relatively objective way by which admissions committees can compare you with other applicants. Medical schools use MCAT\* scores to assess whether you have the foundation upon which to build a successful medical career.

### **Health Care Experience**

According to a recent survey of medical schools, knowledge of health care issues and commitment to health care were among the top five variables considered very important to student selection (the other four were med school interview ratings, GPA, MCAT\* scores, and letters of recommendation).

You should consider being active in health care activities as much as possible as a premed student. If nothing else, these experiences will help you articulate in your personal statements and interviews why you want to pursue a career in medicine.

## **Application Tips**

Information provided by [Kaplan Test Prep - Kaptest.com](http://Kaplan Test Prep - Kaptest.com)

The medical school application process is a lot more than simply filling in the blanks. There are many pitfalls. Take your time and pay attention to directions.

### **Some Helpful Tips**

- **Don't Re-Use Applications**  
Most applications change from year to year.
- **Triple-check for Spelling Errors**  
You lose a certain amount of credibility for careless mistakes.
- **Check for Contradictions**  
Make sure that your application doesn't say you worked in a hospital in 1990 when your financial aid forms say you were driving a cab that year.
- **Prioritize Lists**  
When a question asks you to list your honors or awards, don't begin with fraternity social chairman and end with Phi Beta Kappa. Let the admissions committee know that you realize what's important. Always list significant scholastic achievements first.
- **Don't Overdo Extracurriculars**  
Don't list every event or every activity. Select the most significant and, if necessary, explain them. Admissions officers become suspicious of people who list twenty-five time-consuming extracurricular activities and yet still manage to attend college.
- **Leave High School Behind**  
Unless there's something very unusual or spectacular about your high school background, don't mention it. Yes, this means not making note of the fact that you were senior class president. However, you should discuss health-related work or volunteering within your personal statement.
- **Clear Up Ambiguities**

## **Medical School Personal Statement Secrets**

Information provided by [Petersons.com](http://Petersons.com)

Medical school admissions officers will often emphasize that they don't care what you choose to write about in your essay. They stress this because most writers try too hard to meet the expectations of their imagined readers, discarding all of their own personality in the process. Of course, there's truth in their advice: you should write with the goal of expressing your own values and conveying the qualities most important to you. But you must exercise your creativity with an eye toward the themes and points that will justify your suitability for medicine. After all, your ultimate goal is not just to stand out as a likeable person, but to obtain admission to a medical school.

In addition to the challenge of crafting a fresh take on standard ideas, you face the difficulty of integrating multiple sophisticated themes into a single coherent piece. The themes can be grouped into two basic categories: those that speak to your motivation for becoming a doctor and those that demonstrate the characteristics and abilities that qualify you for the profession.

As the founder of EssayEdge.com, the Net's largest admissions essay prep company, I have seen firsthand the difference a well-written application essay can make. Through its free online admissions essay help course and 300 Harvard-educated editors, EssayEdge.com helps tens of thousands of student each year improve their essays and gain admission to medical schools ranging from Harvard to State U.

Having personally edited over 2,000 admissions essays myself for EssayEdge.com, I have written this article to help you avoid the most common essay flaws. If you remember nothing else about this article, remember this: Be Interesting. Be Concise.

### **Why Medicine?**

Because people don't usually make career decisions based on pure reason, it can be difficult to explain why you've chosen the field you have. Moreover, your basic reasons probably look a lot like everyone else's. In this type of essay, you'll have to develop your ideas effectively and insightfully while emphasizing your uniqueness.

Medicine requires such a serious commitment that few people stumble across the idea of pursuing it late in life. It's very likely that you have always wanted to be a doctor, and that's not a fact that you should hide. But don't offer your point in such a cliched, prepackaged way as to make your reader cringe. For example, you shouldn't start your essay, "I have always wanted to be a doctor" or "I've always known that medicine was my calling." Better to describe early experiences and then let your interest unfold naturally.

Describing the direct impact a doctor had on your life or the life of someone close to you can be an effective way to demonstrate what draws you to medicine. A twist on the "patient's perspective" approach is to describe a time when medicine failed to save or heal someone close to you. The purpose of this tactic would not be to rail against the medical profession, of course, but rather to show how a disappointing loss inspired you to join the struggle against disease and sickness.

### **How Are You Qualified?**

The way to prove your qualification is not to list attributes you believe you possess but to discuss concrete experiences that show your abilities and qualities. As always, details are paramount. The rest of your application has already summarized your accomplishments and your activities. Show the reader what you did in concrete terms, and again, highlight your active roles. The experiences that demonstrate your qualification are not necessarily distinct from those that explain your motivation. You shouldn't plan on dividing the essay into two separate sections for each, but rather organize the structure by topic and extrapolate insights as they develop. It's important that you think of the essay as an integrated whole, not as a checklist of questions you must answer.

Some degree of hospital experience is usually expected, though it's more essential to the "testing your interest" aspect we discussed in the last section of the course than to your qualifications. The main point you're trying to convey here is that you will work well with patients and in a clinical setting. Your shadowing experience might overlap this material, but the emphasis here is on what you learned through observation.

A strong research background helps your case, because the laboratory is such an integral part of the medical school experience. It's not possible to prove your intellectual capability through a short description of your projects, so you should try to convey such intangible qualities as creativity, initiative, and original thinking. Focus on your contribution rather than your research topic. For example, you could describe a situation where you recognized a flaw in a procedure and had the initiative to show your supervisor how efficiency could be improved. No matter how minor your contribution seems, it's better to focus on some tangible input that you had than to describe the project as a whole. As always, the key is to delineate your active role.

## **TOP 10 MEDICAL SCHOOL PERSONAL STATEMENT WRITING TIPS**

### **1. Don't Resort to Cliches.**

Every year, medical school admissions officers read thousands of variations of this sentence: "I want to be a doctor so I can help people." It's undoubtedly true in most instances, yet it inevitably fails because it reveals nothing unique about the individual applicant. If you demonstrate a penchant for helping others by describing specific activities--community

service, for example--it will become unnecessary to declare that desire, as it will already be clear. Every doctor helps people, so focus on the specific actions you have taken.

## **2. Don't Bore the Reader. Do Be Interesting.**

Admissions officers have to read hundreds of essays, and they must often skim. Abstract rumination has no place in an application essay. Admissions officers aren't looking for a new way to view the world; they're looking for a new way to view you the applicant. The best way to grip your reader is to begin the essay with a captivating snapshot. Notice how the slightly jarring scene depicted in the "after" creates intrigue and keeps the reader's interest.

*Before: I am a compilation of many years of experiences gained from overcoming the relentless struggles of life.*

*After: I was six years old, the eldest of six children in the Bronx, when my father was murdered.*

## **3. Do Use Personal Detail. Show, Don't Tell!**

Good essays are concrete and grounded in personal detail. They do not merely assert "I learned my lesson" or that "these lessons are useful both on and off the field." They show it through personal detail. "Show don't tell," means if you want to relate a personal quality, do so through your experiences and do not merely assert it.

*Before: If it were not for a strong support system which instilled into me strong family values and morals, I would not be where I am today.*

*After: Although my grandmother and I didn't have a car or running water, we still lived far more comfortably than did the other families I knew. I learned an important lesson: My grandmother made the most of what little she had, and she was known and respected for her generosity. Even at that age, I recognized the value she placed on maximizing her resources and helping those around her.*

The first example is vague and could have been written by anybody. But the second sentence evokes a vivid image of something that actually happened, placing the reader in the experience of the applicant.

## **4. Do Be Concise. Don't Be Wordy.**

Wordiness not only takes up valuable space, but also confuses the important ideas you're trying to convey. Short sentences are more forceful because they are direct and to the point. Certain phrases, such as "the fact that," are usually unnecessary. Notice how the revised version focuses on active verbs rather than forms of "to be" and adverbs and adjectives.

*Before: My recognition of the fact that we had finally completed the research project was a deeply satisfying moment that will forever linger in my memory.*

*After: Completing the research project at last gave me an enduring sense of fulfillment.*

## **5. Do Address Your Weaknesses. Don't Dwell on Them.**

At some point on your application, you will have an opportunity to explain deficiencies in your record, and you should take advantage of it. Be sure to explain them adequately: Staying up late the night before the MCAT is not a legitimate reason for a bad performance, while documented sickness could be. If you lack volunteer hospital experience, you might point out the number of hours you had to work to make college more affordable for your family. The best tactic is to spin the negatives into positives by stressing your attempts to improve; for example, mention your poor first-quarter grades briefly, then describe what you did to bring them up.

## **6. Do Vary Your Sentences and Use Transitions.**

The best essays contain a variety of sentence lengths mixed within any given paragraph. Also, remember that transition is not limited to words like *nevertheless*, *furthermore* or *consequently*. Good transition flows from the natural thought progression of your argument.

*Before: I started playing piano when I was eight years old. I worked hard to learn difficult pieces. I began to love music.*

*After: I started playing the piano at the age of eight. As I learned to play more difficult pieces, my appreciation for music deepened.*

## **7. Do Use Active Voice Verbs**

Passive-voice expressions are verb phrases in which the subject receives the action expressed in the verb. Passive voice employs a form of the word to be, such as was or were. Overuse of the passive voice makes prose seem flat and uninteresting.

*Before: The lessons that have prepared me for my career as a doctor were taught to me by my mother.*

*After: My mother taught me lessons that will prove invaluable in my career as a doctor.*

### **8. Do Seek Multiple Opinions.**

Ask your friends and family to keep these questions in mind:

- Does my essay have one central theme?
- Does my introduction engage the reader? Does my conclusion provide closure?
- Do my introduction and conclusion avoid summary?
- Do I use concrete experiences as supporting details?
- Have I used active-voice verbs wherever possible?
- Is my sentence structure varied, or do I use all long or short sentences?
- Are there any cliches such as "cutting edge" or "learned my lesson?"
- Do I use transitions appropriately?
- What about the essay is memorable?
- What's the worst part of the essay?
- What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear?
- What parts of the essay do not support my main argument?
- Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This must be the case.
- What does the essay reveal about my personality?

### **9. Don't Wander. Do Stay Focused.**

- Many applicants try to turn the personal statement into a complete autobiography. Not surprisingly, they find it difficult to pack so much information into such a short essay, and their essays end up sounding more like a list of experiences than a coherent, well-organized thought. Make sure that every sentence in your essay exists solely to support one central theme.

### **10. Do Revise, Revise, Revise.**

- The first step in improving any essay is to cut, cut, and cut some more.

### **SAMPLE ESSAY**

His eyesight was almost completely gone, yet there he was on the diamond. I met Jason last summer in Chicago, where I volunteered at a tournament for Beep Baseball, a baseball-like sport for the visually impaired. He was my age—handsome, friendly, and athletic. But Jason was blind. Struck by glaucoma, he had begun to lose his vision in his early teens. By high school, he had become legally blind. My sympathy only intensified when I learned that, had his disease been diagnosed earlier, he almost surely would have retained partial vision. Financially strapped, Jason's family had avoided taking him to a doctor for as long as they could; when he finally visited a physician, it was too late. For years I had planned to work in technology, but my encounters with Jason and others like him convinced me that medicine is my true calling.

Actually, growing up I had always planned to become a doctor, but my goals changed as I began to take computer science classes at [COLLEGE NAME]. In the first meeting of my sophomore-year class on Programming in Artificial Intelligence, Professor Larry Birnbaum joked, "You know those movies where killer robots eventually take over the world? Believe them." I did just that, placing my trust in the vast opportunities offered by computer programming. In my first computer course, I created applications that could beat a human in tic-tac-toe, calculate complex mathematical problems, and even converse with humans on a specified topic. Fascinated with the potential of these programs, I embarked on a different path, away from clinical medicine. I saw a world in which computers would change and even

replace processes in every industry, and I wanted to join the researchers at the forefront of this revolution.

Five years after that first class, the potential contribution of computer technology still inspires me. The possibilities are astounding. Scientists mapped the human genome years before their original deadline. Nanotechnology promises to revolutionize the way we detect and cure diseases. Still, the more I learn about technology, the more I recognize its inadequacies. Although the "psychologist" program I created faithfully reproduces human responses, I discovered that I would never want to speak with a computer about my problems. Certain interactions simply demand personal contact. As I have tutored underclassmen in math and science, worked with athletes in the Special Olympics, and visited with patients as a volunteer at Northwest Community Hospital, I have realized that the human element in such relationships is irreplaceable. While technology may shape the future of mankind, only humanity can touch individual lives.

Jason's story touched mine, confirming my growing sense of the deficiencies in science and technology. Advances in medical knowledge and techniques are useless without parallel progress in healthcare accessibility, widespread education about health issues, and most importantly, strong doctor-patient relationships. The revolutionary treatment methods I imagined myself inventing might never have an impact on patients like Jason. On the other hand, the dedication of just a few volunteers allowed him to play the sport he had always loved. Science could not fix Jason's eyesight, but supportive doctors, volunteers, and friends could help him live a fulfilling life. Spending time with him and others convinced me that, in addition to my research in medical science and technology, I wanted to work directly with those whose ailments cannot currently be cured.

I have thus circled back to my original path towards medicine, with no regrets about the scenic route that led me here. Indeed, I am confident that I will make good use of my computer science skills as I research potential advancements in medical technology. This summer, I began work as a research assistant to Dr. Chi-Hung Chang at Northwestern's Buehler Center on Aging. With Dr. Chang, I am developing a computer program that determines the "quality of life" of terminally ill patients. By compiling physician diagnostics and patient responses to questionnaires, the system assesses the value of given treatments as well as the efficacy of specific pharmaceuticals. Through this project, we hope to understand and improve the current care of the terminally ill. After watching Dr. Chang and other doctors at the medical research facility, I can now declare with confidence that I want to follow their example in my own career, combining clinical practice and research.

My work on the "quality of life" evaluation project gave me a perfect opportunity to fulfill this dual goal, and I look forward to a lifetime spent on similar pursuits. Yet I will never forget that the seeds of my current ambition arose not in the laboratory or at the health center, but on a baseball diamond filled with people playing a game they likely thought they would never play again. In my own career as a physician, I will strive to serve my patients not only as a healer, but also as a friend, supporting them in their toughest moments, and as a mentor, guiding them to live healthy lifestyles. Robots may assist in my endeavors, but they will never possess the compassion of my fellow physicians and me.