

**A Guide to Writing the Dental School Personal Statement**

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### **Abstract**

All dental school applicants go through the experience of writing a personal statement. But what is the personal statement? How can you effectively answer the prompt of “Why Dentistry?” And what is the purpose of the personal statement? As a pre-health student, I encounter many challenges when approaching writing tasks especially due to the lack of practice in a STEM based academic curriculum. In response to this issue that many pre-dental students face, this research article expands on the do’s and don’ts of writing the dental school personal statement. I interviewed two dental school admissions officers, a dental student, and a dentist who recently graduated dental school. The interviews consisted of analyzing what makes a personal statement stand out, guidelines applicants should follow, and strategies for the writing process. With this research article, I hope to provide valuable insight to pre-dental students who are planning on writing their personal statement.

### **Introduction**

So what is the purpose of the personal statement? It is a one-page essay “that gives dental schools a picture of who you are and, most importantly, why you want to pursue a career in dentistry” (ADEA). The dental school application itself consists of numbers such as GPA and Dental Admissions Test (DAT) scores, but the personal statement allows admissions teams to understand who you are and compels the admissions committee to meet you. There are over 11,000 potential candidates applying annually, so just having a good DAT score and GPA isn’t good enough to gain admission into dental schools (University of Illinois, Chicago). While it’s easier to evaluate measures such as GPA/DAT scores with baseline numbers, other sections of the application, such as the personal statement, can allow admissions teams to decide whether or not to extend an interview invitation. By reading this article, you’ll receive valuable knowledge regarding the personal statement from interviews conducted with dental school admissions, dental students, and dentists. You’ll also learn more about writing strategies for the personal statement, how to stand out, red flags, and what admissions committees are looking for.

### **Methods**

To provide insightful information on the personal statement, I decided to interview those who were very familiar with the process on both sides of the application. The first person I interviewed was Dr. Jeri Bullock, the Co-Director of Admissions at University of Utah School of Dentistry. I also interviewed the Admissions Manager at University of Utah, Alex Steele. In addition, I wanted the perspective of dental students who had written a personal statement, so I interviewed Katie Ho, a first-year dental student at UC San Francisco. I also interviewed Dr. Steven Lu—a dentist who recently graduated University of Michigan, provides personal statement writing services, and is currently practicing dentistry. The main questions I asked revolved around how to choose a story to write about, red flags in an essay, and how to make the personal statement stand out from other applicants.

## Writing Strategies for the Personal Statement

When encountering the daunting task of writing a personal statement, where do you even begin? To answer this question, I looked into key guidelines to follow, writing strategies, and how to prepare for the writing process.

During college, writing self-reflection journals for experiences that you're involved in could be helpful when beginning to write the personal essay. UC Davis's Health Professions Advising recommends students to buy themselves a journal as soon as they become a student and to "begin jotting down all...impressions of [their] experiences." Your experiences throughout your college career are difficult to remember, so constantly reflecting on your activities and accomplishments can help in preparation for the writing process. From Dr. Lu's own experience, he speaks about how he wrote reflections whenever he felt that he learned something about himself.

When starting the personal statement, many applicants found success by letting their ideas flow freely without a guideline.

UCSF dental student Katie Ho talks about writing about what came to mind without thinking too deeply:

I wouldn't take it too seriously to the point of too much stress. If you have fun writing, it'll be easier to get a good story out of it. You don't have to take the advice people tell you, so take all advice with a grain of salt. As long as you show character or growth or some willingness to learn, you can write a good personal statement.

When beginning your personal statement, it's okay to have an imperfect first draft. Starting your writing process without a strict format is an effective strategy to get all of the ideas out of your head.

While you can start off the personal statement writing process without a guideline, it's crucial to edit, revise, and receive feedback. In dentistry, attention to detail is important, so grammatical errors, spelling errors, and run-on sentences are big red flags. After creating a statement that you are confident in, getting others to proofread it and offer advice can help take your writing to the next level. Ideally, feedback should be from mentors such as dentists (preferably recent graduates of dental school), dental students, admissions officers (if possible), english professors, or friends/relatives who know you well.

As stated by University of Utah Admissions Manager Alex Steele:

Applicants should ask advisors or friends that know you and what makes you tick. Some people may be hesitant about asking their friends but they can see if the statement captures your personality. Asking different people in different areas of your life will help you get a well-rounded way of seeing if the personal statement captures you.

While it seems like a good idea to get feedback from many people, having too many people read over your essay could cause conflicting opinions and hinder your ability to write. When you

write your personal statement, be comfortable with receiving constructive criticism. However, you don't need to implement all recommendations given by those who review your personal statement.

By having a common theme throughout the personal statement (and the dental school application), applicants can convey a stronger message to the admissions committee. Writing about one of your passions in the personal statement while also writing about experiences (in the application's "experiences" section) will prove that you are taking action towards your passion. For example, an applicant could talk about their passion for helping those with cleft palate in their personal statement and then list their experiences with Operation Smile (a non-profit organization that provides free cleft lip surgeries in third world countries) or craniofacial research in the application.

UC Davis's Health Professions Advising recommends to start thinking of a theme by first making a list of impactful moments from your childhood to college, then by writing paragraphs about each while explaining your decision making process and reflections of how the experience transitioned you into different areas of your life. After reading through those impactful experiences, try to find a concept that is influential to your life or a series of events that parallel with current activities. By doing so, you can convey an overarching theme within your personal statement that portrays your passion for the dental field.

### **How can you stand out?**

Dental school admissions committees have to read through thousands of applications, so one of the most important aspects of writing the personal statement is to write one that is different from others. Dr. Lu emphasizes that "it can't be average because this is the only time that you can separate yourself from other people. They don't know anything about you from your numbers. But how are they going to choose you from other people who have the same stats? They look at the personal statement as a way to compare you to other people."

As found on Duke's Health Professions Advising [Website](#), a potential way to stand out is to start with "a hook— an anecdote or statement that engages the reader and draws them into your essay. This should be short, snappy, clear and grab the attention of the reader. And it will introduce your overall theme or focus."

Dr. Lu talks about his own strategy for catching the reader's attention:

My first sentence was onomatopoeia, "scribble scribble snitch snitch, these were the sounds of my pencil gliding across the drawings." In that paragraph I talked about the combination of art and hand in dentistry. In the second paragraph, I talked about the homeless community and how much dental care they need. And in the third paragraph I talked about how dentistry and haircutting are related.

It's important that your essay is a story, even if it's not related to dentistry. Instead of listing experiences, applicants should show depth and reflection in their writing. As found on Duke's Health Professions Advising Website, some ways to approach the story could be to explain:

- (a) a particular interest that spans both your academic achievements and your extracurricular experiences
- (b) a unique background, or challenges that have shaped who you are
- (c) particular health care issues that have been of interest to you and why or
- (d) how you have developed your interest in medicine over time. You could end your essay with your long-term professional goals, what you will be doing in the coming year, or tie your ending to your beginning.

The personal statement should be an opportunity for applicants to expand on things that weren't already addressed in your application. Katie Ho describes her own experience with writing the essay and how she "used it as an outlet to tell [her] story. A lot of people write about their experiences instead of writing about something they love. I remember a person writing their statement about an egg as a metaphor to personify themselves. Make it interesting because admissions officers look through so many applications."

### **What are some red flags?**

Dental school personal statements can be found online and there can be many templates to help students when writing. However, these templates are also seen by admissions officers and can be seen as unoriginal. Therefore, an important part of writing the personal statement is to not plagiarize or steal from other people's work. During my interview with Dr. Bullock, the University of Utah's Co-Director of Admissions, she mentioned that some universities' Health Professions Offices give the same personal statement templates to their students, so it's very obvious when an applicant is from a specific school. To create a unique statement, it's also important to avoid using cliches. Some cliches Dr. Lu mentioned during his interview were "my orthodontist changed my smile," "I want to give back to others," or "smiles transcends all borders, it's a universal language."

Some fatal flaws found in the personal statement are a lack of self-reflection or revelations of emotion and contemplation. Dr. Lu explains how "telling a story is about using examples, not about using beautiful adjectives. It's anecdotal and to know what to include, you have to know yourself, what your experiences were, and relate it to each other. This is one of the few times that you reflect on yourself." The personal statement shouldn't be a place to list or tell your experiences, but should be a space for you to show who you are through your story. Especially because of the 4500 character limit, each sentence should have meaning. Every section of the personal statement should convey the message you want to express while also showing your potential to become a good dentist. Dr. Lu adds that you shouldn't say "I did this, I

was the president of this club” but instead talk about how you felt during your experience and how it’s applicable to being a good dentist. Listing experiences is a repeat of information from the application and doesn't convey your passion for dentistry. But by adding reflections of experiences with your own thoughts, you give the reader a better idea of who you are.

Another red flag found in personal statements is writing about unethical behavior. For example, some applicants write about dental procedures that they aren’t legally allowed to perform. Disclosing information such as writing about a doctor and how they did not follow guidelines for a patient and including their names can be viewed as inappropriate as well.

While the personal statement doesn’t have to entirely be about dentistry, it should answer the prompt of “Why Dentistry?” Some applicants get lost in their story and forget to answer the question that admissions officers are looking for. Katie Ho talks about how it’s important to “write about a story that you remember well and made a lasting impact on you. It doesn't have to be dentistry related but is best if it is since the question is “Why Dentistry.” Dr. Lu also explains a common error of how “most people talk about their family and upbringing, but not about why they would be a good dentist and who they are. [So the personal statement] almost becomes a therapy session for themselves and they get lost in that.”

### **What are admissions committees looking for?**

Admissions officers are looking for an excuse to meet you after reading your application. Dr. Lu compares reviewing applications to dating:

When you see a picture on a dating app, you see a biography or something funny that piques your interest and makes you want to meet them more. Similarly, [admissions] need to find an excuse to meet you in person.

Writing about a story that is genuine will allow readers to truly understand who you are and find a reason to offer you an interview invitation.

Katie Ho talks about her own personal experience with authenticity in her statement:

I personally wrote about working in my mom’s office and things that were cool that made me want to decide I wanted to do dentistry. I was very blunt about why I chose dentistry and the process of applying to dental school, I explicitly wrote about feeling lost and indecisive but being truthful was a good thing. These negative feelings of feeling “lost” contributed to why I wanted to become a dentist.

Alex Steele elaborates on how important it is to “speak from the heart, and give an authentic truth that’s true to who you are. The personal statement can be intentionally vague so there's no one specific way of writing it and no right or wrong way to write it, and that flexibility allows applicants to shine through.” Dr. Bullock also expands on how admissions “looks for an authentic personal statement that shows us who you are and why you’re going into dentistry. [Dental schools] want to see your passion for dentistry, whether that lies in the continual

education of [dentistry] because there's always a learning factor, the artistic nature, etc. Whatever draws you into dentistry is what we want to hear about.” Especially because becoming a dentist is a difficult and time consuming process, those who are applying to dental school should be passionate about dentistry and show that excitement through their writing.

## **Conclusion**

After interviewing people on both sides of the admissions process for dental school, I learned about the importance of the personal statement and how it can compel admissions committees to extend an interview. Here is an overview of the information I gathered:

- To help aid the writing process, journal your experiences in college and note down how you feel.
- Begin writing without a guideline, and brain dump to reveal your thoughts and feelings about experiences.
- It’s important to use the personal statement as a space to show who you are, especially with a common theme found throughout your life. Don’t list out your experiences, but make sure you have a reflection on who you are.
- Because of the character count, keep in mind that each sentence should have meaning and answer the question of “Why Dentistry?”
- Expect to have multiple revisions and get feedback from people you trust.
- Avoid red flags such as not answering the prompt, writing about unethical behavior, and using cliches or commonly used personal statement templates.
- Overall, show authenticity and passion for the field.

Regardless of how you decide to approach the personal statement, the goal is to show who you are through writing. Every applicant has different life experiences and revelations that change who they are, and being able to convey that in the personal statement can allow you to be successful when applying for dental school.



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