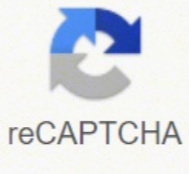




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## How to write an essay for medical school admission

First, what is the college essay (i.e., the personal statement)?This is your main essay. Your application centerpiece. The part of your application you're likely to spend the most time on. But, of course, I'd say that—I'm the College Essay Guy. The personal statement is likely to be 500-650 words long (so about a page) and many of the colleges you're applying to will require it.What's its purpose? Jennifer Blask, Executive Director for International Admissions at the University of Rochester, puts it beautifully: "So much of the college application is a recounting of things past—past grades, old classes, activities the student has participated in over several years. The essay is a chance for the student to share who they are now and what they will bring to our campus communities." Basically, college admission officers are looking for three takeaways in your college essay:Who is this person?Will this person contribute something of value to our campus?Can this person write?Let's do this. At the start of the essay process, I ask students two questions:Have you faced significant challenges in your life?Do you want to write about them? Because here's an important qualifier: Even if you've faced challenges, you do not have to write about them in your personal statement. I mention this now because, in my experience, many students are under the impression that they have to write about challenges—that it's either expected, or that it's somehow better to do so.Neither is true.I've seen many, many incredible essays—ones that got students into every school you're hoping to get into—that had no central challenge.If your answer is "Maybe ...?" because you're not sure what qualifies as a challenge, it's useful to think of challenges as being on a spectrum. On the weak end of the spectrum would be things like getting a bad grade or not making X sports team. On the strong end of the spectrum would be things like escaping war. Being extremely shy but being responsible for translating for your family might be around a 3 or 4 out of 10. It's possible to use Narrative Structure to write about a challenge anywhere on the spectrum, but it's much, much harder to write an outstanding essay about a weaker challenge.Sometimes students pick the hardest challenge they've been through and try to make it sound worse than it actually was. Beware of pushing yourself to write about a challenge merely because you think these types of essays are inherently "better." Focusing myopically on one experience can sideline other brilliant and beautiful elements of your character.If you're still uncertain, don't worry. I'll help you decide what to focus on. But, for the sake of this blog post, answer those first two questions with a gut-level response. 1. Challenges? Yes/No 2. Vision for your future? Yes/No In the sections that follow, I'll introduce you to two structures: Narrative Structure, which works well for describing challenges, and Montage Structure, which works well for essays that aren't about challenges.Heads-up: Some students who have faced challenges find after reading that they prefer Montage Structure to Narrative Structure. Or vice versa. If you're uncertain which approach is best for you, I generally recommend experimenting with montage first; you can always go back and play with narrative. A montage is, simply put, a series of moments or story events connected by a common thematic thread. Well-known examples from movies include "training" montages, like those from Mulan, Rocky, or Footloose, or the "falling in love" montage from most romantic comedies. Or remember the opening to the Pixar movie Up? In just a few minutes, we learn the entire history of Carl and Ellie's relationship. One purpose is to communicate a lot of information fast. Another is to allow you to share a lot of different kinds of information, as the example essay below shows. Narrative Structure vs. Montage Structure explained in two sentences:In Narrative Structure, story events connect chronologically.In Montage Structure, story events connect thematically.Here's a metaphor: Imagine that each different part of you is a bead and that a select few will show up in your essay. They're not the kind of beads you'd find on a store-bought bracelet; they're more like the hand-painted beads on a bracelet your little brother made for you. The theme of your essay is the thread that connects your beads. You can find a thread in many, many different ways. One way we've seen students find great montage threads is by using the 5 Things Exercise. I'll get detailed on this a little bit later, but essentially, are there 5 thematically connected things that thread together different experiences/moments/events in your life? For example, are there 5 T-shirts you collected, or 5 homes or identities, or 5 entries in your Happiness Spreadsheet.And to clarify, your essay may end up using only 4 of the 5 things. Or maybe 8. But 5 is a nice number to aim for initially.Note the huge range of possible essay threads. To illustrate, here are some different "thread" examples that have worked well:Sports have had a powerful influence on me, from my understanding of history, to numbers, to my relationships, extracurricular activities, and even my career choice.I lived with 5 different families as an exchange student, and each one taught me something valuable that I'll carry with me to college.Crassulaceae plants, which can reproduce via stem or leaf fragments, are a great analogy for not only how I make art, but how I choose to live each day.Binary star systems are a metaphor for my relationship with my parents.I am "trans" in so many ways ... let me describe a few.To understand who I am, you must understand how I cook.Pranks have shaped my life in a variety of ways.The number 12 has influenced so much in my life, from my relationship to sports, to how I write, to my self-esteem.All of these threads stemmed from the brainstorming exercises in this post.We'll look at an example essay in a minute, but before we do, a word (well, a bunch of words) on how to build a stronger montage (and the basic concept here also applies to building stronger narratives).To frame how to think about possible topics ... Imagine you're interviewing for a position as a fashion designer, and your interviewer asks you what qualities make you right for this position. Oh, and heads-up: That imaginary interviewer has already interviewed a hundred people today, so you'd best not roll up with, "because I've always loved clothes" or "because fashion helps me express my creativity." Why shouldn't you say those things? Because that's what everyone says.Many students are the same in their personal statements—they name cliché qualities/skills/values and don't push their reflections much further.Why is this a bad idea?Let me frame it this way: A boring personal statement chooses a common topic, makes common connections, and uses common language. A stand-out personal statement chooses an uncommon topic, makes uncommon connections, and uses uncommon language. Examples:Boring personal statement: I want to be a doctor (common topic) because I'm empathetic and I love helping people (common connections) and I really want to make the world a better place (common language).Better personal statement: I want to run a tech-startup (more uncommon topic) because I value humor, "leading from the battlefield," and stuff that makes me cry (uncommon connections for an essay on this topic), and because my journey to this place took me from being a scrawny 12-year-old kid to a scrawny 12-year-old man (uncommon language).Important: I'm not saying you should pick a weird topic/thread just so it'll help you stand out more on your essay. Be honest. But consider this: The more common your topic is ... the more uncommon your connections need to be if you want to stand out.What do I mean? For example, tons of students write doctor/lawyer/engineer essays; if you want to stand out, you need to say a few things that others don't tend to say. How do you figure out what to say? By making uncommon connections. They're the key to a stand-out essay.The following two-part exercise will help you do this:2-minute exercise: Start with the cliché version of your essay.What would the cliché version of your essay focus on?If you're writing a "Why I want to be an engineer" essay, for example, what 3-5 common "engineering" values might other students have mentioned in connection with engineering? Use the Values Exercise for ideas.Collaboration? Efficiency? Hands-on work? Probably yes to all three.Once you've spent 2 minutes thinking up some common/cliché values, move onto the next step.8-Minute Exercise: Brainstorm uncommon connections.For example, if your thread is "food" (which can lead to great essays, but is also a really common topic), push yourself beyond the common value of "health" and strive for unexpected values. How has cooking taught you about "accountability," for example, or "social change"? Why do this? We've already read the essay on how cooking helped the author become more aware of their health. An essay on how cooking allowed the author to become more accountable or socially aware would be less common.In a minute, we'll look at the "Laptop Stickers" essay. One thing that author discusses is activism. A typical "activist" essay might discuss public speaking or how the author learned to find their voice. A stand-out essay would go further, demonstrating, say, how a sense of humor supports activism. Perhaps it would describe a childhood community that prioritized culture-creation over culture-consumption, reflecting on how these experiences shaped the author's political views.And before you beg me for an "uncommon values" resource, I implore you to use your brilliant brain to dream up these connections. Plus, you aren't looking for uncommon values in general; you're looking for values uncommonly associated with your topic/thread.Don't get me wrong ... I'm not saying you shouldn't list any common values, since some common values may be an important part of your story! In fact, the great essay examples throughout this book sometimes make use of common connections. I'm simply encouraging you to go beyond the obvious.Also note that a somewhat-common lesson (e.g., "I found my voice") can still appear in a stand-out essay. But if you choose this path, you'll likely need to use either an uncommon structure or next-level craft to create a stand-out essay.Where can you find ideas for uncommon qualities/skills/values?Here are four places: 1. The Values ExerciseThis is basically a huge list of qualities/skills/values that could serve you in a future career.2. O\*Net OnlineGo to www.onetonline.org and use the "occupation quick search" feature to search for your career. Once you do, a huge list will appear containing knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for your career. This is one of my favorite resources for this exercise.3. School websitesGo to a college's website and click on a major or group of majors that interest you. Sometimes they'll briefly summarize a major in terms of what skills it'll impart or what jobs it might lead to. Students are often surprised to discover how broadly major-related skills can apply.4. Real humansAsk 3 people in this profession what unexpected qualities, values, or skills prepared them for their careers. Please don't simply use their answers as your own; allow their replies to inspire your brainstorming process.Once you've got a list of, say, 7-10 qualities, move on to the next step. Common personal statement topics include extracurricular activities (sports or musical instruments), service trips to foreign countries (aka the "mission trip" essay where the author realizes their privilege), sports injuries, family illnesses, deaths, divorce, the "meta" essay (e.g., "As I sit down to write my college essays, I think about..."), or someone who inspired you (common mistake: This usually ends up being more about them than you).While I won't say you should never write about these topics, if you do decide to write about one of these topics, the degree of difficulty goes way up. What do I mean? Essentially, you have to be one of the best "soccer" essays or "mission trip" essays among the hundreds the admission officer has likely read (and depending on the school, maybe the hundreds they've read this year). So it makes it much more difficult to stand out.How do you stand out? A cliché is all in how you tell the story. So, if you do choose a common topic, work to make uncommon connections (i.e., offer unexpected narrative turns or connections to values), provide uncommon insights (i.e., say stuff we don't expect you to say) or uncommon language (i.e., phrase things in a way we haven't heard before).Or explore a different topic. You are infinitely complex and imaginative.Sample montage essay: My laptop is like a passport. It is plastered with stickers all over the outside, inside, and bottom. Each sticker is a stamp, representing a place I've been, a passion I've pursued, or community I've belonged to. These stickers make for an untraditional first impression at a meeting or presentation, but it's one I'm proud of. Let me take you on a quick tour: "We

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