Medical School Applications: Top Ten Experiences and Personal Essays

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Student Success Centre

The Student Success Centre (SSC) provides free and inclusive advising, learning, and writing support services to students at all levels of skill development, including:

- Prospective
- Open Studies
- Undergraduate
- Graduate

Student Success Centre: Services Overview

Exploratory Advising

- Undecided prospective, Open Studies, current students

Academic Support

- Learning skills, graduate/scholarship applications, outreach, group programming

Writing Support

- Consultations, writing communities, peer assisted writing

Centre for Career & Personal Development

www.ucalgary.ca/ccpd

Supporting students on their journey toward professional and personal success

Centre for Career and Personal Development

- We support all students on their journey to professional and personal success.
- Services include:
  - Mentoring and networking opportunities
  - Career advising and job search support
    - career assessments,
    - resume, CV & cover letter reviews,
    - interview preparation,
    - networking
  - Life design sessions and coaching
  - Experiential learning and skill building
  - Career fairs and employer events

Medical School Applications: Top Ten Experiences and Personal Essays

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Overview and Objective

- This is a 90-minute session designed to help you build confidence and skills in writing medical school application materials.

- Part 1: Keys to better medical school applications (with time for questions and discussion)
- Part 2: Personal Writing
- Part 3: Practice: crafting good titles for UCalgary Top Ten Experiences.

- We will share a copy of the slides and other materials via email later this afternoon.
- There will also be time for questions.

Questions for you

- Please visit www.menti.com and enter the code 27 92 96 2 to answer the following questions:

- Are you applying to one or more medical schools this year?

- Which schools do you plan on applying to, this year or in the future?

Part 1: Keys to better medical school applications

How to make your application stand out

Problem

- Canadian medical schools receive thousands of applications each year.
- Many applications are coming from students with similar academic standing and backgrounds.
- So how can you make your application stand out in a good way?

Understanding How You Will Be Assessed

- Please consult in detail any official advice you can access from the medical schools to which you will be applying.

- UCalgary: Applicant Manual.
  - Admissions Blog.

- UAlberta: Application Requirements.

- UToronto: Admission Requirements.
  - Non-Academic Requirements.
  - Application Tips.

Understanding Assessment at UCalgary, 1 of 2

- UCalgary assesses applicants based on academic factors (GPA; CARS score on MCAT; Academic Merit; Intellectual Curiosity, Research, and Scholarship). This is worth 50% of your file score.

- The other 50% comes from the following five personal or non-cognitive attributes:
  - Evidence of communication skills
  - Evidence of excellent interpersonal skills and collaboration
  - Evidence of commitment to communities and advocacy on behalf of others
  - Evidence of organizational, management, and leadership skills
  - Evidence of maturity, insight, and resilience*
    - * The applicant manual says “maturity, insight, and resilience,” but the scores applicants receive say “Ethical Standards / Professionalism.” We’ll return to this point.

Understanding Assessment at UCalgary, 2 of 2

- The General File Review Committee at UCalgary will not see GPA and MCAT scores, but will look at all the other components of the application to score the five personal attributes.

- Reviewers are given the following question: “To what degree does this applicant demonstrate evidence of [attribute X]?”

- This is how your Top Ten Life Experiences will be assessed: scores are based on how much you demonstrate evidence of the five personal attributes.

Strategies for Top Ten Experiences, 1 of 2

- My recommendation is to write the Top Ten Experiences with the list of five attributes in mind.
- Some experiences may address multiple attributes, but it's a good idea to emphasize one main attribute for each experience.
- I therefore highly recommend that applicants try to divide up the ten experiences so that each attribute is emphasized twice in the list of ten.

Strategies for Top Ten Experiences, 2 of 2

- Be intentional in dividing up content between the three sections of the Top Ten:
  - Title
  - Description (max 250 characters)
  - Impact (max 750 characters)

- Title: this can start giving assessors a preview of the attribute you want to emphasize; longer titles are better (we'll say more about this later)
- Description: get across all the key details about what you did, the nature of the organization and/or role, and other basic information
- Impact: this is where you get across the attribute(s) you want to emphasize with key examples that communicate the impact of the experience.
  - The impact isn't being assessed on how relevant the experience is to medical school.

Strategies for Other Schools

- UAlberta wants less writing from applicants.
  - You have opportunities to reuse and repurpose materials from your Top Tens.

- UToronto has brief personal essays.
  - Questions vary each year, but they will typically have a quotation for you to respond to, plus a question about you.
  - Give specific examples. Personal examples are best, if possible.
  - Get to the example right away.

Part 2: Personal Writing

How to write effectively about yourself and your experiences

Personal Essays

For UCalgary, you are asked to write an essay about yourself (maximum 700 words).

Please reflect on your lived experienced that have led you to the pursuit of becoming a physician. You may wish to include:

Any barriers, obstacles, or challenges that you've faced and/or overcome in general and as a student in particular. If you have experienced any supports, privileges or mentorship that has also shaped your experience you may also discuss that here.

Reasons for wishing to pursue a career in medicine: describe your motivation for wanting to become a physician. You might want to consider questions such as: i) Why do I want to become a doctor? ii) What qualities or experiences do I possess that will enable me to become a good physician? iii) Why should the admissions committee choose me for admission?

If you are applying as an Indigenous, Black or Rural applicant, you may wish to include your connection to these communities.

What is the role of personal writing?

Personal writing…

- Gives you a chance to **share your story**
- **Paints a picture** of what got you here and where you're hoping to go
- Elaborates on **components of your CV**
- Makes the review committee want to **meet** you by being **authentic**

Start by thinking about your story.

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What is your story?

Why you will be a good doctor?
Why should they pick you?
Which communities are you part of?

Effective personal writing will:

- Answer directly the **questions you were asked**
- Articulate how your **experiences and skills** make you a good fit
- Show **alignment** between you and the medical school
- Tell your **story**

Before you start writing…

1. **Brainstorm;** think about your story and what programs you'll apply for
2. **Gather** information and questions
   - Not every application asks the same thing; read the questions carefully
   - Think about how to tailor your statement to each application
3. **Review** your CV

Brainstorming questions

- What inspired me to pursue medical school?
- What can I offer?
- How do my background, skill set, experience and training make me an asset?
  - *What lessons did I learn?*
  - *What impact did this experience have on me?*
  - *What legacy did I leave?*

Show them, don’t tell them.

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Illustrate your points

A. My strong communication and teamwork skills will help me thrive and support patients in the fast-paced surgical environment.

B. During my cardiac surgery elective, I was often a liaison between the patient, their family, and the surgical team. My efforts to share procedural instructions and status updates in an empathetic yet clear manner, such as when preparing patients for open-heart surgery, helped me gain their trust to build positive rapport and manage the patient experience.

Ask yourself: So what?

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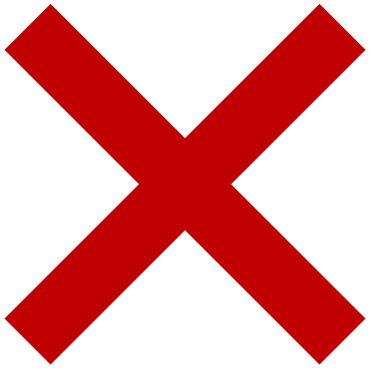
Have you included the result or impact?

A. I had the opportunity to participate in both urban and rural family medicine electives.

B. Taking part in both urban and rural family medicine electives let me experience first-hand the importance of listening to patient needs. Through these opportunities, I developed the craft of asking strategic open-ended questions to allow patients to express their concerns and provide me with enough information to problem solve in the span of an appointment. Problem solving excites me, and…

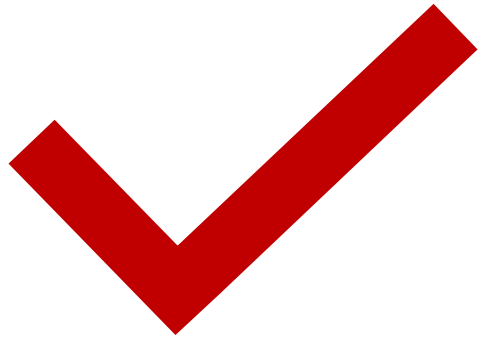
Things to avoid

- Telling a personal anecdote that **is too long**
- **Restating your CV** or using too much chronology
- Being **too cheesy** or cliché
  - *“Ever since I can remember, I’ve wanted to be a pediatrician.”*
- Providing **too many stories**, not enough substance/examples
- Sounding **uncertain or** making **excuses**
- Being **negative**



Keys for success

- Make your document **personal**
  - Write in the first person and keep the focus mostly on yourself
- Have an undertone of **humility**
- **Don’t repeat** yourself
- **Answer the questions** being asked; follow word counts
- Start **early!**



The best personal writing has had time to “brew”!

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As you plan, write, and revise…

Seek support!

- Talk your application and its contents over with others
  - Don’t wait until it’s “perfect” before getting input
- Be prepared to receive conflicting and contradictory feedback

Part 3: Hands-on preparation

Crafting Good Titles for Your Top-Ten Life Experiences

Hands-On Practice, 1 of 2

- Think about your Top Ten Life Experiences
  - “10 activities or experiences that they feel are sufficiently important as to define them as individuals.”

- Take some time now to identify the primary attribute that you want each experience to convey
  - Evidence of communication skills
  - Evidence of excellent interpersonal skills and collaboration
  - Evidence of commitment to communities and advocacy on behalf of others
  - Evidence of organizational, management, and leadership skills
  - Evidence of maturity, insight, and resilience **Or** Ethical Standards / Professionalism

Hands-On Practice, 2 of 2

- After you have come up with a list of experiences (this doesn't need to include all ten, especially if you haven't already started working on your Top Tens), share with others at your table.

- Let them know the title and see if they can infer which of the five attributes you are most trying to convey.

- Within your groups at the tables, you can also discuss the challenges you see in coming up with a good list of experiences.

Another session about medical school

- Join us on Zoom on Thursday, September 12 from 5:30 to 7:00 p.m. (Mountain Daylight Time).

- **Medical School Panel: Advice on Preparing an Application for Medical School**

- Join this workshop to hear perspectives from five recent UCalgary graduates who are now attending medical school at the University of Calgary, the University of Alberta, and the University of Toronto. The panelists will talk about the longer- and shorter-term processes that they went through to get accepted to medical school. Attendees at the workshop will have opportunities to ask questions to the panelists.
- The session will be recorded and posted to the Aspire website.

Questions?

aspire@ucalgary.ca

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