

## The Personal Statement for Residency: Three Days to a First Draft

### Generating a First Draft

#### DAY 1: Your Values

- You cannot be too alone when you write. Disconnect from the internet. Set aside an hour if possible.
- Fill out the “Values Clarification” sheet\* (p.4-5 below). When you have your three top values, choose the one that will let you tell the best story.  
*\*Note: all these values are worthy. Do not choose one that you think “reflects better” on you. If you choose honestly, your writing will feel authentic.*
- Make a list of your nonprofessional interests. Circle those that reflect your top value (or top 3).
- Write down at least 5 stories (a sentence each) from different times in your life that show this value. You might do this for all top 3 values. Try to understand how you came to have these values—what experiences influenced them? Think about how your identity and your environment have shaped each other.
- Choose the story that is most vivid to you and that shows who you are most clearly. *Tell the story* in one paragraph.

#### DAY 2: Your Specialty

- You cannot be too alone when you write. Disconnect. Set aside an hour if possible.
- List your skills and strengths. What is your superpower?
- Write down one thing you would change about yourself if you could, one thing you have changed, and one thing you would not change.
- What kind of beauty do you believe in? Sunsets, God, the human face, mathematical equations—what moves you with its beauty?
- List the people you are indebted to for the role they’ve played in your life.
- Choose the professional in your field whom you would like to resemble in 10-20 years. Describe what you admire about them. If your ideal doesn’t exist, imagine it.
- *Write a paragraph* explaining your interest in your chosen specialty, based on your values and skills. Include experiences that support your decision. Finish by sharing your professional goals, again by referring to your values and skills.

#### DAY 3: Your Story

- You cannot be too alone when you write. Disconnect. Set aside an hour, if possible.
- Read “A Few Thoughts on How to Write” (p.6-7 below)
- Using the story from Day 1 and the paragraph from Day 2, tell the story of what you value, how it has informed your choice of profession, and how you hope to see your professional life develop. As you write, draw from your Day 2 lists to show who you are. Aim for 4-5 paragraphs. Do not worry about word count.

## Revising

Before you revise, set your draft aside for at least a day—a week, if you have the time.

### DAY 1: by Sentence

- Print a copy of the draft.
- As you read each sentence aloud, ask:
  - 1) is it comprehensible?
  - 2) is it important?
  - 3) is it true?
  - 4) is it positive?
- Ideally, each sentence will express your value(s), explain your choices, and further your story.

### DAY 2: by Scale

- *Beginning*: is the opening personal and personable?
- *Balance*: do you spend the most time on what is most important?
- *Order of Information*: if a sentence raises a natural question in the reader's mind, does the next sentence answer it?
- *Transitions*: are they smooth and logical?
- *Facts*: are all dates, names, places accurate?
- *Tone*: does your tone convey humility and empathy?
- *Length*: is your essay between 750-850 words?
- *Conclusion*: did you take the reader where you promised? do you end on a stimulating note?

### DAY 3: by Proxy

- Enlist a trusted reader to read a draft. Ask them not to focus on edits, but only to reflect back their sense of you from what they have read. Pretend you are the residency program, and ask them to answer:
  - 1) what does this person value?
  - 2) what makes this person unique?
  - 3) why has this person chosen this specialty?
  - 4) what would this person contribute to our program?
- Do your proxy's answers match what you want to convey? If not, ask them to point to where in the statement they got their answers. Those are places to revise.
- After revising, repeat this step until you are satisfied. You can also serve as your own proxy: read as if you were someone else.

## Editing

Once you are satisfied with the content and organization of your personal statement, you are ready to edit. Check that your language is:

### *Specific*

- Words that “just came to you” are likely idiomatic and not specific enough. Stay close to what you notice.
- Choose precise, accurate words. Use [thefreedictionary.com](http://thefreedictionary.com) to check definitions and look for more apt synonyms.

### *Clear*

- Is it clear what each pronoun (it, they, which, etc.) refers to?
- Revise sentences that start with “It is” or “There are” to make them more active and engaging.

### *Active*

- Use forceful verbs—replace long verb phrases with a more specific verb. “They argued for the importance of the idea” becomes “They defended the idea.”
- Reword to minimize prepositional phrases. “There are several examples of the issue of integrity in X” becomes “X repeatedly addresses the issue of integrity.”

### *Varied*

- Vary your sentence patterns and lengths.
- Have you used the same word or phrase in consecutive sentences? Find alternatives or combine the two sentences.

## Proofreading

Check that your statement is error-free and inclusive.

- Check words and phrases underlined in Word but don’t rely only on Word (or Grammarly).
- Make a copy of your draft and press the return key after each period, so that you can read each sentence separately. Read slowly and out loud.
- Commas are tricky! Using unnecessary commas is more common than omitting necessary ones. Print out a draft and circle every comma. Review the rules for comma use (and abuse) here:  
[https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/punctuation/commas/extended\\_rules\\_for\\_commas.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/commas/extended_rules_for_commas.html)
- *Check for inclusivity*: have you made assumptions without considering other points of view? See the APA guidelines here for gender-inclusive, culturally sensitive, people-first language: <https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/language-guidelines>
- Ask a friend to proofread as well: a second set of eyes will always catch something else.

## Final Tips

- 1) Starting early will allow you to set aside your draft and come back to it with fresh eyes.
- 2) Outside readers are invaluable, but too many outside readers or readers who are dogmatic or overly invested in their solutions will only confuse you. *Readers are usually right that something is not working, but their “fixes” are not always right.* An ideal reader is someone who can reflect back to you what they read, who can identify what is strong in your piece, and who can provide suggestions in the form of “what if?” (“What if you switched the second and third paragraph order? What if you ended with a sentence about X?”) You can let readers know that this is what you are looking for.
- 3) “A personal statement is never finished, only submitted.” –Rebecca Starks

If you follow these steps, your statement will reflect you—your values, your strengths, your experiences, your choices, your goals. It will personalize your CV and make your interviewer interested in meeting you. You can submit with confidence!

## Values Clarification

Your personal value system consists of the inner rules you use to run your life, to make daily life choices. Some values are more important to you than others. This exercise will help you clarify and prioritize your personal values. Column one: check all values that are important to you. Column two: Narrow list down to 10 items, list them in rank order. Column three: Narrow list down to 3 items in rank order.

Value	1	2	3
ACHIEVEMENT (a sense of accomplishment)			
ADVANCEMENT (to improve, progress, promotions)			
ADVENTURE (new and challenging experiences, excitement)			
AESTHETICS (sensitivity to beauty, artistic expression & environments)			
AFFECTION (love, caring, sensitivity)			
AFFILIATION (participating with others, involvement, belonging)			
COMPENSATION (economic security)			
COMPETITIVENESS (winning, taking risks)			Cont.

COOPERATION (working well with others, teamwork)
CREATIVITY (being imaginative and innovative)
FAME (being famous or well-known)
FAMILY HAPPINESS
FREEDOM (independence, autonomy, spontaneous)
FRIENDSHIP (intimacy, close relationships with others)
HEALTH
INDEPENDENCE (freedom from the control of others)
INNER-HARMONY (being at peace with oneself)
INTEGRITY (honesty, sincerity, standing up for beliefs)
LOYALTY (allegiance, trust, fidelity)
ORDER (conformity, organization, obedience, stability)
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT (use of potential)
PLEASURE (fun, satisfaction, enjoyment, happiness, humor)
POWER (control, authority, influence)
QUALITY (1st class, excellence, having worth, valuable)
RECOGNITION (respect from others, status)
RELIGION (strong spiritual beliefs, a closeness with God)
RESPONSIBILITY (accountable for results, mature, trustworthy)
SECURITY (freedom from worry and uncertainty)
SELF-RESPECT (pride, sense of personal identity)
SERVICE (assisting others, improving society)
VARIETY (diversity of activities, tasks and people)
WEALTH (making money, getting rich)
WISDOM (understanding life, discovering knowledge)

## A Few Thoughts on How to Write: Three Guides

Rainer Maria Rilke (from *Letters to a Young Poet*): “As if no one had ever tried before, try to say what you see and feel and love and lose. ... Describe your sorrows and desires, the thoughts that pass through your mind and your belief in some kind of beauty — describe all these with heartfelt, silent, humble sincerity and, when you express yourself, use the things around you, the images from your dreams, and the objects that you remember.”

Vivian Gornick (from *The Situation and the Story*)

“Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say.”

Gornick tells her own story of insight:

“A pioneering doctor died and a large number of people spoke at her memorial service. Repeatedly it was said by colleagues, patients, activists in health care reform that the doctor had been tough, humane, brilliant; stimulating and dominant; a stern teacher, a dynamite researcher, an astonishing listener. I sat among the silent mourners. Each speaker provoked in me a measure of thoughtfulness, sentiment, even regret, but only one among them — a doctor in her forties who had been trained by the dead woman — moved me to that melancholy evocation of world-and-self that makes a single person’s death feel large.

[...]

The next morning I awakened to find myself sitting bolt upright in bed, the eulogy standing in the air before me like a composition. That was it, I realized. It had been composed. That is what had made the difference.”

“The speaker never lost sight of why she was speaking — or, perhaps more important, of *who* was speaking. Of the various selves at her disposal (she was, after all, many people — a daughter, a lover, a bird-watcher, a New Yorker), she knew and didn’t forget that the only proper self to invoke was the one that had been apprenticed. That was the self in whom this story resided. A self — now here was a curiosity — that never lost interest in its own animated existence at the same time that it lived only to eulogize the dead doctor. This last, I thought, was crucial: the element most responsible for the striking clarity of intent the eulogy had demonstrated. Because the narrator knew *who* was speaking, she always knew *why* she was speaking.”

“In each case the writer was possessed of an insight that organized the writing, and in each case a persona had been created to serve the insight.”

*You have countless personas within you—choose one that expresses your values and your insights while telling your story.*

Verlyn Klinkenborg (from *Several Short Sentences About Writing*):

Nothing in your education has taught you that what you notice is important.

But everything you notice is important.

Let me say that a different way:

If you notice something, it's because it's important.

But what you notice depends on what you allow yourself to notice,

And that depends on what you feel authorized, permitted to notice

In a world where we're trained to disregard our perceptions.

Who's going to give you the authority to feel that what *you* notice is important?

It will have to be you.

The authority you feel has a great deal to do with how you write, and what you write,

With your ability to pay attention to the shape and meaning of your own thoughts

And the value of your own perceptions.

Being a writer is an act of perpetual self-authorization.

No matter who you are.

Only you can authorize yourself....

No one else can authorize you.

No one.