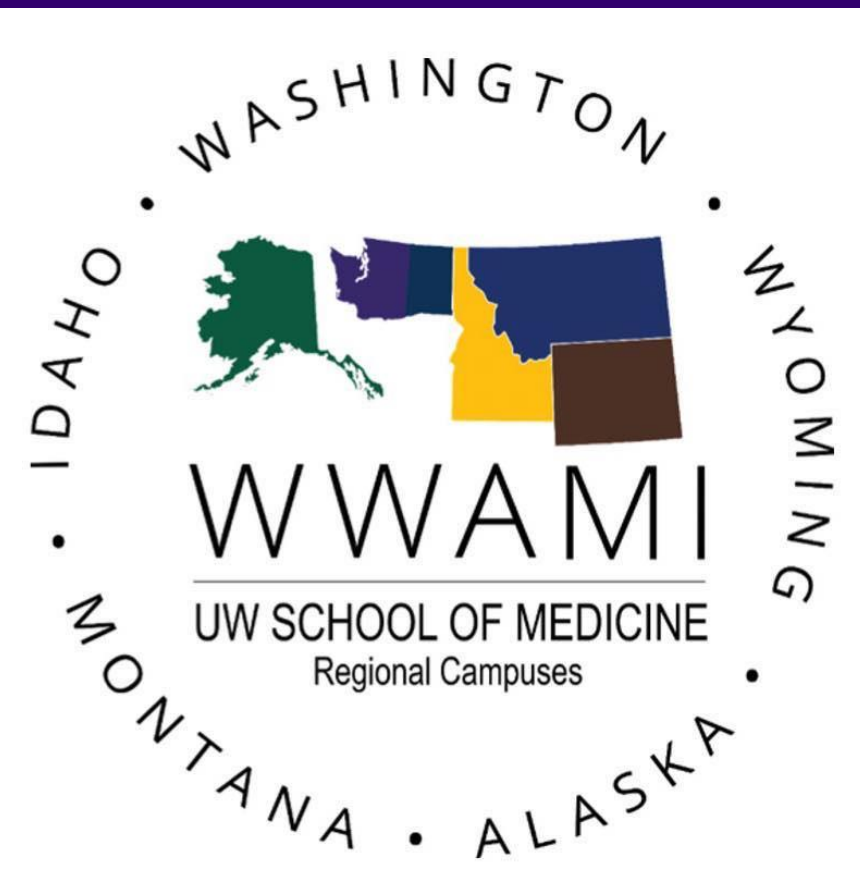


Writing a Personal Statement: The “Personal Comments Essay”



Michael D. Geurin, MD, FAAFP

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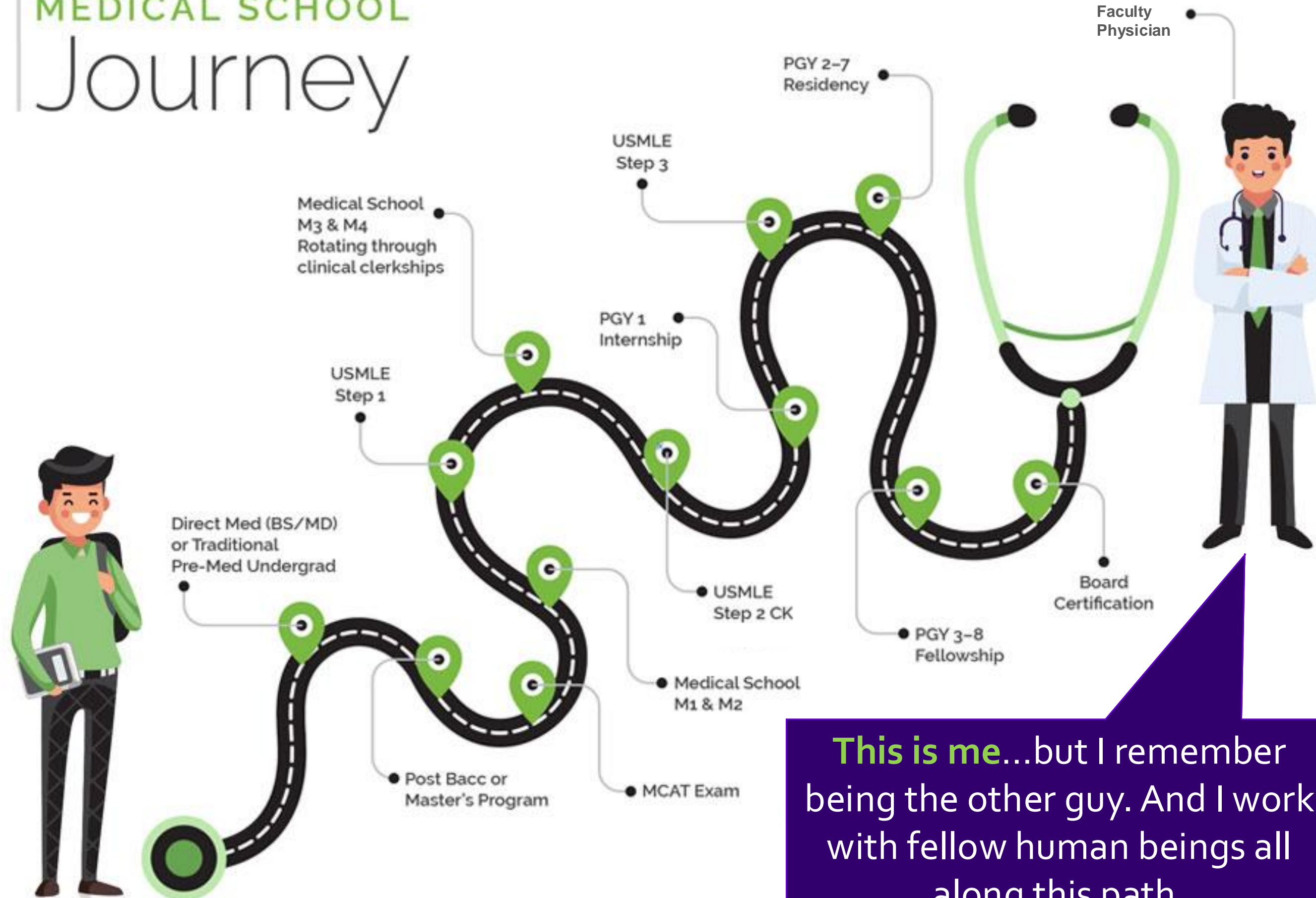
DIO, Montana Family Medicine Residency, Billings, MT

Family Physician, Intermountain Health – Broadwater Clinic, Billings, MT

Sept. 28, 2024

And a recovering College
English instructor!

MEDICAL SCHOOL Journey



This is me...but I remember being the other guy. And I work with fellow human beings all along this path.

Content Overview



- **The Resources**
- **The Writing**
 - Strategies for selecting a topic
 - Strategies for developing and organizing content
 - Tips for successful drafting
 - Tips for effective introductions and conclusions
 - Ways to make content more interesting
 - Techniques for revising and proofreading your work
- **Final Thoughts and Q&A**

Applying to Medical School



- [American Medical College Application Service® \(AMCAS®\)](#)
 - Common application service for almost all MD programs in the U.S.
 - [2025 AMCAS Applicant Guide](#)
 - [The University of Washington/Montana WWAMI](#) uses AMCAS plus a secondary application; the secondary application includes the application to **Target Rural Underserved Track (TRUST)** and **Community-Focused Urban Scholars Program (CUSP)**. The **Medical Scientist Training Program (MSTP = M.D./Ph.D.)** begins with an application to [MSTP](#).
- [Texas Medical & Dental Schools Application Services \(TMDSAS\)](#)
 - Common application service for Texas MD programs, plus two of the three DO programs
- [American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine Application Service \(AACOMAS\)](#)
 - Common application service for almost all DO programs in the U.S.

Resources for Medical School Applications



- <https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/article/applying-medical-school/>
 - A great place to start
- <https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/applying-medical-school-process/medical-school-admission-requirements/>
 - Online database of medical schools that requires purchase to access the content
- <https://www.princetonreview.com/med-school-advice/amcas-application-tips>
 - Really good application tips
- <https://www.princetonreview.com/med-school-advice/medical-school-personal-statement>
 - Specific tips for personal statements that mesh well with this presentation!
- <https://blog.accepted.com/5-tips-aacomas-personal-statement/>
 - Advice for osteopathic applications (AACOMAS)

What Is Your Personal Statement



- “The med school personal statement is a **one-page essay** that gives the admissions committee the opportunity to better **understand you** as a candidate. It is **the best opportunity to give a human face to your medical school application**. Don’t underestimate the power of this statement to make a **strong, positive impression** on an admissions committee.”

Topic Selection



- **How you decided** to pursue medicine as a profession
 - Evolution in your thinking
 - Epiphany moment or defining experience
- What you **hope to accomplish** in medicine
 - Your motivation, personal qualities, passion
- **Who has impacted you**
 - Personal physician, physician mentor
- **What you have learned** about yourself or medicine in your encounters with the medical field
 - Perhaps as a patient
 - Perhaps as a volunteer
 - Perhaps in your prior career/field of study
- [Additional prompts to spark ideas](#)
- [Advisor Corner: Crafting Your Personal Statement \(AAMC\)](#)

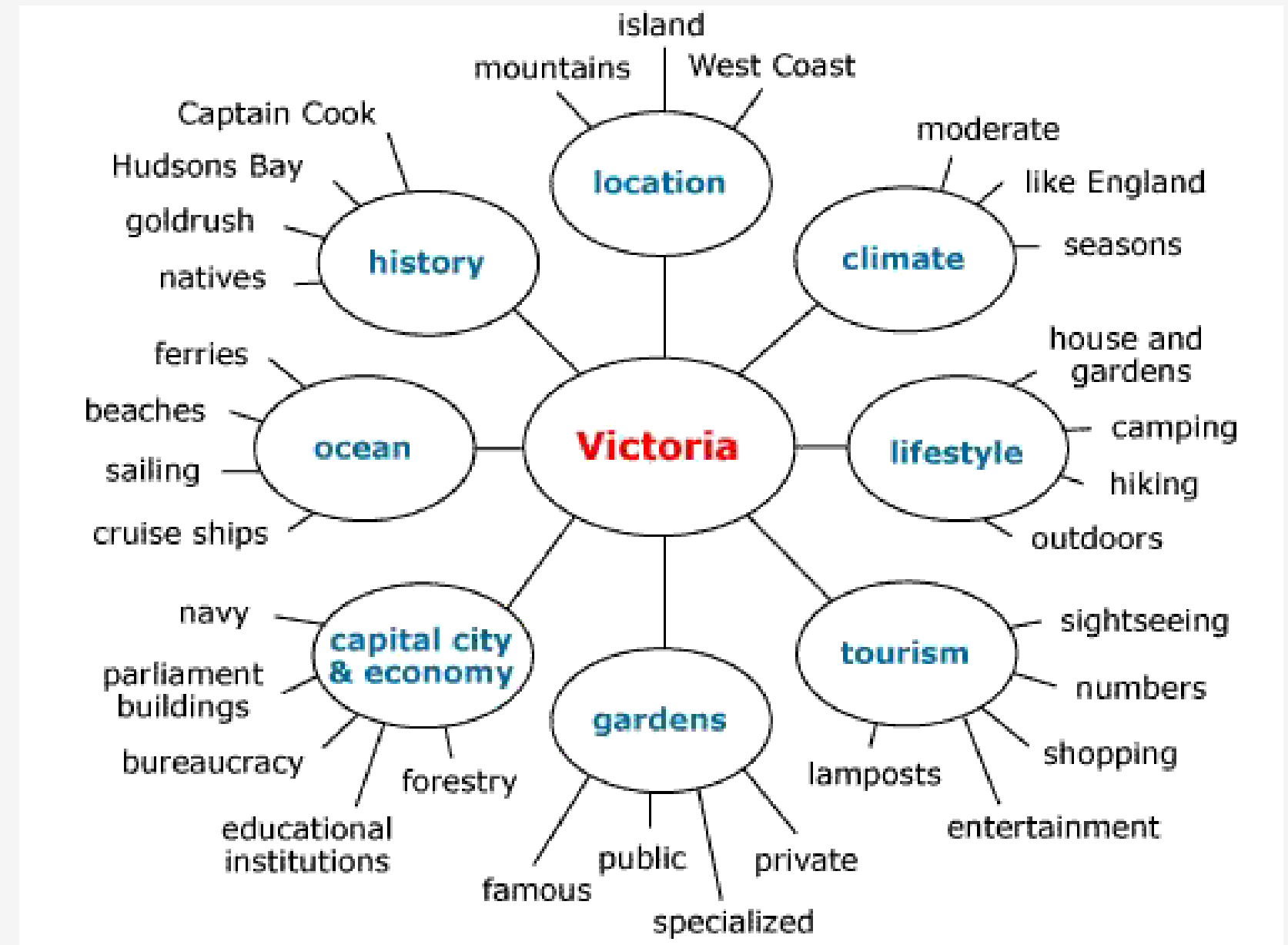
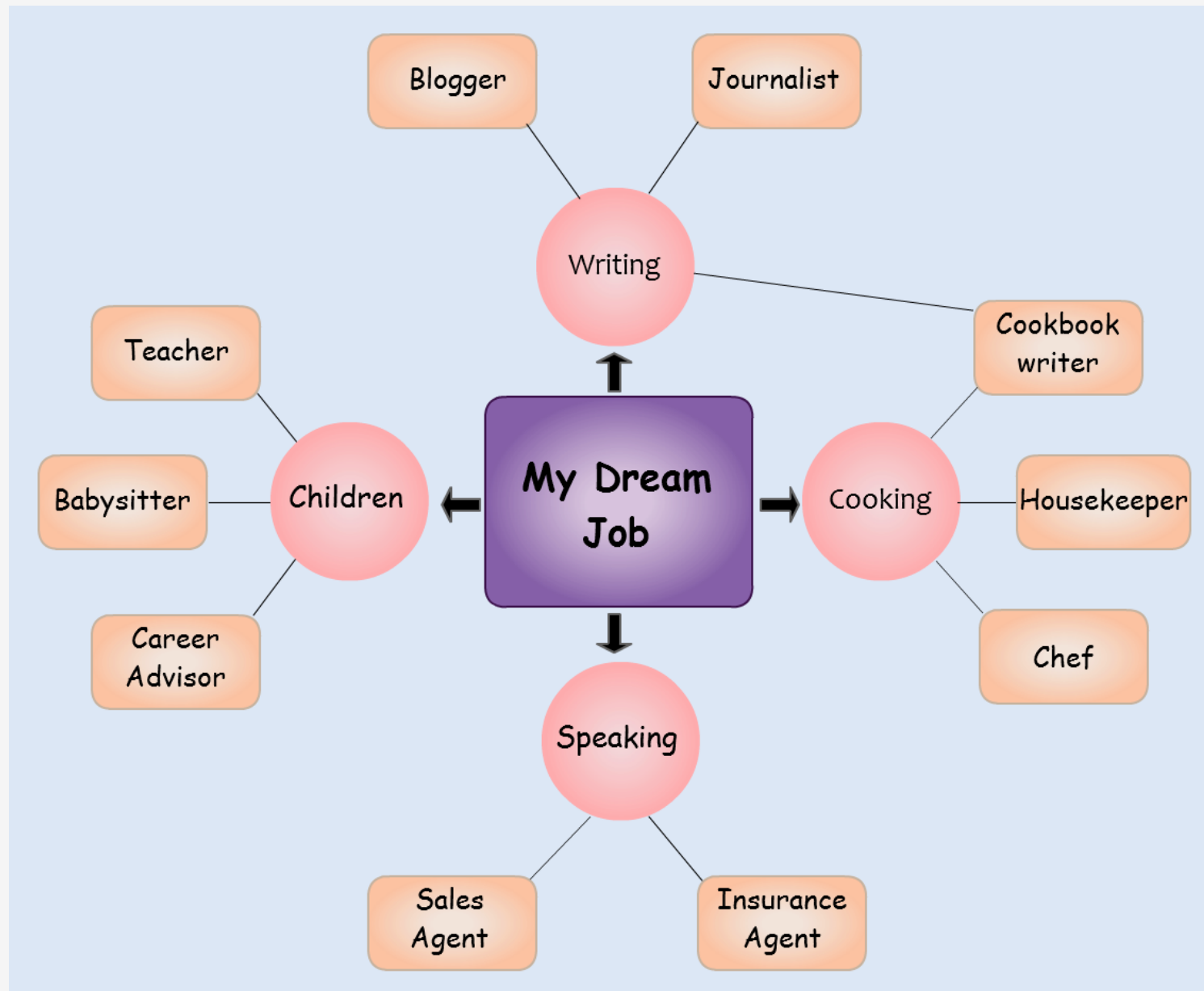
Developing a Topic

- Brainstorming (Listing)

Internet
advanta
good for search resources
need ^{global} update news
learn english.
learn foreign language.
violent.
naked pics. easily
unhealthy info.
~~games~~. Internet games.
meeting new people all over
the world
meeting bad guys.
~~bad no good~~ bad for you eyes.
waste time.
~~be~~ helpful for ~~do~~ how
bid things online.
~~Go~~ Good for search

Developing a Topic

- Brainstorming (Listing)
- Clustering (Creating a Flowchart)




Developing a Topic

- Brainstorming (Listing)
- Clustering (Creating a Flowchart)
- **Journaling**



Developing a Topic

- Brainstorming (Listing)
 - Clustering (Creating a Flowchart)
 - Journaling
 - **Asking Journalist Questions**
- 

Journalist Questions



- **Who** will you be in med school/medicine (and how that will benefit the school—what value/perspectives can you add)?
- **What** are you looking for in med school/medicine? Do you have specific training interests?
- **Where** do you hope to go after completing residency—are you interested in rural care, global health, etc.?
- **When** did you know you wanted to be a physician (the epiphany moment)?
- **How** did you get to this point in your pre-medical education (amplify your college admissions personal statement)? What have you learned along the way?
- **Why** (specifically) do you want to be a physician?

*Writer's
Block*



Developing a Topic

- Brainstorming (Listing)
- Clustering (Creating a Flowchart)
- Journaling
- Asking Journalist Questions
- **Forced Freewriting: 1-2 minutes**



Content Organization

- Outlining
- Making a Tree Diagram
- Utilizing Chronology
 - Causes → Symptoms → Diagnosis → Treatment → Prognosis
 - Past Perspective → New Perspective
 - Childhood Dream → Undergrad Experiences



Starting to Draft

- Review prewriting and run with any ideas
- Write a mock abstract/summary
- Pick the part of the content you understand the best or feel most passionate about
- Start with (or avoid) the introduction
- Use blanks or brackets where you lack the words or need more information and keep on writing



Effective Introductions

- Ask a rhetorical question
 - *Why would a professional pianist decide to go back to school and become a doctor?*
- Relate (or start) a patient/family case
 - Be prepared to discuss it more in your interview!
- Use an inspiring quotation
- Use a surprising statistic or fact
- Define a key word (etymology)



Content: What NOT To Do



- **Avoid quoting a bland dictionary definition:**
 - “Webster’s dictionary defines *doctor* as ‘a person licensed to practice medicine, as a physician, surgeon, dentist, or veterinarian.’ That is what I am becoming.”

The word ***doctor*** has been with us in English since around 1300 AD, but the idea is much older.

Doctor comes from the Latin word ***docere***, meaning “**to show, to teach, to cause to know.**”

Doctors are teachers.

**I want to teach
my patients to be
as healthy as possible.**



Content: What NOT To Do



- **Avoid merely repeating what is found in your AMCAS “Work and Activities” section**
 - “You can list up to 15 extracurricular experiences on your AMCAS application, which may include clinical, research, or volunteer activities as well as honors, awards, and distinguished publications. Don’t waste valuable real estate by listing unrelated, substandard, or short-lived experiences. You’ll have the opportunity to designate up to 3 experiences as “most meaningful,” which will give you an additional 1,325 characters to explain why. Choose carefully!”

Content: What NOT To Do



- **Avoid ending the introduction with a three-prong thesis preview** (“...In this personal statement, I will tell you how I was a boring child, and then a boring college student, and how that has all made me the boring applicant I have become. First, I was a really boring child...”)
 - Overused and uninteresting
 - Scaffolding should be taken down
- **Avoid waffling or betraying indecision about profession choice** (medicine vs. education vs. law vs. public health, etc.)
 - Exception: you are changing graduate programs or failed out of a graduate program. . . . These require explanation!

Content: What NOT To Do



- **Avoid referring to things you would be uncomfortable discussing in a face-to-face interview**
 - Any personal information you place in your application is fair game for discussion
- **Be cautious/strategic about disclosing political, religious, or social affiliations**
 - Schools look for added value, but may be cautious about taking on liability
 - **Advocacy is generally good**; leading protests *can* make people anxious

Content: What to Include

- Medical schools like to see **demonstrated commitment to society**
 - Volunteering (particularly related to health/healthcare)
 - [International Volunteer HQ](#)
 - Involvement in secular community organizations
 - Involvement in religious-affiliated organizations
- Medical schools like to see that **you know what you are getting in to**
 - Paid work in medical offices/hospitals
 - Shadowing experiences in medical offices/hospitals
 - Close family members who work in healthcare
- Most importantly, medical schools want to know **who you are**
 - What inspires you/makes you tick
 - What your strengths are, and how they compensate for any perceived/demonstrated weaknesses



Effective Conclusions



- Give a symbolic or powerful fact
- Relate (or complete) a compelling case
- Use an effective quotation
- Echo the introduction (come full circle)

Effective Content

- Make **effective** (but not *excessive*) use of...
 - Provocative questions
 - Vivid description
 - Figurative language
 - Enlightening analogies

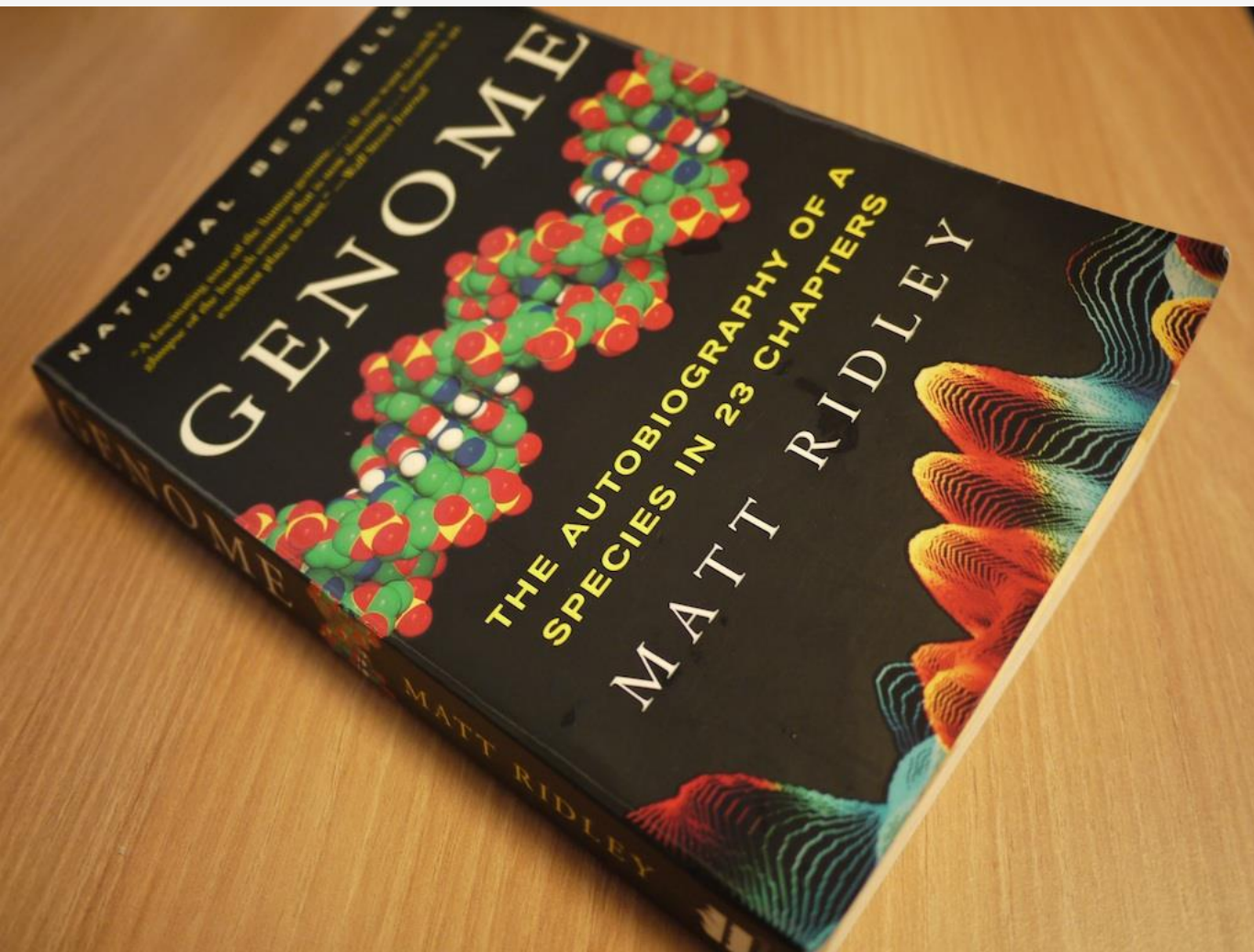


Vivid Descriptions



“My white coat still had the wrinkles in it and hadn’t yet developed the indelible ring-around-the-collar grunge that it has today. I was a second-year medical student, an imposter of the worst sort, sent out to prey on an unsuspecting inpatient to perform one of my first ‘H&P’s. With clammy sweat on my brow and palms, I introduced myself in my best ‘I’m-almost-a-doctor-can’t-you-tell?’ voice and began my interrogation of the ninety-three-year-old man who stared at me over a pile of half-emptied cups and plates, his torso nearly buried in too-short blankets.”

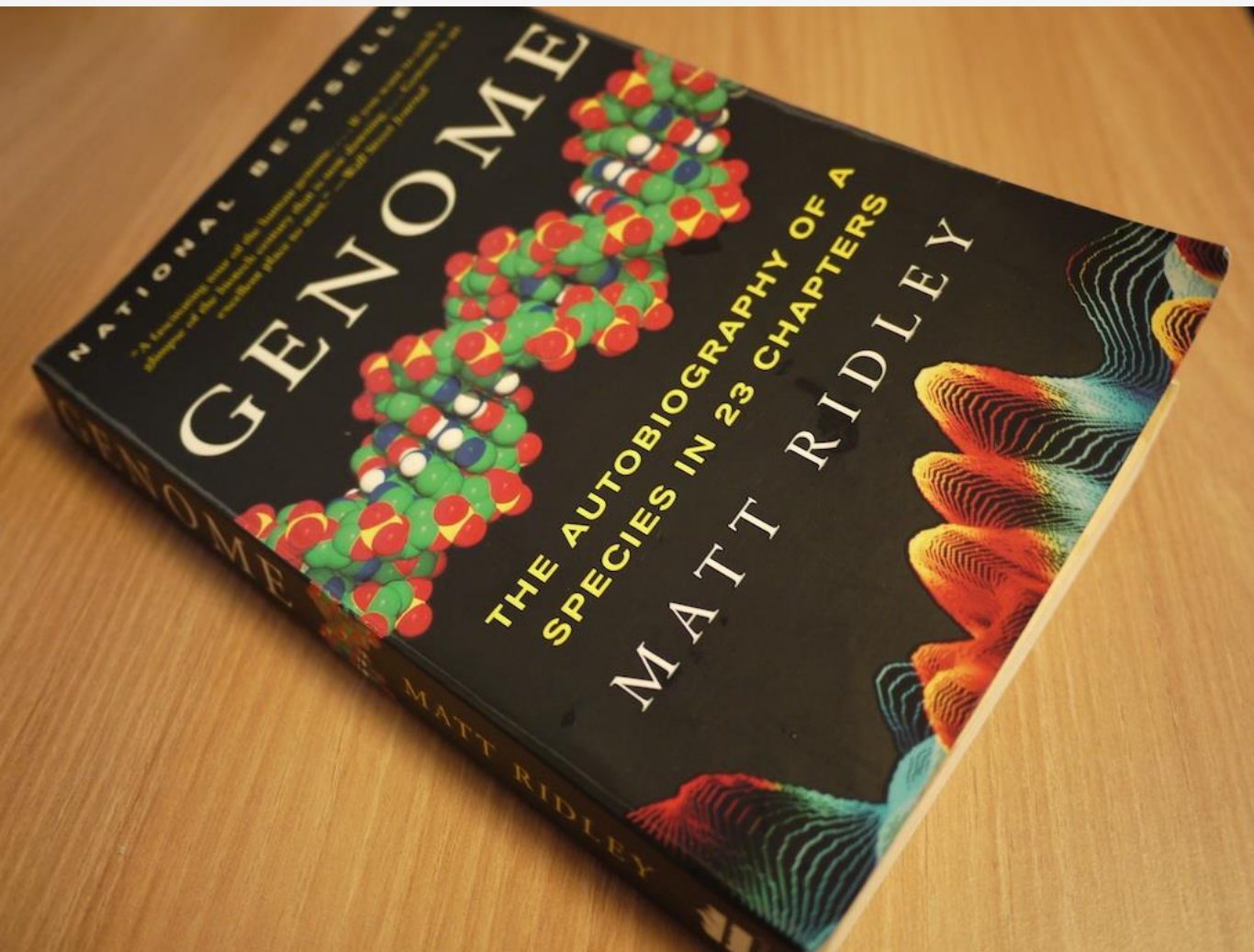
Figurative Language



Metaphors and Similes

“The **genome is a scripture** in which is written the past history of plagues. The long struggles of our ancestors with malaria and dysentery are recorded in the patterns of human genetic variation. Your chances of avoiding death from malaria are **pre-programmed in your genes**, and in the genes of the malaria organism. You **send out your team of genes to play the match**, and so does the malaria parasite. If their attackers are better than your defenders, they win.”

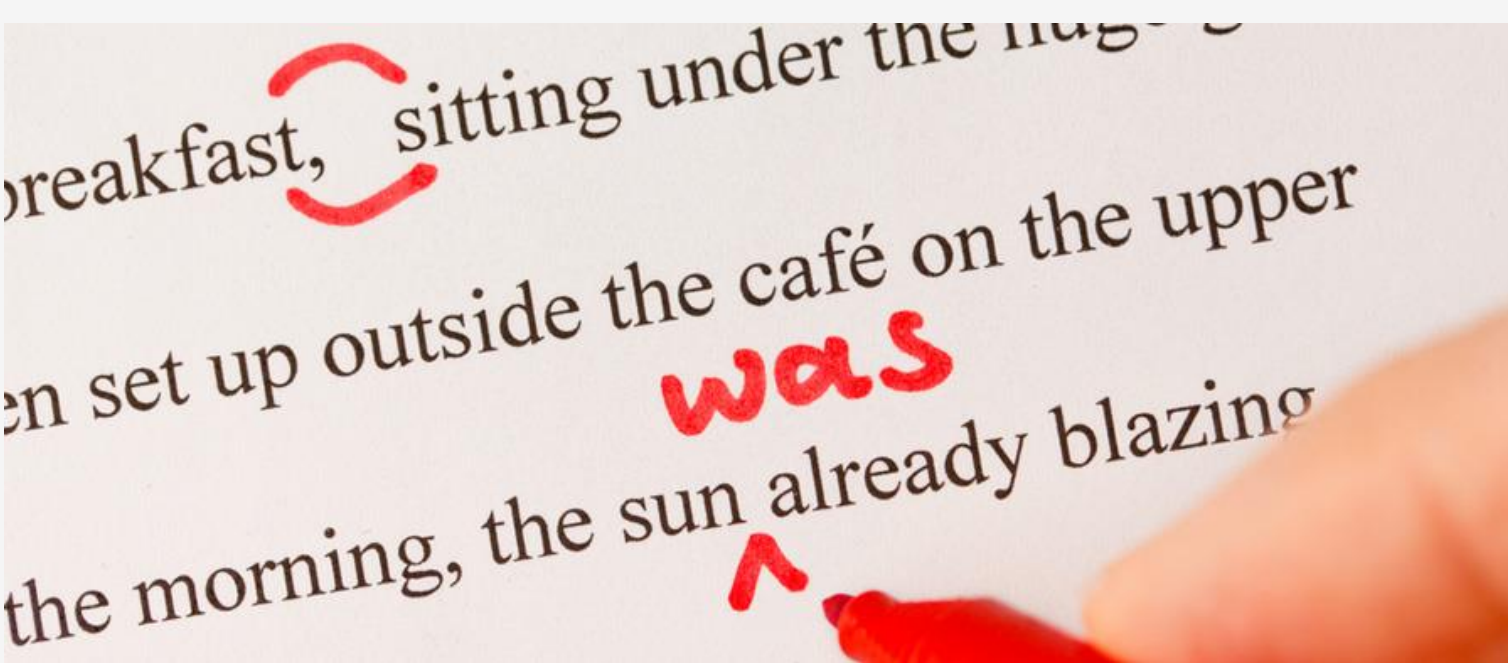
Figurative Language



Analogies

“There are human analogies for almost everything in nature. Bats use sonar; the heart is a pump; the eye is a camera; natural selection is trial and error; genes are recipes; the brain is made from wires (known as axons) and switches (synapses); the hormonal system uses feedback control like an oil refinery; the immune system is a counter-espionage agency; bodily growth is like economic growth. And so, infinitely, on. Although some of these analogies can mislead, we are at least familiar with the kinds of techniques and technologies that Mother Nature employs to solve her various problems and achieve her ingenious designs. We have reinvented most of them ourselves in technological life.”

Editing the Draft



- **Allow some time to pass**, so that you see what you actually wrote vs. remembering what you intended to write
- **Print out with triple spacing** for hand editing—errors stand out better with more spacing
- **Have a colleague review the draft** . . . preferably someone adept at grammar and punctuation
- **Read aloud for awkward sections**; these often need attention to word choice, grammar, punctuation or parallelism
- **Proofread backwards** (by word and/or by sentence)
- **Don't forget any length limits** (and verify these when you apply!)
 - 5,300 characters (including spaces) for [AMCAS](#) applications
 - 5,000 characters for [TMDSAS](#) (Texas)
 - 5,300 characters for [AACOMAS](#) (osteopathic)

This Is a Serious Application



- The person you describe in your personal statement should be...
 - **Interesting** without being **bizarre**
 - **Prepared** without being **rigid**
 - **Confident** without being **cocky**
 - **Humane** without being **emotionally vulnerable**
 - **Humble** without being **self-deprecating**
 - **Well-rounded** without being **unfocused**
 - **Explanatory** without being **spinny**

*THANK YOU
AND ALL THE
BEST!*

