

Helping Applicants Write Their Way into a Surgical Residency

Curt Tribble, MD

Division of Cardiac Surgery, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, USA

INTRODUCTION

The personal statement for residency applications causes more anguish than almost anything else in the application process.

—Kenneth V. Iserson, MD

So, you've got students clamoring for help writing their personal statements for Surgery Residency applications? Writing a personal statement for an application to a residency program is often one of the most daunting aspects of the application process. In fact, it is probably the most daunting part of that process. However, there is a surprising paucity of information about how best to approach writing these residency application essays, in stark contrast to the plentiful advice available for other types of applications, such as those required for college or medical school admission.

They train them by the dozens. We train them by the one's and two's.

—George Minor, MD

Furthermore, writing a personal statement for a surgical residency may be even more challenging than those written as part of an application for a non-surgical medical specialty, for a variety of reasons, including the fact that the numbers of both trainers and trainees are smaller, making the potential relationships more intimate, as well as longer lasting. And, it is also true that one of the hardest challenges for advisors of applicants to these residencies is offering suggestions to their advisees about their essays.

While some will note that personal statements may not carry as much weight as other information in the application, it is a fact that as USMLE results have begun to be reported as Pass / Fail and as some traditional honors, such as being elected to AOA, have recently come under increasing scrutiny, the personal statement will likely rise in importance in applications to residencies. [Sorour, 2022 & Park, 2022]

Having read literally thousands of personal statements over the past four decades and having helped hundreds of students, including two of my own brothers, write these

statements, I have accumulated some suggestions for those trying to help students embarking on this challenging process, which I will attempt to distill and organize in this essay. Let's get started.....

ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS

The essay is the one time we're going to kind of sit back in our chair and give the applicant the opportunity to talk to us. So you want to use that time wisely. The best essays are those that you read and you don't just want to recruit the applicant, you want to take them out for coffee ...

—VIRGINIA Magazine

The personal statement is an essay or a position paper, not an autobiography. As we all learned in high school and college, every essay should have a thesis statement, whether that thesis is stated explicitly or is implied. And, the thesis statement of the applicant's essay, explicit or implied, should be: You will love having me as a resident.

In God we trust, all others must bring data.

—W. Edwards Deming

As is true of all good essays, the author must make assertions that support their thesis statement, and they must provide data to support those assertions. The essay is their chance to make the case that they possess, or are capable of learning, the many skills necessary to become a good surgeon. It is also important not to waste time, theirs or that of their eventual readers, telling those reading these essays something that they already know. For instance, there is no need to dwell on one's ability to take multiple choice tests, as those tests have, at best, limited correlation to learning or practicing surgery, and those reviewing these applications will already know the applicant's grades and test results anyway.

ASSET FRAMING: AN INITIAL STRATEGY

It is easier to take someone who is and to teach them to know, than it is to take someone who knows and teach them to be.

—Wayne Wilson, MD

One way to help an applicant get started on this process is to ask them to contemplate which characteristics of the surgeons (faculty and residents) that they have most admired may have been. And, then, you can ask them to consider which of

Correspondence: Curt Tribble, MD, Professor of Cardiothoracic Surgery, University of Virginia Health System, Division of Cardiac Surgery, Box 800679, Charlottesville, VA 22908; 434-243-9250 (e-mail: ctribble@virginia.edu).

those admirable traits they believe are also true of, or can be developed by, them. For each trait or skill that your advisee adds to their list, ask them what evidence they have to back up their assertion that they possess or can develop these traits and skills themselves, in an optimal educational environment. Some have called this process ‘asset framing,’ a concept I like and believe is pertinent to helping each of our protégés ‘put their best foot forward.’ [Shorters, 2022] A set of potential assertions and examples of potentially corroborating evidence is included in Appendix I.

PUTTING THE STRATEGY INTO ACTION

I have found a practical way to start into this type of brainstorming, which is to suggest that an advisee find a counter top or large table and spread out as many legal pads or pieces of paper as might be necessary on the chosen surface, with one of these traits, skills, or characteristics written at the top of each page. The subsequent task will be to add pertinent information to each page so that the process of adding supporting thoughts and examples to those pages can be organized and efficient, while allowing subsequent reflection, examples, stories, or other ‘supporting information’ to be added from time to time. The applicant should be reminded that new thoughts, ideas, or stories will be likely ‘to bubble up’ as this process unfolds. The goal of this process is to select about three of these characteristics that your fledgling essayist thinks are true of them and for which they have ample evidence.

Obviously, no one of your advisees will have all, or even most, of these attributes, with supporting evidence. However, most of them will have at least some of them and will be able to write in detail about those experiences that can back up their assertions about themselves. Furthermore, you can offer suggestions about which sets of assertions and corroborating evidence you think will be optimal for each applicant, as they construct their essays. I have often found myself suggesting that a student should try to write out a six paragraph essay, with the goal of working to choose the three paragraphs that seem to be the best fit for that individual. Giving them this option is a way of allowing a bit of potentially useful ‘creative license.’

Sometimes a pertinent or pithy quotation can come in handy, either to use explicitly in the essay or to serve as inspiration for a comment to include in the essay. A collection of some of my favorite quotations that might be useful for this purpose is included in Appendix II.

A subtle strategy to consider suggesting to your protégés is that they start writing their essays in the third person, almost as if one of their biggest fans (or their mothers) were writing about them. This approach may overcome the natural tendency of many to write about themselves in a more subtle manner than is actually optimal for this process. The writers should later switch these third person assertions to first person claims, of course. You will want to encourage your protégés, at each stage of the application process, to seek to be memorable, in a good way.

IMPORTANT CAVEAT: DO (YOURSELF) NO HARM

The personal statement is generally not the place to try to win ‘the most colorful essay prize.’ That approach can work for college entrance essays, but it is less likely to impress surgeons reading applications to their residencies. I once read an essay in which the applicant stated that they knew that they were destined to be a surgeon when they saw a frog run over in the road. That folder went straight into the ‘rejection pile.’ Another off-putting assertion that is sometimes made is something like “I knew I had to be a surgeon after seeing my first operation.” Really?! Those reading applications and choosing residents will likely not be impressed with applicants who seem to value ‘flash in the pan’ decisions. Some examples of things NOT to write in these essays are included in Appendix III. And, a satirical example of what to avoid in these essays is offered in Appendix IV.

SO, YOU’VE BEEN ASKED FOR FEEDBACK ON A (USUALLY VERY) ROUGH DRAFT OF A PERSONAL STATEMENT? CONSIDER THIS INITIAL STRATEGY

As an advisor to applicants, you might consider a strategy employed by Henry Kissinger, when he was The US Secretary of State. He would frequently ask his protégés to create a ‘white paper’ on a topic of pertinence to the State Department. When delivered to him, he would write on the cover page of such a white paper some comment like: “I am sure that you can do better than this!” And, of course, the authors would dutifully rework their reports and return them to Dr. Kissinger a day or two afterwards. Years later, after his retirement, Dr. Kissinger was asked by one of his former protégés if he had actually read those first drafts, and he admitted that he had routinely not done so, defending this practice by noting that he was aware of the time pressures felt by these authors and that he, therefore, was allowing them the time that he expected would make their reports better. I have emulated Dr. Kissinger’s approach, on occasion, for the same reasons, with drafts of personal statements that my students and residents have ‘turned in’ to me. (Although, I must admit, I myself would actually read them.) I have found this strategy to be quite efficient and effective, as it has often saved me from feeling the need to spend an inordinate amount of time writing all over what is frequently a disjointed, even sloppy, early draft of a personal statement.

FINISHING UP

The last line of an essay is likely the most important, so care must be taken to make that line both authentic and memorable. Here’s an example that I liked when I read it in a personal statement I read recently that made an impression on me: “I look forward to continuing my development as a compassionate, dedicated, and skilled surgeon in your program.” I

have included a set of other lines from essays that I have liked in Appendix V.

Finally, have your protégés read their essay aloud, in private, and have them ask themselves if it ‘sounds like them.’ If they realize that it does not sound like them, have them put some more work into their essay, with that goal in mind.

FINAL THOUGHTS

While the effort and thought put into writing a personal statement is worthwhile in its own right, the writing process itself can also serve as an excellent preparation for the interviews that your protégés hope they will be offered. For instance, a final interview question will often be: Is there anything else about you or your application that you would like me to know? Material that ended up ‘on the cutting room floor’ during the writing of personal statements may well come in handy when an applicant is asked such a question.

CONCLUSION

This essay was written with hope of its being useful not only to those advising residency applicants but also to those applicants themselves, as they begin the daunting process of creating the personal statements for their applications.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I: Potential Assertions & Supporting Evidence to Consider Citing

I will outline here a set of assertions that your protégés may be able to make about themselves to provide their eventual readers with examples, or data, that can back up their claims. They should eventually choose a handful of these assertions that seem most apt for them and for which they have examples that back up their assertions. Obviously, they should choose only assertions for which they have evidence!

With each assertion chosen (and the corroborating data), the applicants should strive to convey their true spirit, their aspirations, and their commitment to bring those attributes to their training and to their eventual careers. I will provide these sample assertions in the first person to simulate the tone that I believe should permeate these statements. These examples are not presented in a hierarchical manner, as they are each potentially equally persuasive, as long as the writer is able to provide corroboration with stories and examples.

I love to learn how to do things. I have recognized and developed this trait by:

- Working on cars
- Sewing my own clothes
- Wood working
- Painting
- Crocheting & knitting
- Sculpting

I understand mental discipline. Here are some ways I can illustrate that:

- I am a good learner, having obtained good grades and scores on tests throughout my life, as my record shows.
- I have taken up new sports and learned new skills.

I understand physical discipline. Here are examples of how I know that about myself:

- I have played sports that require physical discipline.
- Some of my hobbies involve endurance and perseverance such as running, biking, swimming, yoga, and martial arts.
- I have held physically demanding jobs (with examples).

I am a compassionate person. I have learned that about myself in a variety of ways, including:

- Caring for pets and other animals
- Helping my elderly relatives
- Working at a homeless shelter
- Caring for patients on my clinical rotations

I have learned resilience through:

- Taking on a variety of tough challenges and overcoming handicaps, such as
- Recovering from injuries or setbacks, such as

I have learned and developed leadership skills, from my participation in:

- Student government
- Scouting (ie, Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts)
- Sports teams
- Various jobs

I like and have grown to understand a wide array of different types of people, a realization I have come to through my experiences with:

- Volunteer work
- Various jobs I have held
- Counseling in schools
- Attending large public schools

I have enjoyed learning to work with many different types of people through my experiences with:

- Coming from a big family
- Having had sales jobs
- Taking on volunteer work

I have learned to manage my emotions and remain calm under pressure in a variety of ways, including:

- Rock climbing

- Learning to fly planes or hang gliders
- Participating in theater productions
- Being on a debate team
- Dealing with the loss of people or pets that I have loved
- Playing various competitive sports

I have learned how to communicate effectively through:

- Writing classes in high school and college
- Being a volunteer counselor in my community or school
- Writing for my school's newspaper
- Exposures, throughout my life, to a wide variety of different people
- Being involved in politics and student government in the schools I have attended

I have learned how to do things with precision through my experiences with:

- Carpentry
- Learning to cut glass
- Quantitative analysis chemistry classes
- Playing musical instruments

I have developed the ability to recover from failure or disappointing performances through experiences with:

- Music or dance recitals
- Competitive sports
- Being turned down by someone or some entity

I have gained skill in the realm of representing others through participation in:

- Student government
- Being in other representative roles, such as representing classmates to leadership in schools that I have attended
- Observing senior residents representing their attendings to families or to consulting or referring physicians

I enjoy and have become proficient in teaching, through experiences such as having been:

- A tutor or teaching assistant
- An older sibling
- A coach in various sports

I am honest and have learned to:

- Admit and learn from errors
- Convey unexpected news in a forthright manner

I am an independent learner, a skill I've developed through:

- Sports
- Music
- Various academic challenges

I am resilient, having learned to overcome setbacks and disappointments, such as:

- Not being accepted to a school that I really wanted to attend

- Not having affection reciprocated from a person I cared about
- Having a disappointing academic experience

I have learned the importance of maintaining grace under pressure in a variety of ways, including in:

- Sports
- Debates
- Frightening circumstances
- Dance or music recitals
- Public speaking
- Learning to work and carry on, even when tired

I have learned perseverance and how to carry on when tired, in settings such as:

- Distance running
- Studying long hours to prepare for exams
- Working in construction or farming
- Learning to work, and to carry on, even when tired

I can get along with just about anyone, as I have done in these settings:

- Fraternities or sororities
- Sales jobs
- Student government
- Being from a large family

I have learned to get energy from taking on challenges and learning new things, including through:

- Learning a new sport
- Taking music lessons
- Developing a new skill
- Speaking in public

I enjoy and get energy from teaching as I have learned by:

- Tutoring struggling students
- Coaching sports
- Teaching swimming and / or lifeguarding classes

I have learned the value of language in maintaining my own sense of purpose and balance, and I strive to use the language of commitment, while avoiding the language of complaint. I have learned about these concepts from observing those I admire in many realms, including:

- Sports
- The military
- Parents
- Leaders of all kinds

You will never mind hearing from me at 3AM, because I will:

- Be prepared with both data and suggestions
- Be excited to be of help in any appropriate way
- Have the operating room warmed up on a cold night
- Put your favorite music on in the operating room
- Round up other learners who will want to watch and learn
- Represent you well to others under what will often be trying circumstances

Appendix II: Quotations that might be Useful in Writing Personal Statements

The judicious use of quotations can both liven up and add perspective to essays of any sort, and personal statements are no exception. I have a large collection of favorite quotations, and I have included some of them in this appendix, with hope that the quotations themselves might be useful to some of your advisees for inclusion in their essays or that the quotations might bring to mind ideas that could be of use at some point in the application process. And, some of them may be just plain inspirational.

These quotations are presented randomly.

Assess what you can do, how you are best equipped to serve. It is far better to focus on what you can do, where you can help.

—Seneca (Stoic Roman Philosopher)

It's a truly lucky man who knows what he wants to do in this world, because that man will never work a day in his life. But there are a few, a precious few. And, hell, I don't know if they're lucky or not, but there are a few people who find something that they have to do. Something that obsesses them. Something, if they can't do it, it is going to drive them clean out of their mind. I'm that guy.

—Carroll Shelby, in Ford versus Ferrari

I've been absolutely terrified every moment of my life, and I've never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do.

—Georgia O'Keefe

Between two people of equal technical skill, the one who cares will do the better job.

—Harvey Cushing, MD

Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.

—Arthur Ashe

The good physician treats the disease; the great physician treats the patient who has the disease.

—Sir William Osler

The trouble with most of us is that we would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism.

—Norman Vincent Peale

It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great.

—A League of Their Own by Sarah Gilbert

We don't learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.

—John Dewey

Excellence is attained by those who care more than others think is wise, who risk more than others think is safe, who dream more than others think is practical.

—Bud Greenspan

The perfect golf shot goes right from the shaft, through your

hands, and into your heart...

—Ben Hogan (Note: Although I am not a golfer myself I do like the potential analogy to, say, a perfect stitch.)

The difference between a successful person and others is not a lack of strength, not a lack of knowledge, but rather a lack of will.

—Vince Lombardi, legendary coach of The Green Bay Packers

Whatever else a surgeon is, he is an internist and something more, not something less.

—Francis Moore, MD

Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.

—Theodore Roosevelt

We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.

—Winston Churchill

If you don't believe in yourself, you're beaten before you ever play the game.

—Tim Elko (Player on The 2022 College World Series Championship Team)

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

Viktor E. Frankl

I didn't promise to uphold the Constitution until I got tired.

—David Obey, Congressional Representative from Wisconsin

The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, and to have it make some difference that you lived and lived well.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

If you can figure out 'the why' you can figure out 'the who.'

—John Douglas, in *The Anatomy of Motive*

There are moments in life that change us. We move forward from them different, our course altered in some way.

—Wendy Stead, MD.

You can kill people with kindness.

—Lewis Barnette, MD, Inaugural Chair of Family Medicine at The University of Virginia, (Implying that you must do more than care. You must know what you are doing).

Informed intuition is the result of deliberate practice. Living in a cave does not make you a geologist. Not all practice makes perfect. You need a particular kind of practice, deliberate practice, to develop expertise. Genuine experts not only practice deliberately but they also think deliberately.

—Anders Ericsson, 2007

I was born for this moment and for all the days ahead. I will find defeat, despair, fear, beauty, serenity, and peace. But, before I do, I will be tested far beyond anything I have imagined..... In my innocence, I sail on.

It is as if the wind were trying to warn me that I am to undergo an ordeal, that my voyage will not be an idyll. But I have, I hope, no illusions. I expect an ordeal, an ordeal of grandeur.

—Webb Chiles, In *Storm Passage* (An account of the fastest solo circumnavigation of the world)

You are under no obligation to remain the same person you were a year ago, a month ago, or even a day ago. You are here to create yourself, continuously.

—Richard Feynman, Nobel Award winning physicist

I hope I will die warmed by the life I tried to lead.

—Nikki Giovanni, Professor of Poetry at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA

Always shoot for the far post.

—Keith Horvath, Professor of Surgery and former pro soccer player

Resilience is defined by the capacity of a person to recover from difficult life events, to withstand adversity. It does not mean that someone who is resilient does not experience stress, emotion, or suffering. It does mean that one is able to reflect, analyze, and learn from a situation, in order to grow from it.

—Steve Ely, MD, PhD (The 2022 White Coat Ceremony at NOVA, Southeastern SOM)

I have often had a retrospective vision where everything in my life seems to fall with significance into a logical sequence.

Ansel Adams

Choose a job you love and you will never have to work a day in your life.

—Confucius

Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I've got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

—George Bernard Shaw

Appendix III: Actual Lines I Have Hated (with explanations)

- Let me start by saying that I am a chocoholic. (That line is just plain dumb. I didn't read another word of this essay.)
- I knew I had to be a surgeon after I saw a frog run over in the road. (This line is even dumber. This file went straight into 'the circular file'.)
- I knew I had to be a surgeon after I watched my first operation. (This assertion is odd, at best. Would you marry the first person you met in high school? Buy the first car on the lot that you looked at? Make any

potentially life altering decision with such a small amount of data? If you would, I probably wouldn't want you as a trainee.)

Appendix IV: An Example of a Very Bad Personal Statement

(Inspired by Calvin & Hobbes: 'Opposites Day' by Bill Watterson)

A Personal Statement for an Application for Navy Seal Training – A Spoof

(Candidly, I have seen a LOT of essays that sounded like this spoof! Obviously, I am never impressed by essays that sound like this one. If an advisee hands you something like this spoof, you should just tell them that they must start over!)

I began thinking about becoming a Navy Seal when I enrolled in my first swimming lesson class. I had seen the movie 'G.I. Jane,' which is a story about a woman who was given the opportunity to train as a Navy Seal and, now that I have learned to become comfortable swimming in the deep end of a pool, I know that being a Navy Seal is my calling.

Besides loving to swim, I am also attracted to becoming a Navy Seal because I love the beach. I know that a lot of Seal training occurs on the beaches near San Diego, California. I like being covered in sand and lying in the surf, which I have learned is an integral part of Seal training.

Furthermore, I like being underwater. I am mostly not afraid of drowning anymore, now that I have learned to swim underwater. I have watched every movie about SCUBA diving that I have been able to find, so I am confident that I would enjoy learning to be a SCUBA diver, as well.

I have heard that Seals blow things up. I have gained plenty of experience in this realm by lighting firecrackers and bottle rockets on 4th of July holidays. I have only had a few of those firecrackers blow up while I was close by, and I found that I was only mildly frightened by those explosions. Therefore, I am confident that I would be good at blowing up bridges or boats. And, I believe that I would enjoy or, at least, not be frightened by those explosions.

I am aware that Seals must be in good physical condition. I have tested myself at my school with running tests. I am able to run the length of a basketball court, becoming only mildly short of breath when doing so. So, I believe that shows that I am ready for Seal training.

Since Seals are part of the Navy, I presume that they get to ride around in boats. I believe that I would enjoy that, too, since I only occasionally get seasick when riding in boats, mostly when there are some waves on the lake where my family vacations.

In summary, I am confident that I would be a good Navy Seal. Therefore, you should accept my application to become a Seal.

Appendix V: Lines I've Loved from Personal Statements

(Deidentified and used with permission of each of the authors. Each of these excerpts is from a different author.)

- I want not just to be the best resident that I can be, but I also want to contribute to the welfare and education of everyone, from attendings to fellow learners to

future patients.

- I've been waiting for this moment all my life.... (With a nod to Phil Collins and his song "In the Air Tonight")
- I have always liked knives. From the first time I ventured to Boy Scout Camp in the summer after fifth grade, I have felt content with a blade in my hand. My passion for using knives and my hands to build and repair has grown into an appreciation for the ways I can continue to hone similar skills to treat and heal patients.
- Since the first day that I put on ice skates seven years ago, I have perfected one essential skill: how to stand up after a fall and to move on without looking back. I developed my resilient and hardworking style through figure skating, which has helped mold me into who I am today.
- I grew up as a long-distance runner, and I developed hand-eye coordination early on as an avid artist. I have been told that I have a good kinesthetic 'memory' which makes procedurally based medicine a great fit for me. I am well aware that Surgery can be a stress-laden career path, but I feel that I am up to the challenge.
- I began to learn from my mistakes at an early age in an interesting way. I remember well when my Dad bought me my first Lego set. I learned from my mistakes in creating Lego structures, when they would sometimes topple over. In retrospect, my Lego hobby was the start of my ability to admit my shortcomings and to learn from them.
- My commitment to training in Surgery was at least partly inspired by my parents' lives as Christian missionaries who walked with people through difficult moments and offered them hope.
- I learned about discipline and teamwork growing up playing basketball. I worked hard to make the varsity team at my school. We lost our first game, despite a lot of individual practice by my teammates and me. After that loss we focused on team drills rather than individual skills. We became a much better functioning unit. This recognition of the importance of teamwork and discipline has stuck with me and has helped shape me into who I am today and will continue to influence my approach not just towards individual skill acquisition but also to the essentials of working as a team.
- I found that Surgery was what made me jump out of bed in the morning and lose track of time while I was working. I want to enter a field that incorporates research, technical challenges, strong bonds of mentorship, and, most importantly, places the patient at the forefront of it all.
- I am aware that your trainees will either increase or decrease the risks of a proposed treatment to your patients. I will commit to doing my best to be the resident who works incessantly to decrease those risks.
- I have, and will bring, energy and commitment to your program.
- I will represent you well to your patients, families, and referring physicians, as well as to my own future patients and those who care about and for them.

- I have always had a thing for scars. Some people like tattoos. But, I like scars. They're more natural. They tell a story, often of hardships, sometimes even the worst days of someone's life, or, perhaps, even the best days. They are a symbol of the body's resilience and its ability to heal.

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