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Medical Student Forum

WRITING THE CURRICULUM VITAE AND PERSONAL STATEMENT

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☐ **Abstract—Two of the most important components of the medical student's application for the National Resident Matching Program are the curriculum vitae (CV) and personal statement (PS). The aim of the CV is to give an itemized account of the applicant's accomplishments since the beginning of their undergraduate studies, with the main emphasis on their activities and performance in medical school. The PS, on the other hand, is the applicant's chance to give program directors (PDs) a sense of who they are. The purpose of the PS is to complement but not rehash the CV. It is an opportunity to convey what makes them fit for a residency in emergency medicine (EM). A well-written statement should guide the reader through the heartbreaks, triumphs, and inspirations that drive the applicant. Applicants should remember that the CV and PS are the first impression they brand. Both the CV and PS should be brief; easy to read; professional; honest; consistent; and free of clichés, spelling mistakes, and grammatical errors.** **© 2019 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Inc. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).**

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CURRICULUM VITAE

The curriculum vitae (CV) is an academic equivalent to the résumé, and is likely to be the first part of a residency application in which the selection committee can view the student's individual accomplishments. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to make a good first impression. The CV is intended to be a quick and easy-to-read summary of one's professional life since the beginning of college (1,2). For the purpose of the residency application, the core emphasis should be on the medical student's activities and performance in medical school to the present.

Applications are submitted through the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS), where the CV is submitted and formatted electronically. The ERAS program automatically generates a CV based on the information you provide and does not allow for "personalization" of font size, font type, or paragraph alignment. This standardized document can be viewed as each field is completed and uploaded onto the website. However, creating a separate, more polished CV is recommended to provide to the authors of recommendation letters and to have available for future interviews. In addition, this CV is a living document that will need to be updated frequently (1). A typical CV format is provided in the Appendix.

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The CV usually starts with the education background, as it is the most important listing, followed by other categories arranged in a way that emphasizes the applicant's particular strengths in the order of importance and significance for the position to which they are applying (3–5). For example, if someone has extensive publications, these could be listed first after name, address, and education. Additionally, special attention should be given to categories that showcase the applicant's motivation and uniqueness in some way (e.g., emergency medical technician or volunteering).

Content

Quality over quantity is the rule. Care should be taken to give accurate and descriptive, but concise, accounts of one's participation. Applicants should only include the activities in which they had meaningful participation (e.g., research, honors and awards, and extracurricular activities), while being as descriptive as possible in categories where they had a leading or important role. Also, applicants should only include extracurricular activities that they are prepared to discuss more in depth if asked about during the interview. For instance, members of the Emergency Medicine Interest Group (EMIG) may describe their contributions to the EMIG, how much time they spent working with the group, and what their responsibilities were at that time rather than just stating their membership. Notable achievements of the group and how the applicant played a key role may be mentioned as well. Most importantly, applicants should maintain honesty and avoid overstating their credentials throughout the CV, as program directors (PD)s do find out (1,2).

In areas that do not require explanation, brevity is key. Significant experiences that may be unrelated to EM, such as being the class president or representative or the recipient of a merit-based scholarship, provide readers with a better sense of the applicant's abilities and background and should therefore be included. This is the type of information that will set an applicant apart from the rest. The information should be organized, easy to read, and relevant (1,2). In conclusion, the CV is the applicant's first impression and should represent their background completely, while focusing on their strengths.

Formatting

Although CV formatting in ERAS is out of the applicant's control, they can and should format their official CV to be as aesthetically pleasing as possible. The key is to keep the CV polished and concise. The expected length of a CV is ideally around 2–3 pages, though this can be exceeded should applicants opt to list their academic work (research and publications) (6). The formatting should be consistent throughout the CV, and the content should mirror the CV version that was submitted to ERAS, without adding or deleting items. It is advised to limit the official CV to 1–2 pages (include a page header if 2 pages), to use 1.5-inch margins and 12-point font, to separate categories with horizontal lines, and to list items under each category in reverse chronological order (with dates listed consistently either before or after the entry). On the other hand, formatting that detracts from the actual content, frequent changes in font size, and frequent use of italics or underlining are discouraged. Once complete, spell check and style check are recommended, as well as having the CV revised by multiple individuals (including the applicant's advisor or mentor) (1,2). For copies of the CV that will be sent to authors of recommendation letters, we suggest printing on high-quality paper (sturdy, white or neutral paper) with a laser printer. Also, the applicant should keep extra copies on hand to use during interviews.

Helpful Hints

Medical students should begin writing their CV early in medical school. During April of their third year, they should have it reviewed so it will be ready for authors of recommendation letters at the beginning of fourth year.

Once written and complete, the CV should be put aside for a week and then revisited to make updates with a fresh perspective. The CV is done when the appearance and content impress and satisfy the writer after multiple revisions. A CV should never be submitted if the writer is unsatisfied with it. If it looks sloppy or unprofessional, it will reflect poorly on the student. The most innocent of details or activities are liable to become the main topic of discussion during interviews. This is a big reason to be honest, because the applicant needs to be prepared to expand on anything put in the CV.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

The purpose of the personal statement (PS) is to give the readers and PDs a sense of who the applicant is. The CV's job is to give an itemized account of the applicant's accomplishments. The purpose of the PS is to complement but not rehash the CV. It is an opportunity for the applicants to convey that they have the skills, experience, and motivation necessary to make an excellent EM resident. Applicants should highlight their strengths while expanding on their experiences and personal goals.

The PS does not have to be a "masterpiece," but it should be an honest reflection of the applicant. Applicants should give themselves ample time to brainstorm, draft, redraft, and obtain feedback from others. The key is to start early and revise often.

Organizing Thoughts

Applicants should start writing their PS in the summer between their third and fourth year. This gives them plenty of time for revisions and to start over, if necessary.

Using material from their premedical application should be avoided, otherwise the reviewer will be left with the impression that the applicant recycled material from their medical school application. Similarly, applicants should avoid repeating what was mentioned in their CV. Instead, they need to take time to reflect on what truly made them choose EM over the other specialties in medicine. For example, focusing on what has happened since the beginning of medical school that has narrowed their interest to EM can help. That could be a surgery rotation with trauma elective, a particular patient, personal experience, or the fast pace of the emergency department (ED). In the early stages of brainstorming, applicants may spend several minutes each day jotting down reflections, past events, and other ideas to explore while attempting to flesh out their passions, motivations, and strengths.

Everything that comes to mind can be written down, even if it seems trivial or unimportant at the moment. These simple but honest reflections can be the foundation of a great PS. These brainstormed ideas may be revisited and reworked a few days later.

What to Include in the PS

Several main points need to be addressed, in addition to explaining the choice of EM. For example, the applicant may consider answering the following questions: What makes you more prepared today for EM than the first day of medical school, or the first day of your third-year clerkships? What are fun, unique qualities that you possess that will be welcome additions to your future residency class? Are you willing to handle the future rigor that an EM residency entails? What qualities demonstrate that you are open-minded enough to work with extremely diverse and often underserved populations of a busy ED? What experiences have prepared you for what is to come? What current issues and potential advancements in EM interest you? And how might you address these topics in residency? One thing to avoid in your PS is telling the reader what EM is. The experienced emergency physician reading your PS knows what the specialty of EM entails far better than you do.

PDs and the selection committee should learn that the applicants are well-rounded individuals who have a life outside medicine. After reading the PS, the PD should be eager to meet the applicant and ready to start a conversation. Issues that motivated the applicant's role as a volunteer, researcher, team player, or leader in medical school should be highlighted. Additionally, discussing interests, hobbies, travels, volunteering, and clubs and organizations is advised. Also, it would be a good idea to mention trips abroad to foreign countries or anything that may have enriched the applicant as a person. A few sentences on particular events that may have been overlooked or underemphasized in the CV may be added as well.

The PS is the place to comment on academic or professional mishaps that appear elsewhere on the application. While the PS is not the place to make excuses for past mistakes or actions, applicants can acknowledge what happened and what they took away from those experiences. It is also an opportunity to address gaps in training, which will help the applicants avoid the possible negative assumptions of PDs (7). Therefore, it is the applicant's chance to demonstrate their ability to learn from less-than-ideal outcomes. However, applicants should be very cautious when doing so. Many times, the problem that an applicant believes is obvious on their application only becomes problematic when they focus on it too heavily. Attention should not be drawn to items that would normally go unnoticed. These are sensitive issues that should involve consultation with the advisor, attending, or dean.

Avoiding polarizing statements is also advised when applicants write about a potentially controversial topic. The content may encompass a wide range of themes, but the core of the PS must be a reflection of the applicant, not the content or anecdotes. The PS should communicate who the applicant is and their trajectory toward EM. "I" statements and sounding arrogant or pretentious should be avoided, as this might trigger the committee to question the applicant's professionalism or mental condition. Furthermore, applicants may be asked by the committee to defend or explain certain statements during their interview.

The final paragraph of the PS should summarize the applicant's expectations of the residency program and their future medical career plans. Interests that cannot be backed up by experience should not be included, such as stating an interest in research with no prior exposure or experience listed on the CV.

Formatting

Once the applicant has some thoughts down and has an idea of where they want to go with their PS and the general content they want to convey is ready, they should start forming cohesive paragraphs. This is a creative process that takes a lot of time. This is why early preparation is crucial. Initially, applicants can begin with a loose first, middle, or last paragraph. Sentences should be reworked to flow eloquently, while avoiding awkward clauses or

complex sentence structures. The PS should be written in an active tone and should be as interesting and exciting as possible. A well-written statement should guide the reader through the heartbreaks, triumphs, and inspirations that drive the applicant. If the applicant is not excited about this, the reader will not be either. If the reader cannot feel what the applicant feels, the PS has not done its job.

Putting it All Together

Putting it all together can be difficult. The ERAS application will place an absolute limit on character count. However, when distributing the PS to the writers of recommendation letters, applicants should use a 12-point traditional font and should not go beyond 1 page (5–6 paragraphs). Therefore, every sentence should be important and serve a purpose.

Applicants should avoid clichés or overused metaphors. They should also avoid starting their PS with some form of "I knew I wanted to be an emergency physician when…" Instead, they should start by describing a situation that led them to embrace EM. It is important to be creative, positive, and allow the tone to reflect the excitement for EM (8). Special attention should be given to specific events that shaped the physicians they aspire to become. Several rounds of editing with trusted peers, family, advisors, and mentors are necessary. Additionally, asking for perspective from outside the medical field can help applicants assess the clarity and fluidity of their PS. Is the point that they wanted to convey coming across as intended? If not, they should rework it again and send it back to their readers for further revision.

Applicants should keep in mind that the easiest way to ruin all of their hard work is to overlook spelling or grammatical mistakes. Therefore, applicants should proofread their work and be sure it does not contain any errors (7).

CONCLUSIONS

Applicants should always remember that the CV and, even more so, the PS, are perhaps their first and only opportunity to make a good impression. PDs read hundreds of personal statements, so it is the applicant's job to use the PS to highlight their strengths. If it is boring, poorly written, or not proofread, it suggests ambivalence toward the whole process and will undermine their motivation, professionalism, and most importantly, their ability to care for patients. This is something that applicants want to pour their heart into and it will pay off when they do.

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SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

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