



FIVE FATAL FLAWS TO AVOID IN YOUR MED SCHOOL & SECONDARY ESSAYS



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**Medical School Admissions
Action Plan: 6 Steps to
Acceptance**

ABOUT ACCEPTED

Accepted is THE premiere professional admissions consulting firm, helping applicants get accepted to colleges, graduate schools, business schools, law schools, and medical schools, as well as other healthcare programs, for the past 30 years. We have guided thousands of candidates through the entire application process to gain acceptance at the world's top programs.

When you choose Accepted, you'll have a passionate and invested admissions consultant dedicated to helping you specifically, in addition to the support of an entire team of uncommonly talented professionals, including former admissions directors, published authors, PhDs, journalists, professors, and career coaches. With collectively hundreds of years of direct admissions committee experience, our team has more insider knowledge than any other firm. We KNOW the application process inside and out and can guide you every step of the way with a personalized application strategy that leverages our peer review process so you gain critical feedback from multiple sources.

We invite you to [meet our team](#) and [read what our past clients have to say about us](#).

When you are ready to take the next step in your application process, sign up for a free consultation. We look forward to speaking with you about your goals and helping you achieve them!

SPEAK WITH AN ADMISSIONS EXPERT!

INTRODUCTION

Your medical school personal statements and secondary essays are your chance to show the admissions committees who you are beyond your stats, and an engaging, well-written essay will get the job done. But it's easy to make mistakes in writing these essays. After all, you probably aren't used to writing about yourself in this way.

We've seen an endless number of essays that include at least some (if not all) of the five flaws we cover in this guide. The advice we present here will prepare you to avoid these common application essay killers so you can submit successful, acceptance-worthy essays for med school.

FATAL FLAW #1: LACK OF SUBSTANCE

An essay without substance will bore your readers. And if you bore your readers – even though they’re obligated to slog through (I mean read) your essay – you’ll lose their meaningful attention and with it, any serious consideration of you as a candidate. It’s that simple.

Kindle your readers’ interest and hold on to it with an essay full of the following:

1. Substantive self-reflection

How well do you know yourself? No Google search is necessary to find the real “you,” but you do have to create an environment of quiet space in which to seriously think about your goals, experiences, and dreams. What are the most formative experiences that have made you who you are? Search your head and your heart. This is where you will find the solid substance you need for a good personal statement.

2. Vivid and lively anecdotes, examples, and specifics

Now that you have collected your thoughts and gotten to know yourself a bit better, you’ll need to show the adcom that your dreams are grounded in experience. Write about real-life situations with colorful specifics, short scenes with dialogue (if appropriate and space permits), and the context of the situation you’re describing. Examples add life to your essays and hold readers’ attention.

Here’s a before-and-after to illustrate what we mean:

Before: “I volunteered at a local women’s shelter last summer so I could give back to my community.”

After: “I had wanted to volunteer at a local women’s shelter to give back to my community, but I had no idea how tiring it would be to stand behind the buffet table, ladling out mac and cheese to mothers and children in 90+ degree weather.”

3. Revelations of your thought processes and feelings

While lively examples and anecdotes tell the “what” of your life, they don’t convey the “why.” The adcoms want to learn how your experiences have informed and changed you. It’s important to reveal how your thinking, values, and motivations have evolved over time as a result of the experiences you’ve had and the lessons you’ve learned. These lessons will help you better understand yourself, your strengths, and your career mission.

Let’s return to the women’s shelter example we just introduced. You could mention that you “built relationships by talking to some of the women.” But that’s a bland fact. Alternatively, you could describe a specific conversation you had with a 25-year-old mother of two who was trying to earn her

cosmetology license, and elaborate on how that conversation affected, motivated, or changed you. It's a no-brainer to choose the path that includes detail, context, and reflections.

How to avoid Fatal Flaw #1

Engage your readers by constructing your essays (personal statements and secondaries) on a foundation of self-reflection, and use a structure that balances analysis and an astute use of examples. [Working one-on-one with an expert advisor](#) will help you put your self-reflection, thoughts, anecdotes, and insights into a cohesive, interesting essay that will get you ACCEPTED!

FATAL FLAW #2: FAILURE TO ANSWER THE QUESTIONS

Med school applicants often ask, “What do admissions readers want?” It’s really simple: **they want you to answer their questions.** Too frequently, applicants don’t comply with this straightforward request. In particular, you might feel queasy at the thought of discussing a failure, a time when you really blew it. You might think that if you cop to a failure, it will somehow make you a failure in the eyes of the adcom. This is exactly backward.

Learning from failures is a stress test that (ideally) leads to maturity and growth. That’s why the schools ask this kind of question. They want to see that you took lemons and made lemonade, so to speak. Don’t fear the question; ride the wave! Answer the question directly, without apologies. Then share what lessons you learned, and – this is key – prove that you learned them by showing the difference in how you handled a similar situation later. Voila! Your “failure” has become a success.

If you are asked why you want to attend a given medical school, provide specifics about how the program complements your interests and goals. Mention particular courses, specialty tracks, internship or research opportunities, and anything else that is school specific and relevant to your aspirations. If your answer is so generic that it could apply to most medical schools, you’ll probably get dinged. And don’t focus on why you are a more qualified applicant than anyone else. Just answer the question.

What if you encounter an open-ended question with general instructions? Simple – enjoy the luxury of writing about what interests you and presents your personality and qualifications with authenticity and enthusiasm.

How to avoid Fatal Flaw #2

Don’t assume that the adcom “really” wants to hear what you want to write about, rather than what is asked in the essay prompt. Secondaries are designed to elicit specific information about you and your potential to excel at a particular medical school and in a medical career. Give the schools the information they seek by answering their questions directly. Not doing so risks your application landing in the rejected pile. [Review our school-specific secondary essay tips here.](#)

FATAL FLAW #3: CLICHED WRITING

Don't hide your lucid answers to essay questions behind meaningless verbiage and abused cliches.

Take a look at this, for example:

"As clinical researchers in a novel space, we plan to guide the patient's journey in an optimized way and drill down so that we will gain organic, scalable results. I think outside the box, but my role in the healthcare space also requires an internal focus, and I spend a ton of time both building and updating data-driven initiatives, working to attain physician buy-in, and getting all my ducks in a row."

Okay, we dipped into our buzzword arsenal and exaggerated a bit. But not much! Do yourselves a favor and take that kind of jargon offline. Write directly and clearly so people can understand you:

"As clinical researchers bringing a new drug to trial, we need to earn our patients' trust and assure their safety throughout each step of the approval process. I personally engage with each patient, from their initial recruitment all the way through follow-up after the testing period. Behind the scenes, I have improved the statistical tools our group uses and created a system for communicating with the many physicians and researchers involved in our multicenter study."

For more on what real writers (and readers) think of the latest in vapid jargon, check out our post ['Twas the Night before Deadlines: A Cautionary Tale of Cliches](#).

How to avoid Fatal Flaw #3

Write straightforward answers to the questions asked, and do so in plain, direct language. Filling your essay with meaningless verbiage will raise a big red flag indicating that you cannot communicate in clear, simple, precise language. [Work one-on-one with a pro](#) who will help you avoid the fluff and make your ideas shine to create an essay that will get you ACCEPTED.

FATAL FLAW #4: SUPERFICIALITY

This fatal flaw is a close cousin to lack of substance and cliched writing. What do they have in common? They both imply a seeming willingness to blend into the great mass of applicants who – on a superficial level – are very much like you. They have similar goals, similar educations, and similar research and service backgrounds. They have done generally the same type of prep you’ve done to gain acceptance. But you are not those people. There is only one of you, and you cannot afford to blend in.

Here’s how to distinguish yourself

As we counseled earlier, use real-life examples to tell the story that only you can tell. This portrays you distinctively and memorably. You also want to avoid umbrella words such as “leadership” without more precisely explaining what you mean. “Leadership” has a broad definition that can cover any number of desirable qualities in the admissions process. Of course, you want to demonstrate leadership, but you won’t get the job done by blabbing about your “leadership abilities” in a vague, generic way. Instead, provide an example of a time you were in a leadership role, and break that role down into the specific leadership skills and qualities that were key to your success.

Here is a partial list of leadership components that you can focus on:

1. Listening
2. Initiating
3. Mentoring
4. Teaching
5. Persuading
6. Organizing
7. Establishing a goal or vision
8. Motivating
9. Guiding
10. Empowering

What other specific leadership elements can you think of that have been a factor in your own experiences and abilities? Not all leaders can claim these qualities, and at most, only a handful can write about the specific example you will provide.

How to avoid Fatal Flaw #4

Be real. Avoid vague umbrella words, use specific examples, and banish superficiality from your primary and secondary application essays. Check out our [blog posts about medical school essays](#) for more help.

FATAL FLAW #5: LACK OF FOCUS

Let's assess where we are now. You've spent quiet time thinking about yourself and your goals. You've taken care to answer the essay questions directly and specifically. You've even made sure to answer any questions within the adcom's question. You have carefully avoided cliches and buzzwords and included lively details and specifics. Yet somehow, your essay still isn't working. It seems . . . all over the place. Unfocused. Hard to follow.

Even if you have a clear goal or sense of direction, you need to structure your essay so that your reader can easily follow your thought process. Here are a few tips to ensure logical structure and coherent presentation.

- 1. Have a core idea or theme.**

Every essay you write should have a single, principal message you are trying to convey. Just as a salesperson has a concise "elevator pitch" they make to prospective buyers, you should be able to succinctly state your theme in one sentence or at most, two. Everything in your essay should support that theme.

- 2. Follow a chronological or thematic structure.**

You might have two or three examples in your essay and/or a few subtopics within your main point. That's fine, but your examples and subtopics need to be smoothly organized, either chronologically or thematically. Either approach will work, but there needs to be an architecture to your essay, and you need to stick to it.

- 3. Use smooth transitions.**

Transitions help your reader move from one example or subtopic to the next with logical, flowing connections or contrasts among them. Transitions are like signposts that guide your reader along the path of your essay.

Before you start writing your personal statement or secondary essays, think about what you want to say, clearly and critically. As we discussed in Fatal Flaw #1, Lack of Substance, you need to give yourself the gift of time to examine your head and your heart. During that exercise, and when you are writing the key points you want to make in your essay, consider the relationship between and among the experiences, insights, and subtopics you plan to write about. This will provide your reader with a much more gratifying reading experience – and help boost your candidacy.

How to avoid Fatal Flaw #5

Sketch out your central ideas and the examples you'll use to underscore your theme, choose either a thematic or chronological structure, and help your reader easily follow your narrative by using flowing transitions. This will create an essay that is a coherent whole. Be sure to [read our sample essays](#) for ideas on different structures that work well.

WHY AVOIDING THESE FATAL FLAWS MATTERS SO MUCH

You only have one chance to make a first impression, as the saying goes. Your essays just might be how you make that first impression on the med school admissions committees. As a result, your essays could be the difference between earning a coveted interview or acceptance – or getting a rejection letter. We hope the guidance we've provided here helps you feel better prepared to start your thinking, planning, and writing process. We know you'll be able to avoid these killer mistakes now! Still, nothing beats working one-on-one with an expert on your application.

[Our consultants](#) will not only ensure that you avoid mistakes but also guide you in writing an outstanding, shining application that will get you accepted to medical school!

WHAT'S NEXT?

Thank you for reading Five Fatal Flaws to Avoid in Your Med School and Secondary Essays.

Now it's time to move from general tips to personalized advice tailored just for you.

Sign up for a free consultation with one of our med school admissions experts today!

GET STARTED!

Contact Us



+1-310-815-9553



support@accepted.com



www.accepted.com