



Veterinary School Personal Statements: The Heart of your Application

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ABSTRACT

Veterinary school personal statements can be a daunting task to begin. Applicants are often wondering what makes a personal statement stand out, where do I begin, what do I write about, and what should I not write about. Through multiple interviews with current veterinary students, UC Davis' Associate Dean of Admissions and Student Programs and Assistant Director of Outreach and Admissions, this article aims to provide answers to all of these questions as well as give further insight into what current veterinary school applicants are writing about and what current veterinary school admission boards are searching for in a personal statement.

INTRODUCTION

There is nothing worse than sitting yourself down, sifting through all your life experiences, narrowing them down to the 2-3 experiences that have impacted you the most, and trying to find a way to effectively articulate those experiences within the confines of a 300-350 word limit for a personal statement. When applying for undergraduate universities, I put all my energy and efforts into writing my personal essays since I realized that these personal statements are the only way my application will be "me". Hundreds of other applicants will have the same GPA, and the same extracurriculars, but my specific experiences and life story are what make me unique. Now that I am at the University of California, Davis, pursuing my bachelors degree in Animal Science, the next milestone is veterinary school. As a third-year pre-vet student, vet school applications are always looming in the back of my mind. To say the least, the veterinary school selection process is extremely competitive. With there being only 33 accredited colleges of veterinary medicine in the United States, and only 2 in California (AVMA, 2021), the pressure is on for vet school applications. As an aspiring vet student, I aim to find ways to relieve this pressure. With vet school applications, come vet school personal statements. In this article, I

intend to gather information on how to tackle writing personal statements for veterinary school, as well as what makes a personal statement stand out within this specific career field.

METHODS

UC Davis has been ranked the number one university for veterinary medicine in the United States for the sixth consecutive year as of 2020 (Wood, 2020), as well as the top university for veterinary medicine globally in 2020 (Easley, 2020). To get further insight into how a top university reviews applications holistically, I interviewed Karl Jandrey, the Associate Dean of Admissions and Student Programs at UC Davis, and Lena Al-Rayess, the Assistant Director of Outreach and Admissions at UC Davis, for their opinions on what makes a personal statement stand out amidst the hundreds of applicants they see every year. Additionally, I wanted to include the student perspective as well so I consulted Joshua Liu, a current UC Davis Veterinary School student, and Asal Bastani, a UC Davis fourth year committed to Long Island University Veterinary School, to get a deeper understanding of what their writing process for their personal statements consisted of. Furthermore, I conducted my secondary research through analyzing peer-reviewed journal articles regarding veterinary school personal statements, and a health professions advising website.

DISCUSSION

Veterinary school admission committees generally judge a candidate's merit based upon undergraduate grade-point averages (GPA), Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, interviews, veterinary related experiences, letters of recommendation, and the personal statements (Roush et al., 2014). Although academic ability and clinical hours play a large role in veterinary school admissions, the holistic side of the application is just as important. Academic ability measured through GPA and standardized test scores are actually not a good indicator for

clinical performance, while non-cognitive scores proved as the best indicator for overall performance in the career field (Raghavan et al., 2014). Cognitive scores will get you past the first round of selection, but your portfolio and personal statements are what will get you past that second round and into veterinary school. The question now is how do you differentiate yourself from other candidates and make your personal statement stand out.

What makes a personal statement stand out?

From the veterinary school admissions board perspective, the board is looking for applicants who not only have the experience and academic ability, but also the compassion and drive for this career field. GPA and GRE scores aside, the admissions committee wants to see applicants who have overcome obstacles and exhibited resilience in times of adversity. This is what aspiring veterinary students should be highlighting in their personal statements, experiences that express their love and ambition for veterinary medicine. Lena Al-Rayess, the Assistant Director of Outreach and Admissions at UC Davis, defines what a notable personal statement looks like to her:

Personal statements should be just that: personal. The people reading them want to get to know you as a human, not just an applicant. Often, students write what they think admissions committees want to hear, and that's always easy to spot. Personal statements that are authentic, vulnerable, and well written always stand out. Checklists and what admissions committees look for vary quite a bit by program. Our program (UC Davis) is looking for clearly articulated stories of the "why" students are pursuing vet med and how that "why" connects to a greater story of the student. Often, we are looking for students who have overcome obstacles to get to where they are now. We want students who have shined academically and/or professionally despite life obstacles.

Karl Jandrey, the Associate Dean of Admissions and Student Programs at UC Davis, has the same sentiments when it comes to outstanding personal statements:

[What makes a personal statement stand out is] A clear ability to write in an unapologetic way about the barriers and hurdles overcome on the candidates “distance traveled” to get to the application. I like to see diversity in experiences that shows how the candidates resilience has only strengthened through these challenges to their educational path.

The recurring theme between what Al-Rayess and Jandrey are looking for seems to be following the narrative of a candidate overcoming challenges and highlighting experiences that depict the applicant going above and beyond to attain their goals and ambitions regarding this profession. When writing a personal statement, you should remain true to yourself and emphasize the experiences that showcase your dedication and devotion to veterinary medicine.

Where do I even begin?

Narrowing down all your life experiences to the defining 2-3 moments can be difficult to say the least. From the student perspective, Joshua Liu and Asal Bastani both agree that working on your personal statements everyday and looking at your writing with fresh eyes is helpful to see what parts flow and what parts need to be taken out. Liu shared how his writing process consisted of him listing out not only all the extracurriculars he had, but also what he took away from each experience, how each experience made him a good applicant, as well as how these experiences have shaped his view of people, the veterinary profession, and his future goals (J. Liu, personal communication, February 17, 2021). This strategy is a good way to narrow down which experiences have impacted you the most and are worth writing about. Similarly, Bastani mentions how she listed all her experiences as bullet points and focused more on ideas that she felt she could expand/connect to the most, as well as what she felt represented her the most (A.

Bastani, personal communication, February 17, 2021). When it comes to writing these personal statements, start early so you are able to fully express and elaborate on the experiences that have shaped your goals and ambitions for your future in veterinary medicine.

What Should I Write About?

According to Hamilton's Health Professions Advising website (Hamilton, 2021), some personal statement tips for veterinary medicine include:

- 1) Do not regurgitate experiences and other data already existing on other parts of the application.
- 2) Write about your knowledge of the veterinary profession.
- 3) Include information about who you are as a person and what diversity you might bring to the institution.
- 4) Include information about why you'd be a good candidate.

With these 4 tips in mind, we can begin brainstorming.

BMC Medical Education conducted a study that had the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) survey an audience of licensed veterinarians, OVC students, as well as faculty and interns to rank the characteristics they deem most important when reviewing candidates. Ethical behavior, sound judgement, communication, and critical/creative thinking were ranked as the top four characteristics (Conlon et al., 2012). Veterinary school candidates should keep those four characteristics in mind throughout their writing process and showcase experiences that exemplify these characteristics.

Bastani recently submitted her veterinary school applications and was able to share her personal statements with me. Below is an excerpt from her response to the question "Consider the breadth of society which veterinarians serve. What attributes do you believe are essential to be successful

within the veterinary profession? Of these attributes, which do you possess and how have you demonstrated these in the past?”

I believe it is essential for veterinarians to be passionate, empathetic, and effective communicators in order to be successful in the profession. Passion is crucial in order to enjoy any career and is what motivates me to continue working towards my goals . . . Empathy is vital in creating a rapport with clients. My first euthanasia experience at a vet clinic involved making a clay paw print and writing a card to the clients. By providing this sentimental gift, I saw the emotional toll this experience took on the family and the necessity for comfort I needed to provide. I was compassionate towards the animal and client and made them feel as comfortable as I possibly could.

Bastani not only effectively identified the key characteristics deemed important to veterinary medicine, but also found a way to integrate her own experiences that showcased herself displaying these characteristics within the veterinary field (A. Bastani, personal communication, February 17, 2021). In the rest of her personal statement, Bastani continues to describe experiences that exhibit her effective communication skills and passion for this career.

What Should I Not Write About?

Now that we have covered what current veterinary students have written about as well as what the current veterinary school admissions board is looking for, let's talk about what they are *not* looking for. When asked if there were any themes/narratives that seem overused or repetitive in personal statements, both Al-Rayess and Jandrey agreed that the narrative of having a life-long love for animals and having a singular experience define their moment to their veterinary path is overused within vet med personal statements. Al-Rayess even adds that childhood pets are not really worth mentioning since many applicants' first experiences caring for an animal goes back

to their childhood pet. What Al-Rayess thinks applicants should focus on is “how that childhood love of animals has evolved over the years and how it has manifested itself into the very adult decision to pursue a long and expensive degree” (L. Al-Rayess and K. Jandrey, personal communication, February 10, 2021). Veterinary school admissions boards seem to be looking for potential in candidates, since passion, although important, can only take you so far. They want to see how you have developed this passion over the years, and how this passion has given you the drive to seek out experiences and overcome obstacles in this field.

CONCLUSION

A veterinary school personal statement should be one that encompasses your core values, veterinary experience, as well as moments of persistence in the face of adversity. The hardest part should simply be narrowing down what specific moments in your career have defined your future ambitions and how have you taken steps to get closer to those goals. The rest, with the help of this article, should follow. Remember that ethical behavior, sound judgement, communication, and critical/creative thinking is key. With the tools and knowledge provided by this article, you will be able to tackle your veterinary school personal statements with a better idea of where to begin.

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