



# **Medical School Secondary Application Guide**

(~30 minute read)



## INTRODUCTION

- If you've received this guide, chances are you already know what a secondary application for medical school is, and you've also probably heard that pre-writing (drafting the essays before the prompts arrive in your email inbox) is the way to go.
- Ideally, you are reading this in mid-June (or earlier), before schools begin sending out the secondary prompts at the beginning of July.
- This quick-start guide is designed to optimize your process of navigating the wave of applications that you will receive. Given that most successful applicants apply to 20+ schools, a streamlined workflow and preparation is necessary to avoid getting overwhelmed.
- This guide will cover the four most common prompts which are worth preparing in advance to increase the speed of your submission.
- The advice below is based on an analysis of the 2023-2024 set of prompts. Use the guidelines below to guide your pre-writing process, especially if you have not finalized your school list.
- If you've already made your list of schools that you are going to apply to, I recommend inventorying the most common prompts amongst your specific schools. Then create some drafts that target the most common themes. You can use the brainstorming cues in this guide for inspiration.

## High-Yield General Tips

- *Do not write in a manner that is too verbose.* Admissions committees have minutes to review pages of application material in your profile, ease the cognitive burden while they're reading your essays and make it easy to follow without digression.
- *Submit within 14 days* of receiving the secondary application in your inbox. This guideline is based on many schools' explicit indications regarding the time frame that they deem acceptable. Taking longer than this can be a sign of disinterest.
- *Do not feel the need to max out the word count every time.* In general, if you hit at least 80% of the word or character limit, it's fine.
- *It's okay to leave optional prompts blank.* Admissions committees know how to detect fluff. So unless you have something great to say, particularly in the optional open response sections, lean towards leaving them blank. Intuitively, they would prefer to read less than more.
- *Eliminate redundancy.* It can be tempting to create an introduction and conclusion paragraph or a summary of your main points. Especially if you use chatGPT to help get your draft started, there will be a lot of sentences that reiterate the same point. Make sure that every individual sentence justifies its existence in the final draft.
- *Address the lighter secondaries first.* Secondaries vary drastically in terms of how long or comprehensive or unconventional the prompts are. Send out the ones that can be easily completed first, and leave the complex ones for when you're caught up. Refer to the list of "uniquely painful" and "freebie" secondaries at the end of this guide.
- *Stay organized.* The system you use is up to you, but make sure each secondary draft document is labeled properly with the school name and word count. The absolute last thing you want is to accidentally submit a secondary that mentions the wrong school name. Try our [Google spreadsheet tracker](#) to monitor your progress as you go. (press File → 'make a copy' to edit)



Continue to the next page for tips on pre-writing...

## ADDRESS THE MOST COMMON SECONDARY PROMPTS FIRST WHEN PRE-WRITING

### Prompt #1: Diversity

- 52% of the top 100 Medical Schools in the U.S news ranking had some form of a prompt designed to evaluate the diversity of the applicant.
- Of the diversity prompts with word limits, the average length of this prompt was 330 words. of the prompts with character limits, the average was 1,917 characters, which equates to roughly 340 words.
- There are several common formulations of the prompt that ask some variation of “what will you add to our student body” or “discuss unique aspects of your background.”
- *Draft this prompt first. It's the most common.* Target that 330 to 340 word length so that your draft can be easily adjusted prior to submission.
- If you come from an underrepresented identity group (ex: Black, Latino), or low socioeconomic status background, take this opportunity to highlight that, and discuss any work you have done with underserved communities. Race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status are important factors in determining who will receive an interview.
- Reflect on how these experiences have broadened your understanding of healthcare disparities and the importance of cultural competence in medicine.
- If you don't check any of those boxes, focus more on your unique experiences and perspectives regarding your extracurriculars or academic background. Most prompts will be open-ended enough to allow for this.
- You will commonly be asked a sub-question which is “how will you contribute to the diversity of our medical school?” to which the answer is almost always how the aspect of your background that you've chosen to write about has shaped your perspective and how it will influence your interactions with others.

### Brainstorming Cues

- Has there been anything non-traditional about your educational path thus far? (Do you come from an unconventional pre-med major? Did you have any unique experiences during a gap year?)
- Do you have a particular niche research interest which you have engaged with? How has that shaped your perspective on medicine?
- Discuss any experiences working or volunteering in diverse communities or with underserved populations.
- Reflect on your cultural, ethnic, or socioeconomic background and how it has shaped your perspective on healthcare.
- Highlight any initiatives or activities you've been involved in that promote diversity and inclusion within the medical field or your community.
- Share anecdotes about meaningful interactions with patients or colleagues from diverse backgrounds and the lessons you've learned from these experiences.

## Prompt #2: Why Our School

- 36% of the top 100 Medical Schools in the U.S news ranking had some form of a prompt designed to evaluate why the applicant has chosen to apply to any given school.
- Of the prompts with word limits the average length of this prompt was 306 words. of the prompts with character limits, the average was 1,395 characters, which equates to roughly 247 words.
- Target roughly 300 words for your pre-written draft.
- This prompt does get asked in quite a few different ways, but for purposes of our analysis, we only considered prompts that generally asked "why do you want to come to our specific school?"
- Do what you can to find unique reasons why school might be a good fit for you. If you are able to identify the central themes in your application (which are hopefully reflective of your main interests,) you can simply highlight any aspects of the school that would support those interests.
  - For example, let's say your application is particularly service-oriented. Every time you see that a school has a student-run free clinic, you can reference that in your response.
- Most schools will have a fairly generic mission statement that you can align yourself with using your prior activities as evidence.

## Brainstorming Cues



- Reflect on specific opportunities, curriculum innovations, clinical opportunities, or research opportunities offered by the medical school that align with your academic and career interests. Consider how these programs will enhance your learning experience and help you achieve your professional goals in medicine.
- Cite specific research mentors, student groups, interesting rotations, learning models, community service, etc. if possible.
- Explore the medical school's mission statement and core values. Discuss how these resonate with your own values and aspirations as a future physician. Highlight any specific aspects of the school's mission that align with your personal and professional goals in healthcare.
- Consider the geographic location of the medical school and its surrounding community. Reflect on how the location aligns with your future goals and the type of patient population you hope to serve.
- Whichever angle you choose, try to align your essay with your interests (ex: primary care, population health, leadership, etc.) and discuss how the school can facilitate them, citing specific examples.

### Prompt #3: Activities since graduation

- 30% of the top 100 Medical Schools in the U.S news ranking had some form of a prompt designed to evaluate how the applicant has spent their time since graduation.
- Of the prompts with word limits the average length of this prompt was 283 words. of the prompts with character limits, the average was 1,467 characters, which equates to roughly 260 words.
- Target roughly 270 words for your pre-written draft.
- There's minimal variation in how this prompt will be presented. The goal is simply to gauge how you've been spending your time and improving your application, especially as the gap year becomes more ubiquitous.
- Since there is minimal creativity in this prompt, we recommend taking a look at our "Secondary Essay Example Pack," which contains examples that you can use as a template to draft this essay.

## Prompt #4: Challenge Essay

- 28% of the top 100 Medical Schools in the U.S news ranking had some form of a prompt designed to evaluate how the applicant has spent their time since graduation. This prompt is actually more common than it may seem, because many schools word the prompt slightly differently by asking about a “failure.”
- Of the prompts with word limits the average length of this prompt was 334 words. of the prompts with character limits, the average was 1,898 characters, which equates to roughly 336 words.
- Target roughly 330 words for your pre-written draft.
- In general, your response should contextualize and describe what the challenge was, how you responded, and what you learned. You can also discuss how this may carry forward to your career as a physician.
- You should probably avoid mentioning a straightforward academic challenge, such as a difficult course or exam. This is too generic.
- Instead, pick a topic that clearly demonstrates an attribute that you want them to know about. (ex: resilience, leadership, creativity, etc.) When picking a story, consider which attributes are being demonstrated as you write. This topic can be personal and does not have to be tied to something in your activity section.
- Since many schools will also ask for a failure example, it wouldn't hurt to pick a topic where there was a concrete failure so that you can easily tailor this essay to both prompts.
- Strong responses to this prompt will foreshadow how you will be a competent physician with empathy, strong communication skills, the ability to solve problems creatively, and the ability to acknowledge opportunities for growth in the face of setbacks.

## Brainstorming Cues

- Consider a time when you are engaging in an extracurricular activity such as research, community service, or student group work, or personal matters when...
  - There was a disagreement among the leadership team about how to handle a situation.
  - You faced a decision point without a clear answer, and how you came to a final decision.
  - An initial outcome of a project you were working on was not as intended.



- You faced a moral or ethical dilemma and had to choose between multiple options each with their own drawbacks.
- You encountered unexpected challenges while organizing an event for a student group, such as logistical issues or low attendance.
- You had to navigate cultural or interpersonal differences within a team while collaborating on a project.
- You experienced setbacks or failures while conducting research, such as difficulties with data collection or unexpected results.
- You volunteered for a community service project that presented unforeseen obstacles or required you to adapt your approach.
- You encountered resistance or skepticism from others while advocating for a cause or initiative within your community.
- You faced criticism or constructive feedback on your performance or contributions within a group or organization.
- You experienced burnout or fatigue while balancing academic responsibilities with extracurricular commitments.
- You encountered financial constraints or resource limitations while participating in an extracurricular activity.
- You experienced personal or professional conflicts that impacted your ability to fulfill your commitments within a group or organization.
- You had to navigate a difficult interpersonal interaction with either a peer or family member, and the communication strategies you used to remedy the situation.

## BE AWARE OF UNUSUAL SECONDARY APPLICATIONS

- “Uniquely painful” secondaries are ones that have some combination of an unusually high amount of prompts, high word counts, unusual submission formats, and oddball prompts that you are unlikely to pre-write.
- “Freebies” are secondary applications that have essentially no writing required and can be submitted very quickly.
- In general, you should address the lighter secondaries first and more difficult ones later in order to increase your average speed of submission. The exception to this is if you have a school that you are particularly interested in, and delaying might risk missing that two week submission goal deadline.



## Uniquely Painful (updated 2024)

- A.T. Still University of Osteopathic Medicine
- Arkansas College of Osteopathic Medicine
- California University of Science and Medicine School of Medicine
- Carle Illinois College of Medicine\*
- Duke University School of Medicine
- Florida State University College of Medicine
- Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine
- Miami Miller School of Medicine
- Michigan State University College of Human Medicine
- Noorda College of Osteopathic Medicine\*\*\*
- Oregon Health & Science University School of Medicine
- TCU and UNTHSC School of Medicine\*\*
- University of Kentucky College of Medicine
- University of Massachusetts Medical School
- University of South Dakota Sanford School of Medicine
- University of Texas at Austin Dell Medical School\*\*\*
- University of Texas Medical Branch School of Medicine\*\*\*
- University of Texas Rio Grande Valley School of Medicine\*\*\*
- University of Texas at Tyler School of Medicine
- Virginia Tech Carilion College of Medicine
- Vanderbilt University School of Medicine

\*Portfolio of images/short essays

\*\*Audio recorded answers

\*\*\*Video responses

## Freebies

- Indiana University
- Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine
- New York Medical College
- University of Tennessee Health Science Center
- University of Texas Long School of Medicine at San Antonio