

## CaRMS TIPS FOR STUDENTS

# PERFECTING YOUR PERSONAL LETTER

A well-crafted letter is the first step to catching the interest of the program you want to pursue. It lets you share your enthusiasm for the program or discipline and highlight your positive qualities like integrity, reflection, learning and compassion. It also allows you to demonstrate your ability to follow directions and to communicate through the written word.

## STEPS

1. Start early. Personal letters can be difficult to write, so it is advisable to give yourself plenty of time.
2. Check the CaRMS website to learn what your program wants to see included in a personal letter. Remember, each one is different.
3. Review the prompts outlined by your program and be prepared to answer each of them.
4. Write your letter offline in a word-processing program, not on the website itself. See below for additional information about what to include and tips on writing a convincing personal letter.
5. Check to ensure you have stayed within the requested word count. If no word count is stated, your letter should be between 500 and 1,000 words.
6. Review for spelling and grammatical errors.
7. Ensure your document is visually friendly.
8. Cut and paste the text into CaRMS online.

## What to include

Most programs will specify what you should include in the personal letter, including prompts, word count and other guidelines. Remember, programs really want you to answer the questions they ask and to demonstrate that you can follow instructions, including length and any other requirements they set out.

If no directions are provided, include:

- Why you chose that area of practice
- Why you chose that program
- What you have to offer that particular program
- Any interesting facts you want the committee to consider

## How to structure your letter

- Construct a strong opening statement to catch the reader's attention – be creative but professional.
- Use concrete examples to support your main points. Good stories are stronger marketers than theoretical points.
- Develop an idea in each paragraph and use a smooth transition to segue between paragraphs and ideas; combine ideas within a paragraph if one story can easily demonstrate multiple competencies.
- Ensure that each sentence is built on the one before it.
- Personalize. Don't write generic letters; invest the time in personalizing each letter for each program. It's worth it in the end!



## 5 GREAT TIPS FOR WRITING STRONG PERSONAL LETTERS

### 1. Authenticity is key

Ultimately, you need to be true to yourself. Write what is true about you in regards to the program, your interests and what you have to offer. Do not write what you think the program wants, as it will come off as inauthentic. Ensure the voice of the statement is yours. If you are invited for an interview, the school will expect to meet the person who wrote the statement.

If there is something in your application that is unusual (a gap in training or a shift in the area of practice you want to follow) then tell the real story behind what has happened. That will always sound much better than what you think a committee wants to hear. If your electives suggest an initial plan and then a change of gears in terms of goals, tell the real story behind it or describe how you came to a late realization of what you really want to do.

If your situation is that you are really divided between more than one area of practice, try to tease out what the common elements of each specialty are and focus on that in your application. Talk it out with a career consultant or UGME student affairs staff member. Be your true self and give plausible explanations, acknowledging that you can love more than one specialty and find the common threads.

### 2. Take control of the narrative

This is your story to tell, good and bad. Take ownership of your own journey. When you take control of the narrative, you have the chance to shut down negative assumptions and construct an explanation that allows the committee reading your letter to see you in an even more favourable light.

Make sure the reader is not asking questions in their mind such as, "What is she/he trying to say?" "Why aren't they addressing X that I see on their MSPR?" or "What is the significance of this?" It is your story to tell; don't let pride get in the way.

Address your point of weaknesses as quickly as you can. For example, if you have failed several NBMEs that are still outstanding, taken time away from the program, or if you have any personal struggles, bring this up and frame it as journey to increased self-awareness. Talk about going through a process – that includes identifying the difficulty, seeking help, and then coming out stronger at the end of it.

### 3. Anchoring can work for or against you

When you anchor yourself with a unique experience, you want to ensure it is an experience that you want people referring to when they are talking about you informally in the CaRMS process. Step back and think of different ways your experience could be viewed. For example: If you want to tell a story about bungee jumping, you will want to speak to the attentiveness to details and safety as opposed to going rogue and thrill-seeking. The former are desirable traits in a physician; whereas going rogue and over the top thrill-seeking are not.

Anchoring can really work if you have something unique that you have done in your life. Find a way to tie these moments or pursuits into your narrative. How have they helped you become a candidate with more vision and perspective? How do these pursuits tie into your ability to be a good physician? These are strong anchoring moments that you should use to your advantage in a personal letter.

### 4. Tell a story

The best letters take the reader somewhere. Maybe it starts at the moment in your life when you realized you wanted to be a physician. For example, you broke your ankle and were in the emergency department. The attending physician put that x-ray up on the light board and showed you those broken bones. That interaction had a profound effect on you and as you moved forward in your academic pursuit you always remembered it. Now that you are on clinical rotations and you are working with children, you remember what it was like being that small person on that bed, being spoken to in that kind and respectful way by a physician.

The best narratives move in time chronologically and often they are the simplest to follow. Think of how you can tell a story that unfolds in the order in which it happened. Keep it simple and only include details that are pertinent to the story. Often, that is your best strategy.

### 5. Getting started

If you find you have writer's block and just don't know how to begin working on your letters, sit down and try to think of every emotionally laden experience in your life and use a concept mapping strategy. Think of every moment that relates to you wanting to become a physician. Continue to work on the list over a few days. You will often be surprised at where you find a good starting point for a great personal letter for CaRMS. Remember, you can also make an appointment with a career consultant or UGME Student Affairs to discuss how to approach your letters.

## CONTACT US

We welcome feedback. Please let us know if you find this document helpful and if you have tips you would like us to add! Contact us at [studentaffairsmed@umanitoba.ca](mailto:studentaffairsmed@umanitoba.ca).



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