

t is time for medical school secondary applications. If you thought the primary application was difficult, wait until you tackle these beasts. Here are the major problems students often have: Way too many of them! Medical schools all of a sudden inundate you with applications all at one time. You are now looking at a stack of 20 applications, each with 1-6 essays on them. Generic questions like "why do you want to come here?" You will feel like saying, because it's a medical school! Why else?! Then you will start writing the responses and inevitably copy information from the school's website. At this point, you may feel as though everyone is doing the same thing. Repeat questions Like "tell us about your most important activities." You may think did I not just do that on my AMCAS? Why am I doing that again?!

These are some of the frustrations that will come with writing secondary applications. Take a deep breath and you will get through it. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- **Turnaround time:** You want to get a secondary back to a school within a max of 4 weeks of them sending it to you, but ideally 2-3 weeks.
- **Perfection:** Because of the above turnaround time, perfection is harder to achieve on secondaries than on your primary where you had weeks to prepare. While it is still totally UNACCEPTABLE to make spelling or grammatical mistakes, it may be more acceptable to not write a Shakespearean piece for each of the essays.
- **Instructions:** Make sure to follow a school's instructions. If they say LIST, just list with a few words, do not give them long paragraphs. If they say X characters, stick to to this character count.
- **Prioritizing:** Another question that comes up all the time is "which ones should I submit first?" It is a relevant question and the answer is really whichever one you can. I would tackle those that you think are really easy (i.e. have no essays, or maybe just one really short one) and get them out of the way. Then, move on to schools you are targeting. If UCSD is your dream school, make sure you are submitting your application to them as soon as possible. If there is a particular school that has a really hard question, you can come back to it with a fresher mind at a later time.
- Length of response: Some secondary essays provide room for a very lengthy response and many applicants feel obligated to fill the entire allotted space. I recommend only writing a response that is both relevant and interesting. If you are struggling to get to the 2,000-character count and find yourself repeating what you previously wrote, it is much better to write less. Although you should write a complete answer, you don't have to use all of the allotted space. Quality is more important than quantity in this case.



Tips for specific medical school secondary questions that come up often and some potential ways to approach them:

What is your most important relationship? Who is the most influential person in your life?

This question should be relatively easy. You can choose a parent or relative, but also think outside the box to perhaps a teacher or a professor. The most important part of this, and the key to answering all questions, is not the particular person you choose or even the relationship you have with them, but to keep the reader entertained through the paragraph. You can write "my dad is important to me because he was a doctor and he showed me how to take care of patients," but it will not get you anywhere. Instead, write "Although he does not wear a cape or rescue people from burning buildings, my dad has always been my hero." In this way, you will intrigue the reader, encouraging them to read on further.

The remainder of the response should be about why this person was so influential. Again, keep this interesting, but also focus on aspects of that person that are admirable or ones that you would want to emulate. For example, emphasize integrity, work ethic, dedication, resiliency, etc.



This question may be slightly annoying. You just spent your AMCAS writing about your three most important activities and now they are asking you for more. There are a few approaches to take. If one activity really is most important and you wrote about it as one of your three most meaningful ones, you can write about it again. If you are going to discuss an experience already listed as a most meaningful experience, then I suggest trying to focus on a different aspect of the experience that was important to you. For instance, if in your AMCAS you focused on your research experience because you enjoyed learning the new material and challenging yourself, perhaps in the secondary you can discuss more of the collaborative and interpersonal aspects of your research. This way you can still discuss the same experience while emphasizing different areas.

You can also focus on an area not emphasized in your AMCAS application. If there is something dominant in your life, write about that (i.e. you are a classical musician, or an avid runner). However, ensure that you keep this professional and try to reinforce your strengths. Do not write about how your favorite hobby is going to bars or gambling.

Finally, things to avoid are shadowing experiences or experiences that required a very small time commitment. Really think about how important that shadowing experience was. Did following around a doctor really change your life? Did the three hours you spent at the food bank really make that much of an impact on you? Concentrate on experiences that imparted some knowledge, growth, or further development of your interests and strengths.





Here is a straight forward question where you can talk about your most significant research activities. Make sure to give the reader a framework in the first few sentences. Show them what the big picture of your project or lab was. Try to avoid using a lot of scientific jargon and do not focus on the small details of your research. Remember, readers and evaluators of your application could be a physician, a medical student, a researcher, a secretary, or a nurse. Try to make it understandable to whomever may be reading the essay.

- DO NOT start a paragraph with: "I studied receptor RLAJKNCH r897 which showed that there was no uptake in expression when compared to JLKASN 8343."
- DO try to make your research understandable: "The purpose of our research was to understand how toxins effect cells, which in turn could be used to eventually develop novel drugs..."

Why do you want to come to school X?

This is a popular question and one students often have trouble answering. You should research a school's website to see what they offer, but you SHOULD NOT directly copy from there and say I really love your research pathway and early clinical exposure. If you say just that, your essay will be exactly the same as everyone else's.

To avoid sounding generic in this very generic question, try to relate back your experiences and how they fit in with a particular school. You could say something along the lines of "as an undergraduate, I was exposed to the world of clinical research through my project on depression. With Columbia's required research pathway, I hope to continue this or similar projects. Or "As I spent time volunteering in the psychiatry department as an undergraduate student, I hope to contribute to the renowned psychiatry service at Columbia as a medical student."

In this way, you convey how YOU fit into a school, not just what the school offers, making your response unique and honest.





You do not have to have chosen a specialty or fellowship and write about it here. Instead, you can say you are leaning towards X and Y because you have been exposed to it in the past. Or you know you love working with children, and so you'd love to do pediatrics. Again, think about how your past experiences fit into your future goals. If you have done global health trips, perhaps you want to mention that and say you eventually would love to be doing international work. In addition, you can discuss personal goals in addition to your professional aspirations. For instance, "I also hope to eventually have a family, and expand on my pursuits of traveling and playing the guitar."

Diversity. What do you add to the class?

This is often difficult for someone to answer, but is about what makes them unique. Remember, diversity comes in many flavors. Skin color is certainly one of them, but there is so much more. Let's be honest, if you are an Asian, you are not diverse when it comes to applying to medical school. Same thing if you are Caucasian. But how about diversity in your field of study in college? In your interests? In your talents as a musician? Or as a computer programmer? If you really cannot think of a single thing that distinguishes you, you may be in the wrong field. There is something interesting about you. Find it.

Do you have any other comments that you wish to share that were not included in your primary application?

This is commonly an optional question, but most applicants feel obligated to answer it. Our recommendation here would be only to answer this question if there is really something DIFFERENT and interesting to add. You do not want to waste the reader's time by discussing an experience or aspect of your application you have already thoroughly addressed in your AMCAS. However, if you want to discuss discrepancies in your GPA, or your academic record, you can address that here. If you want to discuss an activity that you started after submitting your primary application, this is the time to do it.

Keep this response to the point and try to convey information that will be relevant to your evaluation as an applicant.

If you have already graduated, what have you been doing since your graduation?

I recommend simply listing out your activities in chronological order and avoid specific details as these are likely in other areas of your application. For instance, "I graduated in May 2019, and after that time, I continued to volunteer at UCLA Medical Center. I also recently began a lab assistant position at a biotechnology company beginning in August 2019."



Have you ever participated in a pre-conviction program or been convicted of, pled guilty, or no contest to: a felony and/or criminal offense (include information even if charges have been dropped or dismissed)? Or have you ever been the recipient of institutional action?

The answer to this was likely already addressed in your AMCAS application, but the point of this question is to be HONEST! If there was something that you didn't disclose in your AMCAS application because of their reporting requirements, you most likely will need to disclose it here. Most secondary questions will ask 'have you ever' and do not differentiate between offenses that may have been expunged from your record. The best thing to do is answer the question honestly but focus how you have grown and matured from the situation. This reflects the integrity required of a physician. If you do not disclose here, and they find out later, you will be in much worse shape than if you would have just pre-emptively told them.

The ideas in this guidebook are merely recommendations! The real important points to remember again are:

- 1. Keep it interesting.
- 2. Relate what you are saying back to things you have done or genuinely want to do.
- 3. Follow instructions.

We hope that helps stimulate your mind a little bit!



NOTES





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medschoolcoach.com



info@medschoolcoach.com



(888) 381 - 9509