



Mastering the VMCAS Personal Essay

Introduction

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The application to vet school, commonly referred to as the VMCAS, can be overwhelming. Vet school applications are competitive, and they only come after years of gathering experience, mastering science classes, tracking veterinary hours, and making sure that vet school is the path for you.

Many students who plan to attend vet school do not consider themselves writers. (If you do, lucky you!) As such, the VMCAS Personal Essay can feel like just *one more thing* that you have to do in the complicated process of completing your application to vet school.

But don't be afraid! It's actually pretty easy to write a compelling, convincing, successful personal essay on your application, if you know what to do. This little book will guide you through all the steps of writing a successful VMCAS essay, including important pitfalls to avoid. And if you need extra help, from proofreading to brainstorming, we are there to assist you.

So let's write a great personal essay!

The New Personal Essay

The old Personal Essay prompt for the VMCAS has been retired, and at the time of publishing this book, has been replaced with the following prompts. Each prompt must be completed, requiring 1,000 characters each. The prompts are:

1. There are many career choices within the veterinary profession. What are your future career goals and why?
2. In what ways do veterinarians contribute to society and what do you hope to contribute?
3. Considering the breadth of society we serve as veterinarians today; 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?

You can learn a lot from the prompts alone. The VMCAS used to give you 5,000 characters to answer the following prompt: “Discuss briefly the development of your interest in veterinary medicine. Discuss those activities and unique experiences that have contributed to your preparation for a professional program. Discuss your understanding of the veterinary medical profession, and discuss your career goals and objectives.”

Now, think from the perspective of the admissions committee members. Their goal is to pick the best collection of students for their incoming class. They are looking to the Personal Essay to give them information that they can’t learn elsewhere, and to help illuminate something about the applicants. Given that information, why would they change the prompt as they’ve done?

Well, the new prompts are more specific and they have less overlap with a resume or transcript. There’s actually a lot of information for you in the fact that this shift has been made. **They don’t want you to re-list your resume or wax poetic, and vaguely, about your interest in being a vet.** In other words, **follow the directions** and write about what the prompt asks.

So, now that we know what we’ll be writing about, let’s go ahead and get your essay ready. But, how much should we worry about it?

How Much Does the Personal Statement Matter?

The answer is: it depends. Your personal statement can't outshine bad grades, and it can't make up for a lack of experience. But it can do two things:

1. It can set you apart if you are an otherwise "average" successful applicant, but your essay shows insight, maturity, care, and depth; or
2. It can show that you haven't taken the process seriously if it is sloppy, off-topic, or very poorly written.

In other words, a mediocre essay probably won't hurt you, but it definitely won't help you. In this way, it doesn't matter as much as, for example, your Common Application essay when you applied to undergrad. After all, you're applying to be a veterinarian, not a novelist.

However, a *very bad* essay can hurt you. If you were an admissions committee member and you reviewed an essay that was off-topic, full of typos, and in any way revealed ignorance of the profession, it would be hard for you to put those things aside in your mind when considering the rest of the application.

What's more, a *very good* essay could help you by strengthening your application. If you can show more dimension to your understanding of veterinary medicine and make yourself stand out, you can humanize yourself to the reader a bit.

So, for short, it matters **a lot** that your essay is at least adequate. And it can help you **a little** if it's really, really good.

Now that we know we should invest at least a little time and attention in the Personal Essay, we're almost ready to start brainstorming and making a plan. But first, we have to go over what **not** to do.

Top Ten Mistakes to Avoid

Remember, our #1 goal is to *not* write a *bad* essay, so that means avoiding the following common mistakes. This list does not include grammar, spelling, punctuation, and the other basics of effective writing, but rather reviews ten mistakes of content that you want to avoid.

1. Stating the obvious.

Three thousand characters is usually less than 500 words. You only get 500 words to show yourself to the admissions committee **and** answer all the questions in the prompt, which include: What are your future career goals? Why are those your career goals? How do veterinarians contribute to society? What do you hope to contribute? What attributes are essential to success as a vet? Which of those attributes do you possess? How have you demonstrated your possession of those attributes? Remember, you don't just have to answer some of those. You have to answer **all** of them.

You probably have a lot of thoughts on each of these questions; if you don't, you will by the end of this book! So you don't have space for anything that doesn't help answer these questions or give the admissions committee a glimpse into what makes you special.

Here are some examples of obvious statements that you can erase from your essay right away:

- "I love animals." Most people don't become vets because they hate animals. The admissions committee is already pretty sure that you love animals.
- "The process of becoming a veterinarian takes a lot of schooling and hard work, and is very competitive." What does this tell me about you? Nothing. Also, I promise the members of the admissions committee already know this.
- "It's difficult to fit all the ways veterinarians contribute to society into just 1,000 characters." Yes, it is. So don't use 97 of them on that pointless sentence.
- "There's no way I can explain all the attributes that are essential to success as a veterinarian." Again, correct. They don't want you to explain every single thing a successful person has to do every day.
- "I'm sure you've read lots of essays that say that focus is important." They probably have, but there's no need to say "I'm unoriginal" expressly in your word count. (Also, don't use the word "you" in your essay. It's about **you**, not the reader.)

2. Going off topic.

You have a **lot** of ground to cover with the questions in the prompts. And remember, these aren't suggestions of what to write about; you are supposed to answer all of these questions.

Now is not the time to talk about your childhood pet. **Please don't talk about how much you loved your childhood pet.** Everyone loves their childhood pet; it doesn't tell the admissions

committee anything about you. In general, if you spend more than one sentence talking about your childhood, you have likely gone off-topic.

Now is not the time to talk about **anything** except what's in the prompt. Every sentence in your response should tie directly to one of the questions in the prompt. If it doesn't, cut it, or find a way to rewrite it that makes it refer directly to the prompt.

3. Using terminology incorrectly.

Here's a guiding principle for your essay: the people reading your essay know more about veterinary medicine and vet school than you do. If you aren't sure **exactly** how to use a medical term, look it up first or just don't use it.

Using medical terminology incorrectly makes you look as if you are trying to pretend to know something you don't. It can be off-putting to the reader.

Not sure if something's capitalized? Look it up. Not sure if an abbreviation has punctuation or not? Look it up. Not sure if you're using the correct name of an instrument? Look it up. Not sure the difference between a zoo vet or an exotics vet? Not sure if you're describing the correct medication? At this point, you can probably guess that you should *look it up*.

4. Making generalizations and speaking in absolutes.

You should avoid making broad, sweeping statements that either can't possibly be true or that you can't possibly know are true. Often these are ideas that are meant rhetorically, but they end up feeling disingenuous and can make you sound pompous, ignorant, or just uninformed. At worst, they will make the reader find you arrogant or unlikeable; at best, they add nothing to your essay.

Here are some examples:

- "No one works harder than me."
- "Every veterinarian faces this challenge in his or her career."
- "Everyone knows that dealing with animals can be emotional."
- "There is no job more important than being a veterinarian."
- "Nothing could be more difficult than the choice I faced."
- "I will be the best and most devoted student you have ever seen."
- "I know I will love every moment of the challenge."
- "I would never do that if I were making the same decision."
- "I always think about the interests of others before my own."

There's a reason that the *Star Wars* franchise chose the sentence, "Only a Sith deals in absolutes." Absolutes generally do not reflect a mature, moral, developing understanding of the world, so you should try to avoid them whenever possible.

To make sure you avoid statements such as these, you can do a quick search of your essay for the words "none", "no one", "everyone", "every", "all", "always", "never", "most", and pretty much any other superlatives (words ending in "est" such as "best" and "hardest").

5. Explaining too much or too little.

The committee members reading your Personal Essay understand more about the veterinary profession and veterinary education than you do. However, they likely didn't attend your school, and even if they did, they didn't attend it this year.

That means you **don't** need to explain:

- What certain medications do
- What certain surgeries are for
- How surgical instruments are used
- What common veterinary abbreviations stand for
- The process of becoming a veterinarian

But you **do** need to explain:

- The acronym for your school club or organization
- The purpose of your school event with a cute but unclear name
- The full name of a particular course at your school
- Any acronyms or abbreviations that are unique to your school or town

In short, you don't want to waste words explaining something the committee members already know, but you don't want to leave them confused as to what you're talking about.

6. Making excuses.

Your essay is not the place to explain why you got an F in a class, or why you had to withdraw during your sophomore semester, or why you don't have as many veterinary hours as some other applicants. Your essay is the place to make yourself sound like a **strong** applicant, not talk about the **weaknesses** of your application.

You *can* address a weakness if you mention it in passing in a way that informs your answer to one of the questions. It should not sound like you are making excuses for your failures.

Here are some examples:

No: “Once I retook the course with a professor who knew how to explain things in a way that made sense, I quickly mastered the content.”

Yes: “Retaking the course gave me the opportunity to master the material, and I know this tenacity will be a key to my success in my veterinary career.”

No: “Working two jobs meant that I was not able to collect the veterinary hours that some of my more affluent classmates could easily fit into their schedules.”

Yes: In every veterinary office where I have worked, resourcefulness has been an essential skill. Finding opportunities to volunteer and learn that fit my lean, self-supported budget has only helped me to build these skills.

No: “I had to withdraw because my school did not make me aware of the deadlines that were approaching, and I had no choice.”

Yes: “Because my school doesn’t have a pre-vet advisor, I have had to be organized and dedicated in pursuit of my educational goals.”

No: “Not everyone can afford to pursue fancy pre-veterinary volunteer programs all over the world.”

Yes: “I believe that veterinarians are an essential part of their communities, and I was grateful to be able to find opportunities to get involved close to home.”

It goes without saying that you **shouldn’t use these exact sentences**, but you get the idea. You don’t want to sound bitter or give off the impression that you don’t take ownership of your own successes and failures. You don’t have to ignore the weaknesses in your application, but you if you mention them, you should frame them in terms of what you learned and how you improved. Speaking of not using these exact sentences...

7. Plagiarizing.

This one doesn’t need a lot of reiteration. If you find a sample essay that seems to say *just exactly what you wanted to say*, and you feel like you’ve finally found the words, that’s great—but you can’t use it.

Put the sample essays down. Stop asking other people on the APVMA Facebook page to share their essay with you as a sample. Write your own work. All the time.

8. Restating other parts of your application.

The Personal Essay is the chance to include **new information** that isn't already in your application. If you've already described the details of a class or activity elsewhere, you don't need to include them here. If you already mentioned an award elsewhere, don't mention it here.

You don't want to waste your word count telling your reader something he or she already knows. This is your chance to share the qualitative aspects of your application: the things that can't be measured in grades, hours, or ranks. This is your chance to talk about your values, your beliefs, your interests, and your ambitions. It's your chance to show the kind of person you are, and the kind of person you are is never a grade or an award. (And even if it were, there are other places to include that information.)

9. Writing filler sentences.

You should view the character limit as a length guideline; while you can't write more than that, you shouldn't write much less.

That said, the prompts give you a **lot** of ground to cover, so you don't have room for lots of flowery introduction and conclusion sentences. Check out this grammatically correct, completely-on-topic opening:

"Veterinarians are an important part of every society around the world and throughout history, and they contribute in myriad ways. In considering all the ways they contribute to society, I realized that they may indeed be the cornerstone of progress in a culture."

Uh, okay. But what does that tell me about the applicant? *Exactly nothing*. And it also used **one quarter** of the characters you get to answer the question. **Skip the fluff.**

10. Playing the expert.

Repeat after me: *you are not a veterinarian*. You don't know what a veterinarian would or *should* do in a medical emergency. You don't know what you would do as a veterinarian in any given setting. You don't yet understand all the ins and outs of owning or running a veterinary practice. It's important that you honor that truth in your essay.

Someday, you might know more about being a veterinarian than your reader does, but *now is not that time*. You cannot impress your reader with your knowledge of veterinary medicine, so don't use your time trying. However, you are an expert in one thing: *you*. Luckily, that is exactly the one thing that your reader wants to know about. Don't spend your essay trying to impress with what you know; spend your essay trying to share who you are.

Now You're Ready to Brainstorm

Clear thirty or sixty minutes from your schedule. Turn off your computer, your TV, and your phone. Get a pen and paper (or use your computer if you prefer), put in some thought, and write down some answers to the following questions.

You don't have to have the correct wording right now, or say things in the right way. Just get something down on paper that matches your real feelings and experiences. Even writing a couple words is great. Bullet points can make it easy to get your mind flowing.

1. What are my future vet career goals?
 - a. Do I want to practice, research, or teach?
 - b. What kind of animals do I want to work with?
 - c. Pets? Conservation? Wildlife? Food animals? What comes to mind?
 - d. Where would be my dream to end up? Writing a book? Saving animals in the rainforest? Opening a free clinic? Discovering a new vaccine?
2. Why do I want those goals in my career?
 - a. Am I more motivated by my talents or my aptitudes?
 - b. What motivates me?
 - c. Who motivates me?
 - d. What do I believe is the measure of success?
 - e. What's the best thing a vet can do?
 - f. What have I done so far that helped me choose these goals?
 - g. What have been my favorite classes? Why?
 - h. What has been my favorite work with animals? Why?
3. How do vets contribute to society?
 - a. What roles do animals play in society?
 - b. How can vets create progress or improvement?
 - c. How can vets alleviate pain or problems?
 - d. What changes are coming in the next decade that vets can help with?
 - e. How can vets make positive change in society and environment?
4. What do I want to contribute as a vet?
 - a. What kind of animals do I want to help?
 - b. What kind of people do I want to help?
 - c. What kind of difference do I want to make?
 - d. Why is it important to me?
5. What attributes are essential to the success of a vet?
 - a. What am I good at that helps me be a vet?
 - b. In what areas could I improve that would help me?
 - c. Who are my professional role models?
 - d. What traits do I admire in my professional role models?

6. What are my strongest attributes?
 - a. What do people say I'm good at?
 - b. What do I find easy and enjoy?
 - c. What am I proud of?
 - d. What's important for me to be good at?
7. What are some examples of times I showed these attributes?
 - a. What are some examples from work?
 - b. From school?
 - c. From my personal life and relationships?
 - d. From childhood?

You won't use everything you wrote above, but this is a good starting place.

Take a look over your brainstorming session. Are there any themes that stand out? Any great ideas? Any concepts that you didn't realize mattered to you until now? Is there anything that sounds unique to you? Is there anything there that truly tells your story and sums up who you are?

You want to look for any themes or ideas that recur throughout the brainstorming session; that might help to guide your ideas and help your essay paint a picture of who you are. Review the list above now, and try to clarify and write down **the top three things that you want the admissions committee to understand about you after reading your responses.**

You don't get a lot of words, so you want to stay on one message and make sure that all your answers are cohesive. You cannot possibly include everything you think or might want to say in your essay, so focus on making the points that are more important to you and that help tell the story of who you are as a candidate. This brings us to the most important concept of your Personal Essay: it should tell a story

Your Story

Although you are answering three short prompts, the responses should make sense together. Think about what you identified as the three most important things you want the admissions committee to know about you from your essay. All your responses should inform at least one of these three things.

Remember: it's important to answer the prompts, but your real *goal* in answering the prompts is to show the admissions committee something about who you are as a person and a candidate.

The story you tell in your essay, ultimately, should match with the rest of your application. If all your volunteer work and vet experience is with dogs, but your entire essay is about elephants, you'll need to explain how those two connect. If all your coursework and research is about reptiles, but your essay emphasizes that you want to work with horses, you should explain. It's okay if your experiences and goals don't match perfectly, as long as you can connect them.

For example, maybe you've been studying horses because learning about horses is a good way to prepare for a career with elephants, which is your goal. Maybe your volunteer hours are with dogs because that activity is supervised by a very experienced vet at your university, but in your summer internship at a zoo you fell in love with zoo medicine.

You don't want to leave the reader wondering if your goals make sense and if you're really informed about your educational plans. Think about the three things you most want to convey in your essay: do they match the rest of your application? If so, your only goal is to convey them clearly in a way that also answers the prompts. If not, you may need to reshape your application to make everything "match" and tell a cohesive story. Whether this means rearranging your resume, reshaping your essay, looking for a new recommendation letter, or some other combination of little changes, you will need to find a way to shape the application so that it's clear to the admission committee exactly who you are and what you bring to their potential incoming class.

Making an Outline

With all the information from your brainstorming session, and an understanding of the story you want to tell, it's time to make an outline.

For each of the prompts, you should select the main points you want to make. Since the responses are very short, you can limit your outline to bullet points. You should focus on five or fewer points to include in each prompt.

Choosing the points you want to convey is more important than beautiful or poetic writing in this case. You have a short window in which to tell your story, so you want it to be concise, accurate, and interesting.

Now that you know what you want to include, the actual writing is the easy part. This doesn't have to be the most beautiful thing you've ever written, but it should be grammatically correct and free of errors. It should also have the right tone.

What Tone to Use

Some of us naturally write in a more formal or informal tone, and it's okay to sound like yourself. Your essay doesn't have to sound just like everyone else's--in fact, it shouldn't!

Here are some general rules of thumb to follow in making sure that your tone doesn't go too far either way.

- **Don't say "you"**. Don't address the reader as "you". There's no need to address the reader in any way.
- **...But it's okay to say "I"**. Many of your college classes may have required that you avoid the first person in formal writing, never saying "I" or "me" in a paper. This isn't an academic essay; it's a personal essay that is asking questions about you and your beliefs. It's perfectly fine to write in the first person; it would be kind of weird if you didn't.
- **Don't try to write "fancy"**. There's no need to use words like "aforementioned" or use introductions such as, "Given the above, it is therefore commensurate that such results would ensue." If you wouldn't say it, don't write it. Long, fancy words don't make you a better writer, and they certainly don't make you sound more like yourself.
- **...But don't use text-speak**. While you don't have to be fancy, you should be somewhat formal. This is a personal statement, not a text. You may think it goes without saying that LOLs and smiley faces don't belong in your personal statement, and it's a relief if you do. But if you aren't sure if something belongs in your statement, then it doesn't.
- **You can use contractions**. Very formal writing avoids contractions like "can't" and "don't", but in the interest of saving space, you can use them in your personal statement if you'd like.
- **...But what about things that are right but sound wrong?** This area is a bit more tricky. Consider the sentence, "Zoo medicine is what I've chosen to devote my life to." You would be more likely to say that than, "Zoo medicine is that to which I've chosen to devote my life," but the second option is grammatically correct. (The first, in case you're wondering, has a preposition at the end of the sentence.) In these cases, should you be formal but correct, or should you try to sound like yourself? My advice is to avoid making the choice by shuffling the order of your sentence whenever possible. "I've chosen to devote my life to zoo medicine" is both correct and normal-sounding, and it has the added benefits of being more clear and more direct than your initial draft.
- **Don't give advice**. Your readers are not looking for advice, so don't tell them what they should or should not do. Remember who you're talking to.
- **...But don't apologize**. At the same time, you don't have to apologize for not being an expert in veterinary medicine or not knowing exactly what you want to do with your life. The word "sorry" shouldn't be anywhere in your essay.

Write, Then Cut

Now you're ready to write! I suggest that you write first, not worrying about perfection but instead trying to convey all the main points of your outline in a way that answers the prompt. Your first step should be including everything you want to include in a way that answers the question and gives the reader some insight into your personality.

Then, you can worry about the length! Editing generally takes longer than writing. Start by shortening your introduction or conclusion--anything that doesn't get right into answering the question and showing who you are.

Next, you can look for phrases that don't add to your main point or that can be replaced with one or two more descriptive words. "The place I worked for many years" can become "my workplace", or "the medications that we always stored in the cabinet" could just be "medications". If something doesn't contribute to one of your main bullet points, then cut it out.

The harder part of editing is choosing if one of your main points needs to be cut. It's likely that it does. Choose the one that says the least about you, is the least unique, or has the least relevance to the rest of your application, and start deleting.

Your final answers should be very close to the character limit permitted.

Check for Grammar, Spelling, and Punctuation

You aren't going to school to be a writer. That said, correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling are essential in your Personal Essay. Why?

1. **Grammar, punctuation, and spelling show attentiveness and care.** For the purposes of vet school, this is the most important reason to care about your quality of writing. Correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling show that you have put time and thought into your application. They show that this is important to you. They show that you have learned a set of rules and know how to follow them. If you can imagine why those things would be important to a vet school admission committee, then you can take the time to make sure your essay is grammatically correct.
2. **Correct grammar makes reading easy.** The purpose of grammar and punctuation is to make life easy for the reader, which is something you definitely want to do in an application.
3. **Correct grammar makes your message clear.** Grammar, punctuation, and spelling are tools for ensuring that your message is conveyed clearly and correctly, which is an asset to you in this process.
4. **Correct grammar is concise.** Good writing saves space and words, which you'll find important with such a strict character limit.
5. **Correct grammar makes you sound smarter.** Whether it should or not, it does. And who doesn't want to sound smart in their application?

For these reasons, you should ensure that your grammar, punctuation, and spelling are correct. Microsoft Word or Google Docs spell-check is a good first start, but that red, squiggly line doesn't know everything.

Please take at least one of the following three steps to ensure that your grammar, punctuation, and spelling are correct.

1. **Read it out loud.** Reading something out loud (to yourself if necessary, but preferably to someone else) can help you discover typos, grammatical mistakes, repetitive word use, phrases that are unclear, or anything that doesn't sound like you intended. This is a **great** first step to writing a solid Personal Essay.
2. **Ask someone to proofread for you.** Asking a friend or family member to read over your essay can be a great way to catch typos or grammatical mistakes.
3. **Read it backwards.** Read the last sentence. Then read the sentence before that. Continue until you get back to the beginning. This method will not help you with continuity or the sound of your writing, but it can be **incredibly** helpful for finding typos or misspellings.

That's It!

Congrats, you're done with this section of the VMCAS. If you find that your application is lacking in research hours, veterinary hours, or hands-on experience, or you otherwise want to have an amazing experience abroad working with animals, we encourage you to check out [Loop Abroad](#) for two-week pre-veterinary experiences around the world (3 credits and 80 vet hours each) or a 14-week semester abroad (300+ veterinary hours, 20 credits, designed specifically for pre-veterinary students). Good luck on your vet school admissions journey!