

## Gabriel Bosslet

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I'm a fellowship director who just finished reviewing over 400 applications for 8 fellowship spots.

The following is a [#thread](#) on writing a personal statements. (Spoiler alert: I find 99% of them to be TERRIBLE.)

[#meded](#)

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1/

The following are MY preferences and proclivities. Some will ring true for other PDs, some may not. And Turi McNamee wrote very eloquently about this in [@AnnalsofIM](#) in 2012. [pdfs.semanticscholar.org/94f4/4d6b3da42...](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/94f4/4d6b3da42...)

2/

I'm going to

tag [@davidschulman](#) , [@jennifer\\_jwm](#) , [@KristinBurkart3](#) , [@DrMCMiles](#) , [@GenevaTatemMD](#), who are PD colleagues in [#pccm](#),

and [@sanjayvdesai](#) , [@TKapetanos](#) , [@MitchGoldmanMD](#), [@abbyCCim](#), [@jenchoi\\_iua](#) and any others who are PDs. I'd love to hear from them on this topic.

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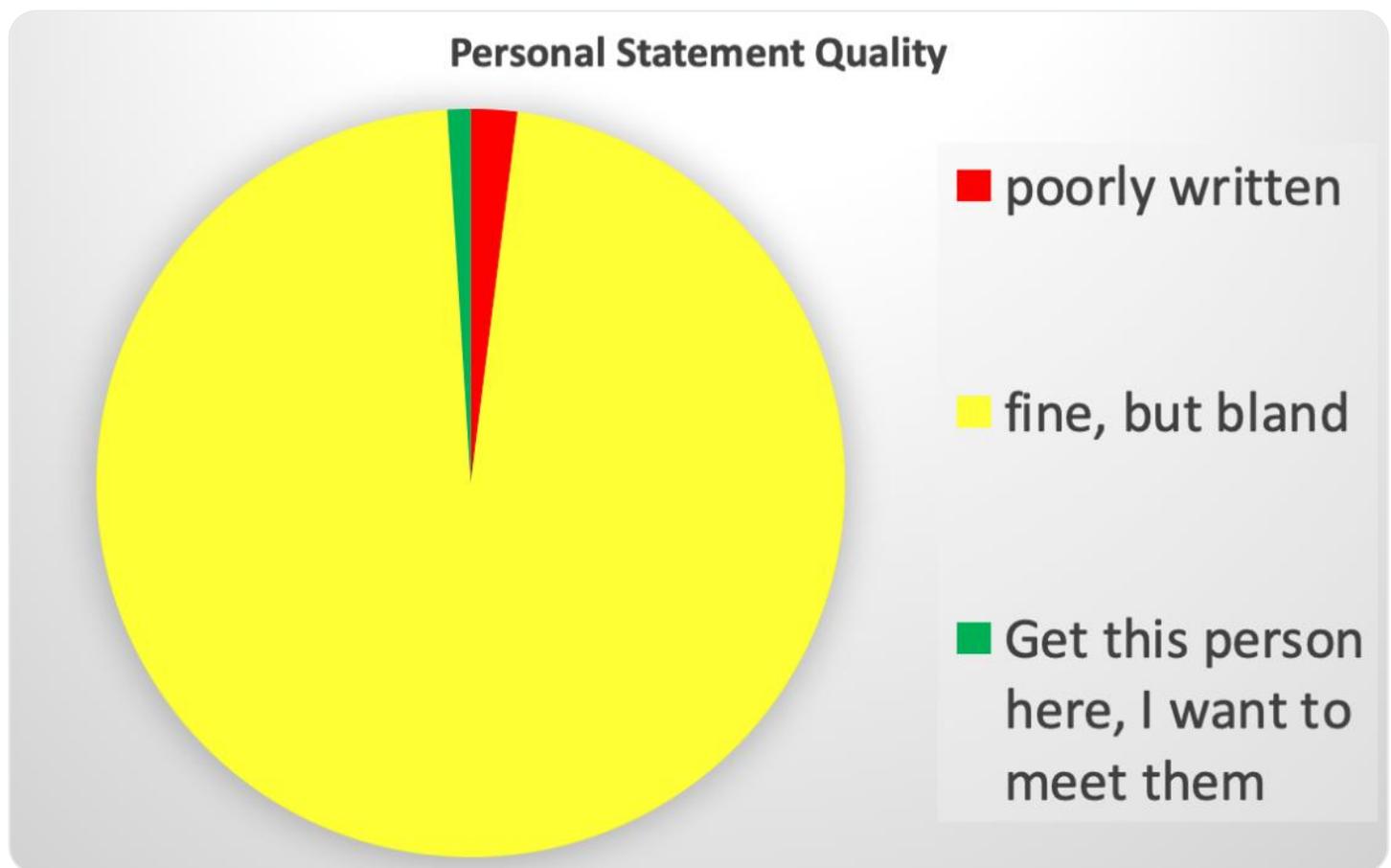
I'm going to speak honestly here. And also reveal that I have committed all of the atrocities about which I am going to write. I read my fellowship personal statement last

week and I wanted to fire myself. But people only learn these things if PDs share them.

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For me there are 3 phenotypes of personal statements: those that hurt the applicant; those that are milquetoast and do nothing for the application; and those that, on their own, tip an applicant to getting an interview. This pie graph shows the distribution.

5/



First, the PS can certainly hurt you. One that is poorly written, with misspellings and poor grammar and run-on sentences belies a lack of attention to detail that will raise eyebrows. So point 1: have it proofread by multiple people. But this is the lowest bar to cross.

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Most PSs follow one of several recipes. These recipes are like prison gruel for PDs- bland but they transmit the calories. These recipes won't hurt you, but they won't get you an interview. But they bore the hell out of us poor PDs as we slog through them.

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Recipe 1 starts with an inspiring quote (usually from Osler or Hippocrates) and then talks about some stuff and then it ends with some allusion to the quote. 20% of applications look like this. This is overused.

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Recipe 2 is a hero story. This is doubly true for [#pccm](#) apps. Severe ARDS, 4 pressors, prone, paralyzed person who somehow survives and returns to give a hug several days later on their way to the fair. This is critical care. It's also what about 25% of applicants write.

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Recipe 3 is the "why I like your specialty" PS. It's fine. But just know that all the other applicants also like it because they like solving mysteries or holding patient's hands or helping others. This tells me nothing about you as a human. Just know that.

10/

Recipe 4 is the "I was X type of person, then went to Africa on a mission trip, and I learned how lucky I am and I want to share my fortune with others". I call this one the college entrance essay. Less common in subspecialty applications, but common

enough.

11/



Recipe 5 is the “I want to do pulmonary medicine because I had childhood asthma” statement. This is getting closer to sharing new personal information, but it is usually so superficial as to be useless. And it is common.

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Recipe 6 is a recitation of the CV. A. Complete. Recitation. Of. What. I. Just. Read. So I got to read it twice.

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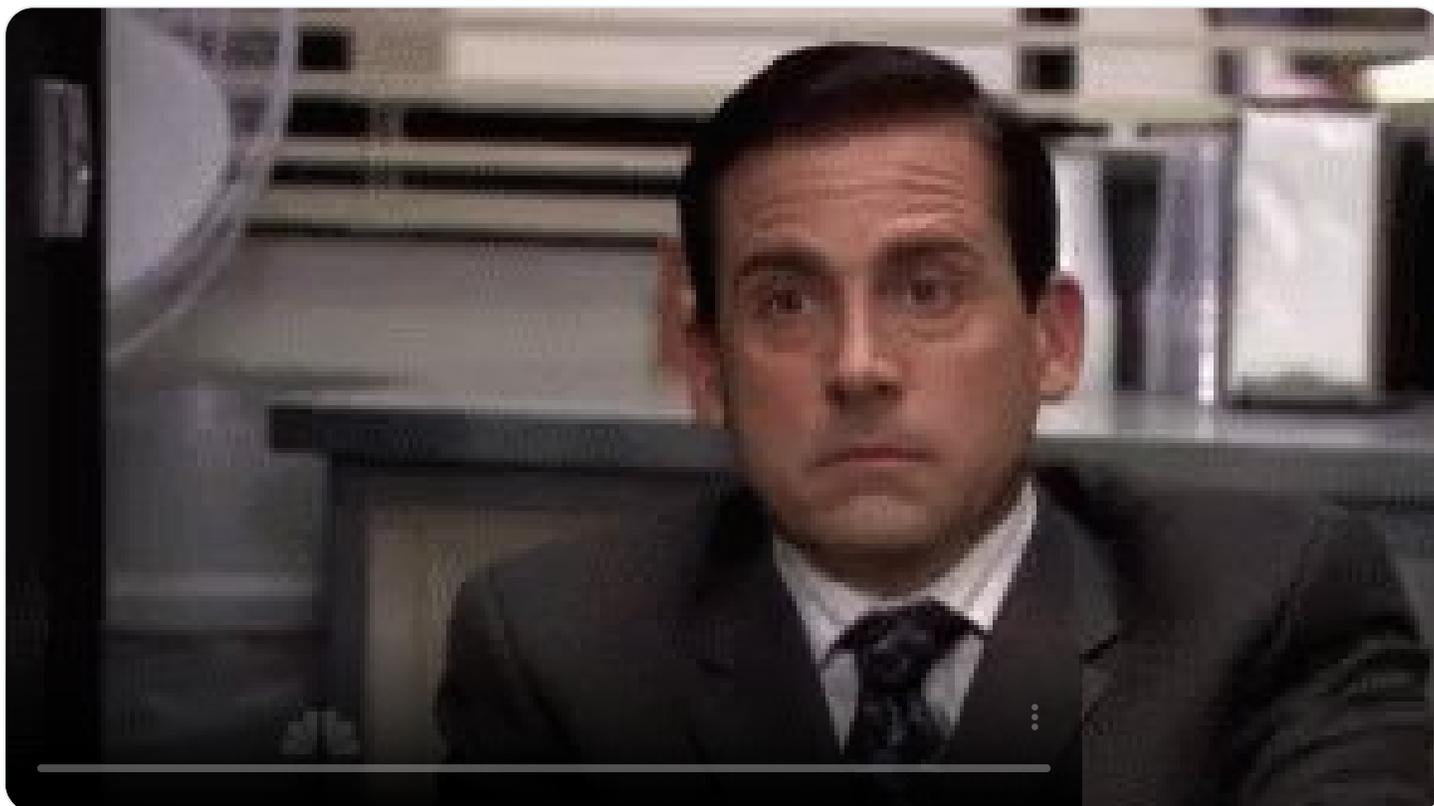


The above recipes are safe. I consider them worthy of a C. You accomplished the task and didn't get hurt in the process. Good on ya. But none of those PSs will unlock the door to an interview.

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I've spent a lot of tweets here outlining what I consider to be the typical phenotypes of boring PSs. The following are the characteristics of a PS that would make me sit up and read with interest and bring a candidate to interview just because I would like to meet them.

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For me a good PS is unique, authentic, and conveys something about you as a person that is compelling and demonstrative of grit and resilience. Or it simply does a great job of sharing a vulnerability.

16/

Probably the most important tip I can give: Humans like to read narrative stories. A good PS has a narrative quality with a coherent beginning, middle, and end. There is conflict and resolution. It says something about you.

17/

Read this thread from [@gradydoctor](#) about how she handled an issue with a resident. It has a beginning, middle, and end. I learned a ton about her as a teacher and as a person. It has engaging, granular dialogue.

[Unroll available on Thread Reader](#)



**Kimberly Manning, MD**  
[@gradydoctor](#)



1/

"Can I run something by you?"

It was Saturday. I was already gone. She was still on the ward. I didn't respond to that text. Instead, I called her directly.

Me: "Hey."

Her: "I'm so sorry to bother you, Dr. Manning."

Me: "Never be sorry."

\*silence\*

Me: "I'm all ears."

♥ 11K 8:44 AM - Aug 3, 2019



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18/

A well-written narrative is hard. Writing a good PS over a couple of hours is a fool's errand. Want to write a good one? Start it far in advance and revisit it every so often. You'll struggle and hate it at the beginning, but it will blossom.

19/

**\*\*Side note: Read [#BirdByBird](#) by [@ANNELAMOTT](#) for a terrific book on the writing process that has compelling prose and will make you smile. It's like a book-long personal statement that I have read multiple times\*\***

20/

Good PSs can be built around a vulnerability. Fail a board exam? Lean into it and describe your emotional response and what you did to improve. Take a year off of training to care for an ill grandmother? A narrative about how this led to who you are today can be gold.

21/

**\*Tip: I actually open the PS FIRST for candidates with obvious vulnerabilities. If it is not addressed in the PS, I consider it a lost opportunity.**

22/

Often learners tell me they have no mind-blowing experiences about which to write. I

didn't either. But even somewhat rote experiences, upon reflection, can be written about in a compelling way.

23/

I once read a PS about how a candidate built a lawnmowing business as an early teenager and it just grabbed me. The entire essay was built on the lessons he learned and how it molded him and made him gritty. It was awesome.

24/

One candidate described the process of baking a cake in a narrative fashion that was compelling and weaved in experiences of loss and victories and I felt like I knew who he was before even meeting him.

25/

Boring experiences can be written in a compelling way. I would read David Sedaris or David Rakoff write about watching a blade of grass grow if he wrote a book about it. Read these types of authors!

26/

I've outlined my idiosyncratic preferences about PSs here. Some PDs may **VEHEMENTLY DISAGREE** with some of my thoughts. But I think many of these points will ring true for most.

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Take home points:

1. Use one of the recipes if you want to write a safe, boring PS.
2. Compelling PSs are narrative stories that provide insights to you as a person that is unavailable otherwise.
3. Want to write well? Read good writers. I put three in the tweets above.

FIN/