



# Genre analysis of personal statements: Analysis of moves in application essays to medical and dental schools

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## Abstract

Despite the important role the personal statement plays in the graduate school application processes, little research has been done on its functional features and little instruction has been given about it in academic writing courses. The author conducted a multi-level discourse analysis on a corpus of 30 medical/dental school application letters, using both a hand-tagged move analysis and a computerized analysis of lexical features of texts. Five recurrent moves were identified, namely, explaining the reason to pursue the proposed study, establishing credentials related to the fields of medicine/dentistry, discussing relevant life experience, stating future career goals, and describing personality.

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## 1. Introduction

The personal statement, or the graduate school application letter, as an academic promotional genre (Bhatia, 1993), serves as one of the most important documents in the graduate school admission process. In the preparation of application materials, the personal statement poses a challenge to most applicants because of their unfamiliarity with the conventions of the genre, its discourse community, and its audience expectations. Research on academic writing has examined a variety of genres such as journal articles,

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abstracts, dissertations, and conference proposals (Badger, 2003; Berkenkotter, 2000; Brett, 1994; Hyland, 2001, 2003; Kanoksilapatham, 2005; Martín, 2002; Pinto dos Santos, 2002; Rowley-Jolivet, 2002; Samraj, 2002, 2005; Smith, 1997). An important genre that has received little attention from researchers, however, is the personal statement for graduate programs. Little is known about this occluded genre in the academy (Swales, 1996) and college writing instructors have no theoretical or practical guidance to assist students to produce good personal statements, a high-stakes genre for the graduate admission process. Graff and Hoberek (1999) attributed the applicants' lack of knowledge not to the deficiencies in the applicants but to "a lack of interest in socializing hopeful members of the academic family into its particular customs, beliefs, and behaviors" (p. 242). Genre study helps to bridge the gap in preparing future practitioners because it connects the recognition of regularities in discourse types with a broader social and cultural understanding of language in use, thus unpacking the complex cultural, institutional and disciplinary factors at play in the production of specific kinds of writing (Freedman & Medway, 1994). This study was conducted using the framework of genre analysis to explore move structures, underlying patterns, text-audience relations, and communicative purposes of the personal statement as a genre.

### 1.1. Literature review

As a defining treatise in genre theory, Carolyn Miller's (1984) essay, "Genre as Social Action," described genre as a recurrent social action taking place in recurrent rhetorical situations in particular discourse communities. Swales (1990) further defined genre as particular forms of discourse with shared "structure, style, content, and intended audience," which are used by a specific discourse community to achieve certain communicative purposes through "socio-rhetorical" activities of writing (pp. 8–10). In his latest book on research genres, Swales (2004) described "constellations of genres" in the forms of hierarchies, chains, sets, and networks, stressing the need to see genres as "*networks of variably distributed strategic resources*" (stress original, pp. 13–31). Hyland (2004) discusses the importance of genre approaches to teaching L2 writing by emphasizing the role of language in written communication. Other genre studies stress socio-cultural and disciplinary contexts, textual regularities, the interpretive process of reading, intertextual linkage through implicit or explicit reference to other texts and background knowledge, the social roles of readers and writers, and the dynamics and instability of genre (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993; Bhatia, 1993; Freedman & Medway, 1994; Miller, 1994; Paré & Smart, 1994) discussed the pedagogical implication of genre studies in composition classrooms, focusing on its role as a heuristic tool for invention, its high relevance to reader expectations, and its nature as social processes of responding to recurrent contextual situations. The analysis of context and audience plays an important role in genre studies. Paltridge discussed the two concepts of context and audience in depth, distinguishing the "context of culture" from "the context of situation" (Paltridge, 2001, pp. 45–62). Swales and Feak (1994) considered genre as a product of many considerations, such as audience, purpose, organization, and presentation, with audience as the most important factor in their list.

The notion of move (Swales, 1990), defined as a functional unit in a text used for some identifiable purpose, is often used to identify the textual regularities in certain genres of writing and to "describe the functions which particular portions of the text

realizes in the relationship to the overall task” (Connor, Davis, & De Rycker, 1995, p. 463). Contributing to the fulfillment of the overall communicative purpose of the genre, moves can vary in length and size from several paragraphs to one sentence, but normally contain at least one proposition (Connor & Mauranen, 1999, p. 51). Move analysis is a helpful tool in genre studies since moves are semantic and functional units of texts, which can be identified because of their communicative purposes and linguistic boundaries.

### 1.2. Unique features of personal statements as a genre

Many move analyses of promotional genres have been done for genres such as job application letters, negotiation letters, and grant proposals (Bhatia, 1993; Connor & Mauranen, 1999; Connor & Upton, 2004; Henry & Roseberry, 2001). Compared with genres with more rigid structures such as job application letters and research abstracts for journal articles, the personal statement differs in its lack of prescriptive guidelines, its allowance for creativity and individuality, its space for narratives and stories, and its goal both to inform and to persuade. Moreover, as Hyland (2000) pointed out, different disciplines value different kinds of arguments and set different writing tasks. The personal statement, as one of the primary written products used to win one’s entry into most graduate programs in the US, reflects such disciplinary differences in its structure and communicative purposes. For instance, Brown’s (2004) rhetorical study of psychology personal statements highlighted the need for the applicant to provide evidence of disciplinary appropriation and socialization as well as to present oneself as an apprentice scientist rather than an outsider. Moreover, audience expectations for personal statements as a genre are often “more shaped by local cultural values and national academic traditions than is the case with more technical writing” (Swales & Feak, 1994, p. 229).

Therefore, the move structure of the personal statement for professional programs such as law and medicine may differ slightly from that of the personal statement for philosophy, which stresses academic and intellectual preparedness over relevant professional and practical experiences. One unique feature about personal statements for medical/dental school is that applicants come with a bachelor or master’s degree from fields unrelated to medicine/dentistry. They are required to both justify their motivation to shift from their previous areas of study to medicine/dentistry and to prove their preparedness for medical/dental schools. Given the limit of 5300 characters for personal statements in the American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS) application, such a constraint on rhetorical space requires the use of well thought out, concise, clear, persuasive, and interesting essays to “encapsulate the entire [relevant] experience into words [to] present [one’s] goals, motivations, sincerity, experience, and background, [and to] accurately express [one’s] unique, interesting, and likable personality” (Kaufman, Burnham, & Dowhan, 2003, p. 1).

### 1.3. Research questions

This text-based, exploratory study serves mainly to examine the genre features of personal statements written by applicants to medical/dental schools in the US through the construction and analysis of two small personal statement corpora. More specifically, this study strives to answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the moves of successful personal statements used for application to medical/dental schools?
2. How do unedited unsuccessful personal statements differ from edited and successful personal statements?

## 2. Description of the study

### 2.1. *Discourse community*

The discourse community that uses the genre of personal statements comprises medical/dental school admission committees, faculty members, and medical/dental school applicants with diverse academic and professional backgrounds. No matter whether they are native speakers or non-native speakers, the applicants are involved in composing a completely new genre to appeal to an unfamiliar audience, namely, medical/dental school admission committees or privileged professors. Applicants suffer from their unfamiliarity with the conventions of the genre, readers' expectations, and the need to promote themselves as perfect candidates for target programs. In other words, in this rhetorical situation, the writers are very different from, if not inferior to, their interpretive/evaluative counterparts in terms of academic and professional backgrounds, power, attitudes, and knowledge. Such imbalance in power and expertise creates great tension for the applicants, who have to write to conform to the conventions of the genre and to meet the expectations of their evaluators.

### 2.2. *Communicative purposes*

As a promotional genre, the personal statement serves to capture readers' attention, to establish the writer's competence, to appeal to readers' needs and expectations, and to demonstrate the fit between the writer and the field of medicine/dentistry. The communicative purpose of composing the genre is to gain admission to and/or financial support from target programs. According to existing publications on the personal statement (Asher, 2000; Curry, 1991; Mumby, 1997; Stewart, 1996), to gain admission, the applicants have to establish their academic and professional qualifications; demonstrate their abilities through work experiences; discuss their interests and motivation in studying in the target field; explain why the target program matches well with their interests and goals and what contributions they can make to the field; and explain their future study and career plan.

The following are questions frequently asked in personal statement prompts and guidelines that the author gathered from over 100 American graduate programs:

1. Why do you choose to study in this program? Why here and now?
2. What is unique and exceptional about you?
3. Why are you qualified? What kind of relevant experience do you have?
4. What is your future study and career plan?

Two professors in charge of admission processes at two medical schools in the mid-west were contacted and interviewed through phone calls and email correspondences to obtain insiders' perspectives on conventions of the genre. Some of the qualities the admission

committees hope to see in personal statements, according to the professors interviewed, are evidence of commitment to medicine/dentistry, i.e., intellectual interests in and academic and research experiences related to medicine/dentistry; intellectual capacity to succeed in medical/dental schools, for instance, academic successes and contribution to research projects; involvement in community services, clinical or health care related experiences; and personal qualities such as maturity, dedication, commitment, empathy, compassion, and responsibility. One thing stressed by both professors is the necessity to go beyond a basic desire to help people. In other words, applicants have to demonstrate their commitment to the career of physician/dentist through the description and discussion of specific, concrete first-hand experiences rather than just repeating the clichés that they enjoy helping people. They warn against the use of a laundry list of accomplishments and recommend the selective use of specific illustrative stories to make a strong argument about the applicant's possession of qualities highly desired by medical/dental schools.

The understanding specified above was obtained only through the author's research and, in most cases, is not readily available to potential applicants. Most students are likely to be at a loss when writing the admission essay due to their position as outsiders to the discourse community they hope to join. Therefore, research on the move structure of the personal statement should help shed light on its characteristics and better prepare applicants to write this high-stakes document.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. *The corpus: data collection*

Thirty online personal statements for medical/dental schools were collected from public websites, among which 20 were posted as successful and/or edited samples<sup>1</sup> and 10 were posted as unedited samples.<sup>2</sup> All the personal statements in the corpora were either submitted to commercial websites providing professional editing services or posted by the target programs or successful applicants<sup>3</sup> to offer potential candidates some insight into the features of successful application letters. Commercial websites such as [EssayEdge.com](http://EssayEdge.com) or [Accepted.com](http://Accepted.com) offer paid editing services. Some websites post both unedited and critiqued personal statements to demonstrate to browsers the quality of services of the websites, while others include both unedited and edited versions for advertising purposes. However, the majority of the personal statements posted on those editing service websites were unedited, perhaps both to promote sales and to avoid plagiarism. As [Table 1](#) shows, the total

<sup>1</sup> These personal statements were either edited and posted by commercial websites as well-written samples or posted by medical/dental programs or applicants as successful essays that won their writers admission into the target programs. Using percentages of moves separately for edited and successful personal statements, my examination of the corpus did not find any significant difference between the moves and structures used in those two types of personal statements or the background (credentials and life experiences) between applicants of edited and successful personal statements except the relatively higher use of Move 3, *Relevant experiences*, in the successful personal statements (see [Table 3](#) for distribution of moves in the personal statements). For convenience's sake, I categorize this corpus as one single corpus and refer to it as successful personal statements.

<sup>2</sup> The unedited samples were posted in the original state as submitted by applicants interested in using the paid editing services. No professional editors or writers changed the personal statements to make them better.

<sup>3</sup> Please contact the author for more information if you are interested in the sources. Detailed lists of websites used in this study were omitted due to space constraints.

Table 1  
Total words and average length of personal statements

Number/corpus	Successful	Unedited
PS	20	10
Total words	13,802	6613
Range	501–1083	502–792
Average length	692	661

words for the two corpora were 13,802 and 6613. The average length of successful personal statements (692 words) is slightly longer than that of unedited ones (661 words).

In the two corpora, nine essays were edited and posted as excellent samples by paid services, six were posted as successful application letters by the target programs and five posted by successful applicants, and 10 were posted unedited and claimed as resulting in rejection by paid services (see Table 2). Moreover, all the essays were written to apply for doctoral programs in medicine (24) or dentistry (6). The unedited personal statements were written by applicants themselves without any assistance from people more familiar with the genre. In contrast, most of the successful personal statements either received paid services from professionals or were known to have gained the writers entry to their target programs. According to the statements, the applicants came from very diverse backgrounds: most of them were native speakers with undergraduate degrees from anthropology, Spanish, biology, sociology, mathematics, and chemistry. Only one applicant explicitly stated that he had a master's degree. It was also worth noticing that most personal statements (9 out of 10) in the unedited corpus did not mention the applicants' academic background whereas 13 out of 20 personal statements in the successful corpus mentioned that explicitly.

Table 2  
Number and percentage of personal statements that use different moves and steps

Move/corpus	Successful (20 PS)			Unedited (10 PS)		
	Total <sup>a</sup>	PS <sup>b</sup>	Percentage	Total	PS	Percentage
<b>M1: Explaining reason</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>
S1: Interest	18	12	60	5	1	10
S2: Understanding	16	9	45	9	5	50
S3: Personal/family	7	7	35	6	5	50
<b>M2: Credentials</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>80</b>
S1: Academic	15	11	55	7	5	50
S2: Research	12	10	50	6	4	40
S3: Professional	35	19	95	7	8	80
<b>M3: Relevant experience</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>M4: Stating goal</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>M5: Personality</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>151</b>			<b>67</b>		

<sup>a</sup> Total: total number of moves/steps used in the corpus.

<sup>b</sup> PS: total number of personal statements that use the move/step under discussion.

This project aimed to first examine the moves of successful personal statements and then compare their rhetorical and linguistic features with the unedited ones. As the identification of typical moves for medical/dental schools is based on the analysis of successful personal statements, the corpus size of successful personal statements was twice that of their unedited counterparts. Two small corpora were constructed to analyze the moves and rhetorical strategies employed in these two types of essays. The 20 successful personal statements were examined to identify moves regularly used in the genre of admission essays for medical/dental schools. The 10 unedited essays were analyzed to identify the differences between successful and unedited essays and to explore how such differences might contribute to the final success or failure in admission processes.

### 3.2. Development of moves

The definition and categorization of moves in the personal statement drew on many sources. First, to understand the rhetorical objectives of the genre, the author looked through existing publications on personal statements in general (Asher, 2000; Curry, 1991; Mumby, 1997; Stewart, 1996) and over 100 websites in different tiers of graduate programs in the US, all of which offer instructions on the writing of personal statements. Even though different programs have different length and structure requirements, the basic communicative purpose and rhetorical objective are the same: to gain admission into target programs by demonstrating one's academic background, professional qualifications, and personal strengths.

Second, as Connor and Mauranen (1999) pointed out, the identification of moves in a text depends on both the rhetorical purpose of the texts and the division of the text into meaningful units on the basis of linguistic clues, which include “discourse markers (connectors and other metatextual signals), marked themes, tense and modality changes, and introduction of new lexical references” (p. 52). In this study, explicit text divisions in the personal statement, namely, the use of section boundaries, paragraph divisions, and subheadings, served as textual marks for move recognition. As moves served rhetorical purposes, the introduction of new themes (**Overall**, I feel I am the type of person/**Since that time**, I've acquired a more realistic view of medicine) and lexical references (**I proceeded to volunteer** in the Preceptorship Program/**My interest in medicine** had started out with an enjoyment of science/**I started investigating** dentistry by talking to my dentist) usually implied the start of a new move. In addition, the identification and counting of T units<sup>4</sup> helped to break down the text into moves because this examination revealed T units' rhetorical and communicative purpose, which in turn helped to locate places for change of topics and themes. Finally, the analysis of lexical devices also helped to analyze the moves. One important tool was the identification of keywords, which, closely related to the move categories, helped to break down the personal statement into distinct moves. However, instead of operating by themselves, such use of keywords should always be followed by

<sup>4</sup> A T-unit consists of a main clause and any subordinate clause or non-clausal structure attached to or embedded in it. A sentence may contain several T-units if it is a complex sentence with several main clauses. One such example is: “They were messengers from someplace else where the decisions were made and the odds calculated; they seemed in control of events that I wanted very badly to have control of myself.” The semicolon here signifies the existence of two complete sentences.

the analysis of the rhetorical intentions of the T-units containing the keywords before determining whether different moves exist and what kind of moves they are.

One instance was taken from an unedited personal statement to illustrate the process of dividing texts into moves. Altogether, four different moves were identified in the text. The use of explicit text division tools, in this case, paragraph division, suggested the existence of different moves. Linguistic means such as marked themes (*so far*), tense/modal change (see below), and new lexical references served as sources for move recognition. The use of keywords such as *medicine*, *courses*, *research*, *clinics*, *hospital*, *volunteer*, and *maturity* suggested the introduction of new lexical references and the start of different topics and themes in the text. To determine whether the change of topics and themes signifies the start of new moves, the identification of keywords should be followed by careful reading and analysis of the rhetorical intention of the T-units containing those keywords.

When I was fifteen I was stricken with a cryptic illness. After several years of suffering and many doctors visits I was diagnosed with Systemic Lupus Erythramatosis. The Lupus diagnosis would change my life in almost every aspect and was the beginning of the path that has led me towards medicine. //

I've spent the past year going to school, working, and volunteering and I've learned through various ways that *medicine* is not only a path that I'm capable of, but one that I want more than anything in the world. // As a full time student I *have* successfully taken many challenging *courses*. I *have* been *working* part time in a psychobiology lab learning how to perform *research* first hand. // It *was* here that I discovered that although I love research, in many ways it is too disconnected from the people it is helping to be my ideal *career*. // I *spend* a great deal of time in the *clinics* and the *hospital* at Boston University Medical Center and there I have observed the patient–doctor interaction and realized that I want to be involved with the people I'm helping. // My *volunteer* work, which *involved* bring healthcare access to the homeless was also important in that it *showed* me just how much as a doctor you truly can make a difference in someone's life.

Flowerdew (1998) stressed that the trend of corpus-based analyses is not only to study the lexico-grammatical patterns of texts but also to examine the corpus at functional, rhetorical, pragmatic, and textlinguistic levels. Following the method used by Henry and Roseberry (2001) and Upton and Connor (2001), a multi-level analysis of a textual corpus was conducted using both a hand-tagged moves-analysis and a computerized analysis of lexical features of texts. Two types of concordance software were used in the study: Concapp was used to compile concordances for keywords related to the moves and Concordance to find out collocations, or words located to the left and right of certain words. The use of a mixed method approach, namely, both quantitative and qualitative, aimed to examine the corpus from different perspectives and to reach a richer understanding of the genre at both the functional and rhetorical levels.

## 4. Results and findings

### 4.1. Identification and analysis of moves

The corpus of successful personal statements was analyzed through an iterative process until distinct genre moves were identified and clear definitions for each were devel-

oped. The corpus was reanalyzed and recoded five months later using the final set of moves, resulting in an 89.3% intracoder reliability rate. The entire corpus was then independently coded by a research assistant, with a resulting 82.7% intercoder reliability rate.

Five moves were identified in the corpus, namely, *Explaining the reason to pursue the proposed study*, *Establishing credentials related to medicine/dentistry*, *Discussing relevant life experiences*, *Stating career goals*, and *Describing personality*. The order of appearance of the moves varied in different personal statements, but most of them were commonly presented in the two corpora.

**Move 1: Explaining the reason to pursue the proposed study** shares similar functions with Swales' (1990) move for article introductions, namely, Establishing a territory, and Connor and Mauranen's (1999) move for territory for grant proposals. Move 1 consists of three steps: Step 1: Explaining academic or intellectual interest in medicine/dentistry describes the way in which the applicant became interested in those fields through related academic and intellectual pursuits; **Step 2: Stating one's understanding of medicine/dentistry** links the applicant's understanding of the profession to his/her experiences, personality, and abilities, and explains how the applicant's understanding of the field helped him/her to make the decision to study medicine/dentistry. **Step 3: Describing the motivation to become a doctor/dentist due to personal or family experiences** discusses how the applicant started to consider pursuing the study and what family events and personal experiences contributed to such a decision. In most personal statements, at least one of these three steps was used. Examples of each of these steps are provided below.

#### **Move 1, Step 1: Explaining academic or intellectual interest in medicine/dentistry**

Throughout high school I have been intrigued by the sciences, but it was not until I read about late-breaking discoveries and research in the field of genetics that my interests in science intensified. In my sophomore year at UBC, I first began to seriously consider dentistry as a career.

#### **Move 1, Step 2: Stating understanding of medicine/dentistry**

From these opportunities and others I've gleaned that the physician's job involves more than the application of intelligence. It is a career which demands tenacity, faith, objectivity and perhaps more importantly, compassion. It is a profession offering physical as well as mental challenges, direct human-to-human contact when it frequently counts more, a measure of business autonomy and relative prestige, I can never see the job as becoming boring.

#### **Move 1, Step 3: Describing motivation to become a doctor/dentist due to personal or family experiences**

These crises included the teenage pregnancy of my sister in 1981, and subsequent shared parenting responsibility for my nephew, and my mother's seven-year battle against cancer. It was through this exposure to cancer that I gained some limited medical experience and first began thinking about becoming a physician.

**Move 2: Establishing credentials related to the fields of medicine/dentistry** is the most important move in the personal statement. It describes the applicant's qualifications and experiences related to and valued by the fields of medicine and dentistry. Move 2 in this corpus is realized by three variations: **Step 1: Listing academic achievements**; **Step 2: Reviewing research experiences related to medicine/dentistry**; and **Step 3: Discussing professional experiences in clinical settings**.

**Move 2, Step 1: Listing academic achievements** demonstrates the applicants' academic preparedness for the proposed study.

After five years of working, I decided to pursue more advanced research training in the latest techniques of microbiology. Since the fall of 1998, I have been taking several Ph.D.-level courses at New York University. My courses at NYU are Biochemistry . . . and Physiology Basis of Behavior.

**Move 2, Step 2: Reviewing research experiences related to medicine**, according to the two interviewed medical school professors, is considered essential for the qualified applicant because of the research-oriented and performance-based nature of doctoral study in medicine/dentistry.

My interest in medicine remained constant through health-related part-time jobs and a focus on medical sociology in my graduate research. Issues such as drug abuse and attitudes toward death were among my concerns. During my two years of graduate school, I co-authored three publications, six research monographs, and five papers for presentation at professional meetings.

**Move 2, Step 3: Discussing professional experiences (volunteer and exposure) in clinical settings** goes beyond the cliché story of "motivation" to show the applicants' involvement and experiences in the profession.

I've spent time as an EMT on ambulances, in emergency rooms and in an autopsy room, seeing for myself some of the decisions being made by doctors and the other many health professionals. . . I have been employed for the previous year as a Student lab assistant in a university medical school observing and interacting with the medical students and staff.

**Move 3: Discussing relevant life experiences** deals with the applicant's community involvement, extracurricular activities, and work experience to offer insight into his/her abilities and skills related to, but not directly connected with or obtained from the field of medicine/dentistry. Professional experiences, for instance, volunteer work and clinical shadowing, are highly desirable for applicants. However, not every applicant may have the opportunity to get such professional involvement. To make up for this lack of clinic-related experiences, many applicants used their work and volunteer experiences in non-clinical community settings and their people skills to stress their willingness to help others, which is considered as an important hallmark of medicine/dentistry. Most essays contained at least one move of such experiences.

Since I already volunteered in the community, I broadened the experience by working with different groups. My work with the elderly, the handicapped and with chil-

dren caused me to evaluate the different needs of those groups and if I could provide those needs.

**Move 4: Stating future career goals.** This move describes the applicant's intended future career after graduation, which stresses the goal-orientedness and strong motivation of the applicant.

I look forward to one day opening my own practice and becoming a well-respected member of both the community of dentists and the community of patients.

**Move 5: Describing personality** This move explicitly describes or demonstrates the applicant's unique experience and personality to distinguish him/herself from the large pool of applicants (see Fig. 1).

I have learned the importance of teamwork and contribution from all team members. These experiences have also given me a great deal of confidence in my abilities and myself. . . My inherent strong work ethic has resulted in much positive feedback from employers and colleagues.

Among the five moves identified above, Moves 1, 2, 3, and 4 are the quasi-obligatory moves whereas Move 5 seems a more elective one. Moves 1, 2, 3, and 4 of the successful corpus and Moves 1, 2, and 4 of the unedited corpus all occur on average once per statement, with Move 3 of the unedited corpus occurring on average only slightly less frequently at 0.9 times per personal statement. This pattern suggests the importance of the use of these four moves to meet the genre convention, communicative purpose, and rhetorical expectations. Table 2 confirms this finding, for in the successful corpus, Moves 2 and 3 appeared in all the essays at least once and Moves 1 and 4 were used at least once in 18 and 19 essays (respectively, 90% and 95%). In the unedited corpus, Move 1 appeared in all the essays at least once, and Moves 2, 3, and 4 were used, respectively, 80%, 70%, and 90%. In contrast, the average number of Move 5 is well

Move	Definition
Move 1: Reason for studying medicine	The writer explains reasons for pursuing the proposed study
Step 1: Academic/intellectual interests	The writer gives reason for academic or intellectual interests in medicine/dentistry
Step 2: Understanding of the field	The writer describes his/her understanding of medicine/dentistry
Step 3: Personal/family experiences	The writer explains the motivation to become a doctor/dentist due to personal or family experiences
Move 2: Credentials	The writer establishes credentials related to the fields of medicine/dentistry
Step 1: Academic achievements	The writer lists academic achievements related to medicine/dentistry
Step 2: Research experiences	The writer reviews relevant research experiences
Step 3: Professional experiences	The writer discusses professional experiences (volunteer and exposure) in clinical settings
Move 3: Relevant life experiences	The writer discusses life experiences valued by the field of medicine/dentistry, for instance, community volunteering
Move 4: Future career goals	The writer states future career goals
Move 5: Personality	The writer describes personality either through explicit statement or through the use of examples

Fig. 1. Moves of personal statements and their definitions.

below 1 per essay and the move appeared at least once in only 40% of the essays in both corpora (see Table 2), which suggests its function is more elective. The sequence of the five moves in successful personal statements is quite variable and to some extent determined by both the applicants' life and professional experiences and their way of organizing their personal statements.

One interesting thing about the move structure is that none of the personal statements in the two corpora addressed the issue of the applicants' "match" with the target program. Explicit explanation of the match between the applicant and the target program is highly stressed in publications about personal statements for graduate programs in general. However, this part is missing in the entire corpora used for this study. The absence is in part due to the similarity of all medical/dental programs, for they are not as different as other graduate programs in terms of teaching and research focuses and strengths. Medical schools adopt similar curriculum and course offering because they have to prepare students for the Medical Licensing Examination (MLE). Similarly, dental schools use standard curriculum to prepare students for the National Board Dental Examination (NBDE).

## 4.2. Move analysis of the corpora

### 4.2.1. Move frequency and proportion

The average number of each of the moves is listed in Table 3. Although the average length of successful and unedited personal statements is about the same, the average number of moves used in each essay is quite different (8.2 vs. 6.1, or 4:3). This ratio indicates the absence of relevant moves and the overuse of irrelevant details in the unedited personal statements. ~~The average number of moves demonstrates that, compared with the unedited personal statements, successful personal statements devote~~

Table 3  
Total and average number of moves in the corpora

Move/corpus	Successful (20 PS)			Unedited (10 PS)		
	Total	Average	Percentage <sup>b</sup>	Total	Average	Percentage
<b>M1<sup>a</sup>: Reason</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>30</b>
S1: Interest	18	0.9	11	5	0.5	8
S2: Understanding	16	0.8	10	9	0.9	14
S3: Personal/family	7	0.35	4	6	0.6	9
<b>M2: Credentials</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>30</b>
S1: Academic	15	0.75	9	7	0.7	11
S2: Research	12	0.6	7	6	0.6	9
S3: Professional	35	1.75	21	7	0.7	11
<b>M3: Life experience</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>1.55</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>M4: Stating goal</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>1.15</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>M5: Personality</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0.4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Total number of moves</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>8.2</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>6.1</b>	<b>100</b>

<sup>a</sup> M: move; S: step.

<sup>b</sup> Percentage: the percentage of the move/step under discussion when compared with the total number of moves in the corpus under discussion.

more effort to and better develop the first four moves but pay less attention to Move 5, *Describing personalities*. The two moves or steps that appear on average more than once in the successful personal statements are Move 2, Step 3, *Stating professional qualifications* (1.75 times per essay, or 21% of the total number of moves) and Move 3, *Stating relevant experiences* (1.55 times per essay, or 19%). In comparison, most moves appear less than once in unedited personal statements except Move 4, *Stating goals* (1.1 times per essay). Judging from the result of the average number of moves per essay, successful personal statements pay almost twice as much attention to Move 1, Step 1, *Stating intellectual interest* (0.9 times per essay and 11%, compared to 0.5 times and 8% for unedited essays). Successful essays also devote more discussion to the applicants' credentials (3.1 times per essay and 38%, compared to 2 times and 30% for unedited essays), particularly professional qualifications (more than twice as many), and relevant experiences (1.55 times per essay and 19%, compared to 0.9 times and 14% for the unedited essays).

Tables 4 and 5 show, respectively, the average number of moves and steps per essay in both corpora. The ratios of Move 2, *Establishing credentials* and Move 3, *Describing relevant life experiences* in the successful and unedited corpora were, respectively, 3:2 and 5:3, which means the successful essays devoted more attention and discussion to these two moves than the unedited ones. Meanwhile, the ratio for Move 5, *Describing personality* is 1:2, which suggests the unedited essays tended to rely more on explicit description of personality whereas the successful ones relied more on facts to suggest the applicants' character.

As Table 5 shows, the ratios of Move 1, Step 1, *Describing academic/intellectual interest* and Move 2, Step 3, *Discussing professional experiences* of the successful and unedited corpora are both 2:1 whereas that of Move 1, Step 3, *Discussing personal/family experiences* is 1:2. This implies that successful essays considered academic and intellectual interests in medicine/dentistry as the reason for pursuing the study. In contrast, unedited essays stressed family events and personal experiences with diseases as the motivation. Table 5 also shows that successful essays had far more discussion about applicants' professional experiences in clinical settings than the unedited ones (1.75 steps vs. 0.7 steps per essay, or a ratio of 5:2).

Table 4  
Number and ratio of moves in the two corpora

Corpus/moves	Move 1 Reason T (A) <sup>a</sup>	Move 2 Credential T (A)	Move 3 Life experience T (A)	Move 4 Goal T (A)	Move 5 Personality T (A)	Total
Successful (20) <sup>b</sup>	41 (2)	62 (3.1)	31 (1.5)	23 (1.1)	8(0.4)	165(8.5)
Unedited (10) <sup>c</sup>	20 (2)	20 (2)	9 (0.9)	11(1.1)	7(0.7)	67 (6.7)
S/U ratio <sup>d</sup>	1:1	3:2	5:3	1:1	1:2	4:3

<sup>a</sup> T: total number of moves in the corpus; A: average number of moves per personal statement.

<sup>b</sup> The successful corpus contains 20 personal statements.

<sup>c</sup> The unedited corpus contains 10 personal statements.

<sup>d</sup> S/U ratio: the ratio of the average number of moves per personal statement in the successful and unedited corpus.

Table 5  
Ratio of steps for Moves 1 and 2

Corpus/ steps	M1S1 <sup>a</sup> Interest T(A) <sup>b</sup>	M1S2 Understand T (A)	M1S3 Personal T (A)	M2S1 Academic T (A)	M2S2 Research T (A)	M2S3 Professional T (A)
Successful (20) <sup>c</sup>	18 (0.9)	16 (0.8)	7 (0.35)	15 (0.75)	12 (0.6)	35 (1.75)
Unedited (10) <sup>d</sup>	5 (0.5)	9 (0.9)	6 (0.6)	7 (0.7)	6 (0.6)	7 (0.7)
S/U ratio <sup>e</sup>	2:1	1:1	1:2	1:1	1:1	5:2

<sup>a</sup> M: move; S: step.

<sup>b</sup> T: total number of steps in the corpus; A: average number of steps per PS.

<sup>c</sup> The successful corpus contains 20 personal statements.

<sup>d</sup> The unedited corpus contains 10 personal statements.

<sup>e</sup> S/U ratio: the ratio of the average number of moves per PS in the successful and unedited corpus.

#### 4.2.2. T-units for moves

To further explore the differences between the two corpora, T units were counted and calculated for each move. All the T units in the successful corpus were relevant to the five moves identified above, whereas only 75% of T units in the unedited corpus were relevant to the moves (see Table 6). Since the average length of the personal statement was about the same in the two corpora, this finding suggests the overuse of irrelevant detail and the lack of attention paid to the rhetorical moves valued by the medical/dental schools in the unedited essays. One example of an irrelevant detail describes the applicant's study-abroad experience without making any explicit connection with the ultimate rhetorical purpose of the essay.

Table 6  
Number of T-units for each move

T unit/corpus	Successful (20 PS)			Unedited (10 PS)		
	Total	Average	Percentage	Total	Average	Percentage
<b>M1<sup>a</sup>: Explaining reason</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>8.5</b>	<b>30</b>
S1: Interest	53	2.7	10	4	0.4	1.5
S2: Understanding	58	2.9	10.5	23	2.3	8
S3: Personal/family	42	2.1	7.5	58	5.8	20.5
<b>M2: Credentials</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>11.2</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>8.4</b>	<b>25</b>
S1: Academic	61	3	11	17	1.7	6
S2: Research	43	2.2	8	17	1.7	6
S3: Professional	121	6.1	22	36	3.6	13
<b>M3: Relevant experience</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>M4: Stating goal</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>8.5</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>M5: Personality</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Total of relevant T units</b>	<b>545</b>	<b>27.3</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>21.2</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Total number of T units</b>	<b>545</b>	<b>27.3</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>28.3</b>	<b>100</b>

<sup>a</sup> M: move; S: step; T: total number of T-units in the corpus; A: average number of moves per personal statement.

During my junior year in England, I did some serious introspection. My British friends, though in a friendly manner, challenged my most basic assumptions, and by doing so, challenged me. . . Against the background of England's racial and economic crises, and of the Falklands war, my friends and I sharpened our perceptions of equality and civil liberty. In comparing my views with theirs, I strove to distinguish opinions that were mere products of my American upbringing from fundamental convictions about individuals, society, morality and justice. My year in England taught me more than any course on foreign cultures or sociology ever could. I left with a deeper faith in my own beliefs.

A few lines below, the applicant stated, "I further tested my resolve this past year as I completed *pre-medical courses* and conducted a *research project in pediatric psychiatry*." He/she devoted long paragraphs to irrelevant details but only one short sentence to what could have been strong instances of Move 2, *Establishing credentials*. Because the study-abroad paragraph took the space of 143 words out of the total of 684 words (over 1/5 of the length) of this essay, such use of irrelevant details marked a waste of space that could have been used for sound rhetorical argument and elaboration for Move 2.

Table 6 also confirmed the finding that Move 2, *Establishing credentials*, was the most developed move in the successful corpus (41% of the total number of T units), within which professional qualifications (Step 3) stood as the most developed step (22%). This finding showed that the successful personal statements met the expectations of the admission committees. As discussed by the two faculty interviewees for this study, the things that admission committees value most in medical/dental school applicants are evidence of commitment to medicine/dentistry demonstrated by intellectual interest in and academic/research qualifications related to medicine/dentistry, evidence of commitment to medicine/dentistry, involvement in community services, and clinical-related experiences. Although all five moves existed in most personal statements, the qualities closely connected to and valued by the discipline of medicine/dentistry<sup>5</sup> were much more developed in the successful corpus than the unedited one. In terms of the average number of T-units for each move per essay in the successful and unedited corpora, that of Move 1, Step 1 (*Academic interest*) is, respectively, 2.7 and 0.4, that of Move 2, Step 1 (*Academic qualifications*) is 3 and 1.7, and that of Move 2, Step 3 (*Professional experiences*) is 6.1 and 3.6 (see Table 6). The decision to focus and elaborate on the moves/steps highly valued by the target audience well served the communicative purpose of the genre, namely, to help the applicant to gain entry to the discourse community of medicine/dentistry.

In Move 1, *Stating reasons for pursuing the study*, the three steps took about a similar number of T units to address those three issues in the successful corpus. In contrast, as Table 6 shows, the unedited corpus relied more on motivation, or personal experiences (20.5%), and much less on interest, or related academic/intellectual pursuit (1.5%), as the reason to study medicine/dentistry. In other words, the unedited corpus stressed personal experiences rather than academic/intellectual development as the reason for studying medicine. However, as graduate programs expect applicants to demonstrate some basic understanding about the discipline and academic research (Brown, 2004; Graff &

<sup>5</sup> See the findings of my interviews of medical professors above.

Hoberek, 1999), unedited essays may fail to demonstrate the applicants' understanding of the fields due to reliance on personal experience rather than knowledge obtained from academic and practical work.

One interesting finding for the T-unit analysis is that for Move 5, *Describing personality*, although the ratio of the average number of times this move is used per essay is 1:2 between successful and unedited personal statements, the ratio of the average number of T-units for Move 5 per essay is 3:1.4, or over 2:1 (see Table 6). This finding demonstrates the importance of the use of T-unit analysis to further examine and supplement the findings of move analysis: although successful personal statements use fewer moves in describing the applicants' personality (Move 5), the average number of T-units used in those moves is much higher than their unedited counterparts, which implies the use of more development and elaboration in Move 5, *Describing personality*, in the successful personal statements.

#### 4.2.3. Use of stories

Labov and Waletzky (1967) define a story as one of the methods to recreate a past experience by matching a sequence of verbal paragraphs or passages to a sequence of events which previously occurred. Because the genre of personal statements discusses one's past experiences to establish oneself as a well-qualified applicant for the target program, stories serve as an important persuasive tool in the genre. Not all stories are directly relevant to the ultimate goal of the genre, namely, to promote oneself as a competent applicant. Some stories are told to serve certain purposes, which may eventually help promote the applicant as a competent candidate. Other stories fail to explicitly state or elaborate on the connection between those stories and the promotion of the applicant and remain irrelevant to the rhetorical purpose of the genre. For instance, the personal statement in Appendix A tells stories about the applicant's frequent change of school in her early years of education and the difficulties she experienced in applying to colleges, which could have been made highly relevant to her decision of applying for medical schools through adequate explanation and good argument. However, little connection is made between the deficiencies in her academic background and her reason for applying to medical schools. What started as a disadvantageous background was never resolved because she did not explain how she managed to overcome those obstacles and succeed in her academic career. As a result, her stories remain negative and become irrelevant, even damaging to the rhetorical purpose of her essay.

After the corpora were analyzed and segmented into different moves, stories in all personal statements were categorized into relevant and irrelevant ones depending on whether they became part of any of the five moves, and the T units for all stories were counted in both corpora. Stories were employed in 12 out of 20 successful personal statements (60%) and 9 out of 10 unedited personal statements (90%). As Table 7 shows, the average number of T units devoted to story telling per essay in the unedited corpus was over twice as many as that in the successful corpus, which demonstrated the unedited essays' over-reliance on story telling as a persuasive tool. Moreover, whereas successful essays employed stories highly relevant to the rhetorical purpose of the genre, only half of the stories in the unedited ones appeared directly relevant to the purpose of applying for medical/dental programs.

The unedited personal statements (with 24 stories, or 2.4 stories per essay) relied much more heavily on story telling than the successful corpus (with 16 stories, or

Table 7  
Number of T-units used in stories

Corpus/T units	Successful (20) <sup>a</sup> Total (A) <sup>c</sup>	Successful (20) Relevant (A)	Unedited (10) <sup>b</sup> Total (A)	Unedited (10) Relevant (A)
Stories	16	16	24	14
T-units	111 (5.6)	111 (5.6)	125 (12.5)	74 (7.4)

<sup>a</sup> The successful corpus contains 20 personal statements.

<sup>b</sup> The unedited corpus contains 10 personal statements.

<sup>c</sup> A: average number of T-units of stories per PS.

Table 8  
Number of stories in different moves

	Successful (20) <sup>a</sup>		Unedited (10) <sup>b</sup>	
	Total	Average	Total	Average
<b>M1: Reason</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0.25</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0.5</b>
S1: Interest	1	0.05	0	0
S3: Personal/family	4	0.2	5	0.5
<b>M2: Credentials</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0.4</b>
S3: Professional	6	0.3	4	0.4
<b>M3: Life experience</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0.5</b>
<b>M4: Stating goal</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>M5: Personality</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0.15</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Relevant stories</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>1.4</b>
<b>Stories in the corpus</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>2.4</b>

<sup>a</sup> The total number of personal statements for the successful corpus is 20.

<sup>b</sup> The total number of personal statements for the unedited corpus is 10.

0.8 stories per essay) (see Table 8). The 16 stories employed in the successful corpus were used in four moves, with an average of 0.05 per personal statement in Move 1, Step 1 (*Academic interest*), 0.2 in Move 1, Step 3 (*Personallfamily experiences*), 0.3 in Move 2, Step 3 (*Professional experiences*), 0.1 in Move 3 (*Relevant life experiences*), and 0.15 in Move 5 (*Personality*). In contrast, only 14 out of the 24 stories were used in the moves, with an average of 0.5 move per personal statement in Move 1, Step 3 (*Personallfamily experiences*), 0.4 in Move 2, Step 3 (*Professional experiences*), and 0.5 in Move 3 (*Relevant life experiences*). The other 10 stories in the unedited texts occurred in extraneous materials unrelated to the five moves identified in the successful personal statements. This finding again confirmed the over-reliance of unedited essays on Move 1, Step 3, *Personallfamily experiences* as the reason for studying medicine/dentistry instead of stressing the applicants' intellectual/academic interests in the fields. Moreover, story telling in the unedited corpus tended to overuse remotely related or unrelated stories to demonstrate one's motivation to study medicine/dentistry due to the applicant's or family member's illnesses or death, to stress one's strong will and persistence in adversities, or to explain things such as low GPAs, long period of absence from schools, and lack of relevant academic or professional background. Instead of quickly resolving the negative experiences to focus on what they learned

from such experiences and to explain why they were capable of undertaking the demanding task of pursuing medicine/dentistry, the unedited essays tended to dwell on and give overwhelming information about such negative experiences without making explicit connection between those experiences and their ultimate communicative purpose: to get admitted to medical/dental schools. As a result, such strategies both wasted the space of the personal statement and failed to present the applicant positively as someone who conquered personal adversities and overcame unusual obstacles to become a qualified candidate for the target program.

One example of an irrelevant story describes the applicant's father as a farmer without making connection with his/her application to medical schools or the father's influence on the applicant's personality. That story took the space of 224 words out of a total of 730 words (about 1/3 of the essay). Although the applicant later compared physicians to farmers in terms of their long working hours and hard work, the comparison was only remotely relevant to his rhetorical purpose and did not appear to help strengthen the presentation of him/herself as a competent candidate for the target program.

I heard the familiar sound of the back door closing gently. My father was returning from driving his dirty, green John Deere tractor in one of our fields. Although he begins his day at 5:00 a.m. every morning, he usually returns at around 7:00 p.m. I never really questioned his schedule when I was a child, but as I entered high school I wondered how my dad could work so hard every day of the week and still enjoy what he does. He works long hours, becomes filthy from dirt, oil, and mud, and worst of all, can watch all his hard work go to waste if one day of bad weather wipes out our crop... His dedication and pride mystified me throughout high school.

#### 4.2.4. *Factors contributing to the differences between the two corpora*

One question remaining to be addressed was the cause of the differences in the use of moves in the two corpora: Why did the unedited essays rely on irrelevant stories? Was it because of the applicants' lack of relevant skills and experiences, or was it because of their ineffective rhetorical strategies and unfamiliarity with the genre? As shown in Table 2, in the successful and unedited corpora, Move 2 was used, respectively, in 100% and 80% of the personal statements, whereas Move 3 was used, respectively, in 100% and 70% of the personal statements. This difference in the use of the two most important moves in the corpora implied that, compared with successful applicants, the applicants from the unedited corpus might have fewer profession-related credentials and relevant life experiences. However, such differences did not justify the over-reliance on stories (2.4 compared to 0.8 per essay in the successful corpus), the overuse of irrelevant stories (10 out of 24), or the lack of attention paid to Move 1, Step 1, *Academic/intellectual interests* in the unedited corpus (1.5% of T-units compared to 10% in the successful corpus, see Table 7).

As illustrated by the use of irrelevant details in the study-abroad essay, too little attention was paid to experiences related to medicine/dentistry. The most important information about the applicant's credentials, namely, pre-medical courses and research experiences, was buried in one short sentence. In addition, only minimal attention was given to the applicant's experiences working in medical settings:



*My summer at the Frontier Nursing Service in Kentucky's Appalachia confirmed my career choice. It brought me full circle, to life at its beginnings. Although I thoroughly enjoyed following FNS pediatricians, internists, ob-gyn's and surgeons, my adventures as a labor coach were by far the most exhilarating events of the summer.*

Instead of using this important clinical experience to illustrate and discuss his/her credentials, qualifications, and experiences, the applicant only mentioned and commented on the experience before moving on to other topics. In contrast, the applicant devoted two long paragraphs (242 out of a total of 684 words, or over 1/3 of the space) to discussing his/her interests in journalism and law and his/her study-abroad experiences without making explicit connection with the ultimate rhetorical purpose: to apply for medical/dental programs. Therefore, it is likely that with better genre knowledge and rhetorical decisions, this applicant could come up with a successful revision that highlights and focuses on his/her qualifications and experiences related to medicine/dentistry instead of dwelling on irrelevant ones.

Because of the lack of detailed background information about the applicants, it was hard to come to a solid conclusion as to whether all the other personal statements in the unedited corpora fell into the same category of ineffective use of rhetorical strategies in composing the admission essay. However, the personal statement analyzed above did reveal the existence of ineffective rhetorical choices. If enough attention had been paid to fully develop Moves 2 and 3, the applicant could have constructed a highly persuasive argument about him/herself as a competent candidate for the target program.

The analysis points to both ineffective rhetorical strategies and the relative lack of medicine/dentistry-related experiences as the factors contributing to the overuse of irrelevant details in the unedited corpus. It also suggests the importance of teaching genre conventions and rhetorical principles in helping graduate school applicants to compose strong personal statements.

#### 4.2.5. Word frequency

While the moves were manually identified and counted, the lexical features were analyzed through the use of concordance software, Concapp and Concordance. Concordance was used to run the frequency word counts on both corpora to compare the frequency word list for them. An interesting word is *and* (443/242, or 22.2 and 24.2 per essay on average in the successful and unedited corpora), which ranks third and fourth in the two corpora. The use of keyword concordance shows that *and* is used in binary phrases, most frequently with two nouns, but also with two verbs and sometimes two adjectives, which confirms Henry and Roseberry's (2001) finding in their study of application letters as a promotional genre. Focusing on the use of binary nouns in the two corpora, my analysis showed that many cases of the use of *and* serve as examples to demonstrate the applicant's qualifications, relevant experiences, and desire to pursue medicine or dentistry as a career. The use of binary nouns in the two corpora was somehow different, however, with more medicine/dentistry-related phrases used in the successful corpus (18 out of a total of 28, or 64%) and both a larger number of binary noun phrases and much lower percentage of medicine/dentistry-related binary noun phrases used in the unedited corpus (9 out of 43, or

21%).<sup>6</sup> The overuse of noun phrases unrelated to medicine/dentistry suggested the inclusion of more irrelevant information in the unedited corpus, which again, confirmed the finding about the lack of focus on medicine/dentistry-related issues in the unedited corpus.

## 5. Discussion



Applicants are faced with a dilemma when applying to medical/dental schools: they write personal statements to seek entry into the disciplinary community of medicine/dentistry. As outsiders to the community, they are expected to say something that is of interest and relevant to the field of medicine/dentistry and to demonstrate their previous involvement with and understanding of the field. However, such expectations are assumed rather than explicitly stated. Surrounded by such ambiguities, tensions, and misconceptions, applicants suffer from this “don’t ask, don’t tell” feature of the application process (Graff & Hoberek, 1999). In other words, the genre of personal statements becomes a mystified and occluded genre to the applicants: they have no adequate knowledge of the context, their audience, and the communicative purpose. Because occluded genres (Askehave & Swales, 2001; Swales, 1996), for instance, manuscript reviews (Chilton, 1999) and recommendation letters (Precht, 1998), are hidden from public record, hard to obtain, and understudied, little guidance exists on how to write these texts to meet their multiple obscure communicative purposes. The personal statement, as one occluded genre, may present extra barriers for writers when they have to cross cultural, disciplinary, and linguistic boundaries.



This study serves to bridge the gap discussed above by examining the contexts and the rhetorical/linguistic features of the genre of personal statements. It also contributes to the existing understanding of promotional genres by expanding the application of move analysis from job application letters to personal statements. Personal statements share something in common with other promotional genres such as job application letters, namely, the use of the move to promote the candidate (Henry & Roseberry, 2001). Job application letters use other moves<sup>7</sup> mainly to inform the readers of the applicant’s interest in and condition for applying for the position as well as the referees and materials supporting his or her application (Henry & Roseberry, 2001, p. 159). However, the function and development of the rhetorical move of self-promotion in personal statements are very different from that in job application letters. Although both genres of documents are submitted together with resumes in the application processes, they serve different communicative purposes and function differently as rhetorical documents. The promotion move in job application letters serves to highlight relevant experiences and skills and to obtain a job interview. As one of the first documents an employer will read in the job search processes, the application letter supplements the information in the resume and helps determine whether the employer will give the applicant an interview or simply throw the application materials into the trashcan. Another important feature of the genre is the short amount of time it usually

<sup>6</sup> Please contact the author for a complete list of the binary phrases.

<sup>7</sup> Opening, Referring to a Job Advertisement; Offering Candidature; Stating Reasons for Applying, Stating Availability, Stipulating Terms and Conditions of Employment, Naming Referees, Enclosing Documents, Polite Ending, and Signing off.

receives from its audience: employers usually scan a resume in 10–30 seconds, and in most cases they read the cover letter only when the resume does not give them enough information to offer or decline an interview. Even if cover letters get read, they only receive 10–20 seconds of review (Donlin; “Cover letters,” 23). In contrast, as one of the key components in the application package, the personal statement aims to persuade the admission committee to offer admission and/or financial support to the applicant by *demonstrating* the applicant’s academic, intellectual, and/or professional qualifications as well as his/her unique personality through *the use of narratives, evidence, and examples*. Unlike the job application letter, it works as a vital part of the application package rather than a supplementary one. Because most applicants have high GPAs, standard test scores, and good recommendations, they need to capture the reader’s attention and to distinguish themselves from the pool of applicants and establish their credentials through the *description* of relevant life experiences and unique personality instead of just listing them.

Job application letters employ five strategies in the move Promoting the Candidate to present selected information about the applicants’ qualifications and abilities relevant to the desired position (Henry & Roseberry, 2001). Rather than using examples to illustrate the applicant’s skills, these five strategies focus more on highlighting relevant skills and abilities and stating from which jobs or experiences such abilities are acquired. Therefore, this promotional move in job application letters tends to look more like those in the unedited personal statements rather than those in the successful ones because of its reliance on *claims* of abilities and qualifications rather than good use of narratives to support such claims.

Unlike job application letters, which use different moves both to inform the audience and to promote the job candidate, personal statements devote all the five moves to completing the overall rhetorical task of promoting the applicant as a competent candidate for the target program. The use of narratives of personal experiences to illustrate one’s academic, research, and professional qualifications replaces the listing of relevant skills and abilities in job application letters to promote the candidates as competent applicants. As the two interviewees of this study stressed, personal statements are evaluated as the *evidence* of the applicant’s commitment to and involvement in the field of medicine/dentistry. Therefore, *description and discussion* of first-hand experience in medicine/dentistry-related settings or human service settings are expected and valued by the admission committees rather than empty claims of abilities. Moreover, providing the opportunity for applicants to stress their strengths, interest in the fields, and individuality, the personal statement serves as the only place in the application where applicants can *personalize* their application package and present themselves as both unique individuals and competent candidates. In other words, job application letters are more informative whereas personal statements are more descriptive and persuasive as promoting genres.

In addition to the theoretical contributions to genre knowledge, this study has practical pedagogical implications for writing courses for native and non-native speakers. Genre-based analysis offers insights that can be applied in the teaching of ESL, EAP, and ESP courses. It serves as a useful tool for a holistic teaching methodology, which should be understood as a heuristic description rather than prescription (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990). Through the use of specialized, genre-specific corpora, this study examined how language is used in particular contexts for particular purposes or in

particular genres, thus contributing to the knowledge for both writing instruction and professional understanding. The rhetorical move structure delineated in this study helps to demystify the writing of personal statements and other related promotional genres and facilitate the creation of persuasive documents. The rhetorical structure revealed by move analysis can be presented in writing classrooms to enhance students' understanding of the genre of personal statements. The move structure can be used to explicitly teach the disciplinary contexts, audience expectations, and communicative purposes surrounding the graduate school application processes and to demystify the writing process. It can also serve as a heuristic tool in writing personal statements when applicants are asked to use the moves to guide their understanding and analysis of both the communicative purposes and audience expectations of the target program. The awareness of the convention of personal statements can empower potential applicants by helping them to think early and start preparing early in the process, thus greatly enhancing their chance of getting admitted to the target program. Finally, as a guideline, the move structure provides some systematic assistance to less experienced applicants to meet the expectations of the discourse community they seek to enter. In short, this study contributes to the understanding of genre knowledge by defining and describing the rhetorical and lexical features of personal statements as a genre.

## 6. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study examined and described the features of graduate application letters to medical/dental programs. Five functional moves were identified: *Explaining the reason to pursue the proposed study*, *Establishing credentials*, *Describing relevant life experience*, *Stating career goals*, and *Describing personality*. However, there are some limitations in the design of this study due to practical constraints. Because of the difficulty to get access to private documents such as the personal statement, the author could only use personal statements available on public websites. The first drawback is the limited size of the corpus, for the study of 30 personal statements can only lead to tentative conclusions instead of applicable generalizations. The second limitation is the lack of cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural comparison of such genre in this study due to limited sources. Future research should examine personal statements written in different disciplinary and cultural settings and make comparison to find out possible disciplinary and cultural influence on personal statement writing.

To conclude, this descriptive study seeks not to confirm or reject hypotheses but rather to generate hypotheses and stimulate further research for the study of the personal statement as a genre. Therefore, all the findings about personal statements for medical/dental schools should be tested by future research and compared with the move structure in personal statements for other graduate programs.

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**Appendix A. Move analysis of a sample unedited personal statement**

The original personal statement	Moves
<p>All of my life I have been a city girl, but I moved to Santa Rosa when I was about 13. Up until I was about 16, I lived there permanently. I used to switch back and forth from parent to parent all of the time. When I first started high school, I went to Piner High and, in my junior year, I went to Montgomery and, from there, to a continuation school. I am currently now back at Piner. I had to basically kick and scream to get back into my regular high school – as you can see there is some drama behind the scene.</p>	<p>Story about education, remotely relevant</p>
<p>Applying to college was not an easy thing for me. First, I had to make the choice of whether I wanted to go or not. After I went to SMYSP, I knew I wanted to be there – my big problem was that I did not think I was good enough. No one in my family even has a high school diploma. At first I was going to just settle for a junior college, but with the pushing of my pals from Stanford, I decided not to sell myself short.</p>	<p>Personal history – academic background, not directly relevant</p>
<p>I really had no confidence in myself. I did not feel so smart.</p>	<p>Move 5: describing personality</p>
<p>I kept telling myself that my chances for getting into college were slim because I went to a continuation school. So when I got back from my time at SMYSP, I put everything that I had into my education. For the rest of my summer I pretty much hit the books.</p>	<p>Move 3: academic qualifications Educational endeavor</p>
<p>When I first started to apply to colleges I just told the truth about who I was. I did not try to put on a courageous act. I just wanted them to see that I may be just as qualified as anyone else, but the difference between us is that I want it so badly. I really did not care where I got accepted; I just wanted to go to college and be someone. Just being there would be a chance to prove that I am worth taking a second look at.</p>	<p>Story about college application: not directly relevant</p>
<p>See, I am not a rich girl who has always gotten what I wanted, and because I want this so badly, I don't want anyone to take it from me. I worked hard to be who I am, and the great part about it is that I have ambition and I am a goal reacher</p>	<p>Move 5: describing personality</p>

*(continued on next page)*

## Appendix A (continued)

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I wish to one day become a pediatrician and care for the little ones who are in need. I don't plan on just being a doctor; I want to be a doctor for low-income families and I want to work in a clinic. I never really have gotten great medical attention and I plan on changing that for others. I am definitely not in it for the money; I just want to care for people and give them some type of hope.

Move 4: Career goal

Who knows – maybe I will end up working at the Stanford Children's Hospital!

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Prediction: irrelevant

Due to space constraint, no move analysis of a sample successful personal statement is included here. Please contact the author for more information.

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