

## **Helping Students Compose and Revise their Personal Essays**

by Joe Schall, Penn State University

Having conducted hundreds of one-on-one tutorials with students writing personal statements, many of whom will not achieve their target scholarship or program, I approach the process in a way that I hope will help the student see the writing of the personal statement as valuable in itself. In guiding the student through the process of self-reflection and revision, I find it valuable to frame my comments within three categories: affirmative tone, thoughtful selection of material, and anticipated audience response.

### **Managing Tone**

Students need to recognize that the personal statement is a public exercise in self-definition. Therefore, they must ask themselves questions about their personal motivations, scholarly aptitude, and suitability for graduate school. Honest, self-reflective answers to these questions promote a humanizing ethos.

I encourage students to define and discuss the personal portrayed by their writing, inviting them to supply adjectives to describe that persona. If they view the persona as bubbly and creative but I view it as naïve and annoying, I consider whether I'm being too jaded or whether the student is not objective enough.

If the writer's tone betrays a lack of confidence or comes off as hubristic, I encourage a straightforward affirmative voice. I remind students to be confident but not cocky, realistic but not pessimistic, idealistic but not Panglossian. In plain terms, I tell students that their goal is to be understood and to be liked.

### **Selecting Material**

Especially when students apply for national scholarships with extensive application questions, they need to select their material holistically, avoiding needless repetition and considering how various parts of the application reveal data and examples that need not be covered by narrative discussion.

I often invite students to compose the personal statement with an articulated theme or two in mind, which unifies the essay, concentrating on demonstrating that theme through their experience and research. The theme should be concrete and obvious and is often naturally revealed in a thesis statement.

Students need help interpreting question parameters, which often can be summed up in a word or two. For instance, interpreting the lengthy NSF application questions, one prompt is about personal motivation, one about demonstrated commitment, one about research goals, and one about research experience.

### **Anticipating Audience Response**

I encourage students to learn all they can about the nature of particular selection committees through both research and communication with scholarships directors and past scholarship recipients. Scholarship websites and application materials often reveal the kind of selectors involved, and such information can be used to shape material and decide on the level of technical details and explanation needed.

I try to give students realistic information about application review protocol and how much time, in practical terms, selectors can spend on each application. Articles written by NAFA<sup>1</sup> members and selectors Jane Curlin (on the Udall) and Doug Cutchins (on the James Madison Fellowship) are highly instructive here. I think it wise to offer to share these articles with students no matter the scholarship for which they're applying. For the personal statement, I urge students to write an essay that can be read and understood within minutes, and to review their entire application in real time, just as a selector would, with an eye for where a reader might be needlessly slowed down or become puzzled.

Some students need to be reminded of extreme audience turn-offs, such as an air of braggadocio, an outright demand for the scholarship, or a groveling or self-pitying plea for help.

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<sup>1</sup> National Association of Fellowships Advisors