

## The Quest of Composing the Personal Statement

University of Missouri  
Fellowships Office

*Writing a personal statement for a fellowship application is akin to taking on a Heroic Quest. Some steps are remarkably similar—beginning the journey in relative anonymity, receiving the call (to apply, say, for a Fulbright), receiving counsel and guidance from elders or supernatural resources (faculty mentors!), encountering various challenges (websites that lose data and servers that crash are dragons of our day), and so on until the final submission: slaying the monster and falling into a deep and profound sleep.*

*Although it isn't likely that a fellowship applicant will have to fend off the forces of darkness, the writing (and revising) might feel like a series of herculean tasks to be performed in the shadows of the Underworld. Conversely, receiving notification that one has been awarded the fellowship might seem like a divine reward—a kind of scholarly apotheosis.*

*In the end, while each applicant strives to achieve a personal grail—the fellowship—few will earn the title of Rhodes or Gates scholar. Yet simply taking up the cause signifies that the applicant is indeed a Hero, having accepted a daunting summons to action. Odysseus might have been killed by one of Penelope's suitors (okay, not likely). Frodo might have failed in his attempt to cast the Ring into the fires of Mordor (but Gandalf, Sam, Sméagol, and a cast of thousands helped to make that possible). Luke Skywalker might have been defeated in battle by Darth Vader (but we know he had to overcome his father—connecting him to another archetype). The heroism they displayed on their journeys would merit our attention regardless of the consequences; as mythic heroes, though, were they not destined to triumph?*

*Reality differs from myth, however, and while we might wish that the odds be ever in your favor, chances are that you will not be named a Truman or Churchill scholar. Yet those of you who undertake the rigorous tasks required to complete an application will have answered the call to adventure, marshaled resources for a journey of self-discovery and possible transformation, and enhanced a portfolio of accomplishments that you may exploit for other pursuits. The process itself thus becomes the object of the quest, with you, the applicant, narrating a personal tale. Ultimately, then, you who challenge the Fates by submitting a fellowship application demonstrate to us all that you stand tall before us, "strong in will/To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield."*

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For many applications, including some for fellowships and graduate school admissions, you will be asked to compose a personal statement or personal essay (the terms are generally interchangeable).

Several sources provide guidance in writing personal essays. For example, the Fellowships Office website (<http://fellowships.missouri.edu>) under Student Resources, has links to several other guides, including "Approaches to ... The Personal Statement (or Personal Essay)," by Dr. Robin Walker, who works in MU's Graduate School and has extensive experience with the writing of proposals and applications for a range of purposes (see <http://GRFPessayinsights.missouri.edu/>). A quick search on the Web will reveal numerous other resources.

While the length and specific purpose of the essay will vary according to the application, your essay will likely offer you an opportunity to portray yourself as you would have others see you (honestly and sincerely, not exaggerated or romanticized). Your résumé or

curriculum vitae (C.V.) will cite factual achievements and experience; your personal statement should allow your reader to peek beneath your skin, to discover the essential you. Your essay, therefore, should blend your past with your future, using present-day reflections on a moment or event important in your development as a means of revealing your character, your values, your intellectual curiosity, and, quite likely, your aspirations.

You may write about a strictly personal matter or about global concerns; you may write about academic issues or about service to a broader community. Regardless of your topic, perhaps the single-most important idea to remember is that the personal statement is *yours*, that it is *personal*—yet it should move your reader into an understanding of who you are within a broader context, whether scholarly or societal. You should show your reader who you are in a deeper, more profound manner than other, more mechanical elements of the application can accomplish. An effective essay will demonstrate your intellectual curiosity—that you can latch on to an event, home in on its significance in your development, and expand on that moment as a catalyst for your future endeavors.

### **Some Specific Bits of Advice**

1. Follow the application instructions carefully, making sure that you respond to the question (prompt), which may guide you in a focused manner or which may be quite open-ended.
2. Brainstorm (or engage in whatever kinds of pre-writing strategies you find most effective for yourself) without concerning yourself about structures or space limitations. Then, begin to shape an essay . . .
3. Demonstrate your understanding of the context—that you are writing (implicitly, more than likely) for a particular audience and with a specific purpose.
4. Be yourself—that is, don't describe an idealized image of someone you think your audience wants you to be; write honestly and sincerely.
5. Capture the attention of your audience immediately with drama, emotion, or action that engages the reader.
6. Sustain that engagement with a theme that paints a picture of who you are.
7. Illustrate through clear, grammatically correct prose that you have a strong command of the language—focus on active verbs and precise nouns, and avoid clichés as well as vague or platitudinous generalizations.
8. Revise, revise, revise, edit, proofread, and correct. Read your work aloud to yourself, often an effective but overlooked means of catching errors.
9. Seek assistance from a well-qualified and capable editor, and feel free to work with the Fellowships Office.

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May 2012