

## Getting Personal: What Students Should or Should Not Say about Themselves on Scholarship Applications

A. Scott Henderson

[Scott.Henderson@Furman.edu](mailto:Scott.Henderson@Furman.edu)

Five things to avoid:

1. Responses that resemble a talking family tree. Reviewers are interested in the applicant, not his/her great-great-great-grandfather who was Justice of the Peace in the Kansas Territory. Mentioning mothers, fathers, brothers, and/or sisters is OK if doing so provides greater insights about the applicant. (“Having been raised in a single parent household...”)
2. Not-so-thinly—or unapologetically trumpeted—reasons why the applicant deserves, more than any other living person, to get the prize, scholarship, fellowship, admission to law school, etc. (“So, as you can see, my whole life has prepared me to be a Rhodes scholar.”)
3. Boasting about particular accomplishments, especially relatively unimportant ones. (“Ever since I won the school spelling bee in third grade, I realized the importance of hard work!”)
4. Gratuitous or otherwise inexplicable revelations about personal attributes that aren’t connected with anything else the applicant has said. Such revelations are OK if they are relevant to the applicant’s identity and/or long-term goals. (“My abiding passion for civil rights stems from the fact that, as a gay male, I have been the victim of bigotry and discrimination.”)
5. Comparisons between the applicant and a famous person, living or dead. (“I was happy to see that my views are the same as John Dewey’s, inasmuch that “The best education is the best education for everyone.””)

Five things to target:

1. Sincerity and authenticity. The applicant should speak from his or her heart. Applicants should not say what they think reviewers want to hear. This includes encomia about the namesake of the award, honor, etc. if there be one. Talking about a personal flaw or defeat (with proper finessing) is OK.
2. A consistent tone. Applicants, particularly on items that ask for personal information, should try to maintain the same tone that exists throughout the rest of the application. Otherwise, that response/section might sound flippant or ghost written.
3. Mentioning something significant or telling that has not been revealed elsewhere in the application. Such references should not be gratuitous (see #4 above) or trivial (“Most people don’t know that my favorite color is blue.”)
4. Highlighting (When appropriate) the connections between the applicant’s personal characteristics and the topics/issues that he or she has investigated (or wants to investigate).
5. Prompting this reaction from the reviewer: “I want to meet this person!”