PERSONAL STATEMENTS: A CAUTIONARY TALE

“Personal Statements”—just the sound of the words strikes fear in the hearts of many students. And perhaps it should. After all, your personal statement may make or break an introduction into the next important step you hope to take toward graduate school, law school, the workplace, or a nationally competitive scholarship.

Writing well is hard work. Months before you need to send a personal statement you should begin thinking about what you are going to say. Sit down and brainstorm some ideas, noting vital points you would not want to omit. Jot ideas down on a legal pad, draw pictures in the margin, have some fun with the idea “Who am I.” Then one early morning or late night, select some of the key ideas that seem essential to your story, your identity. Make a plan and write a draft. Some people have to write, write, and write—before they can figure out their plan. Nevertheless, ultimately a plan, a design, or a kind of symmetry must exist under your words.

You will be sad if you submit an essay “off the top of your head.” This document will probably need weeks of revision and research before it is ready to represent you to some decision-maker. As many as 20 drafts may be necessary before the essay takes wings and flies perfectly to the mark. All the points below are tips for the revision process of that first draft.

Many students start an essay by describing a significant experience. You may, for example, be tempted to spend many lines on your love of a particular sport. Unless you are applying for an athletic scholarship, the sport should not take more than a paragraph and should be representative of something central to your identity. The committee members are reading many essays; they want to move as quickly as possible to the heart of the piece. They will appreciate your making the introduction as tight as possible.

Because writing about yourself seems awkward, you may tend to draw on big words that are not characteristic of your voice. Be very careful about relying on the thesaurus. You may generate phrases that do not make sense. Professional readers can tell within a sentence or two if the essay has an inauthentic ring.

Do not repeat the information that is on your resume. A personal statement should complement the resume, telling us who you are, not what you have done.

Do not try to be too clever by half. Humor almost never works to your advantage. This is a formal document; the tone must be professional.

Some students rely heavily on scripture and or other quotations. The essay is yours and yours alone. Overuse of favorite authors or texts may stand in the way of the reader’s ability to hear and see your own true self on the page.

Shorter is often better than longer and larger font (12 point) is often better than smaller (10 point or 8 point). Even if you are given a 1000-word limit, you will be well-served to try to write the essay in 900 words. White space around the paragraphs provides a nice aesthetic, as well as an appreciated relaxation for the reader’s eye. Use the “Find” tool to count the times your favorite noun or verb appears. Count the lines in your paragraphs. Ten lines are tolerable; twenty are not.

Style happens late in the process. Scour your vocabulary to find a perfect verb. Locate a thirty-word sentence that could be whittled to six words. Such honing adds color and energy. You know the essay is nearing completion when you read it aloud and can feel the smooth flow from paragraph to paragraph, as if a silver cord were winding its way from beginning to end.

The last paragraph must tie the whole essay together and conclude in such a way as to cause the reader to respond, “This person is a smart cookie! I’d like to meet the writer of this essay!” When that happens, you are about to hear some good news!

Ask someone who is skillful to read your essay and tell you the truth. (Try Baylor’s Writing Center.)

Unfortunately, having written one perfect personal statement does not mean you freed from future writhing among words. The fine pattern you have designed may need to be tailored somewhat to fit the next application you must fill out or next audience you must impress.