

WRITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS AND STUDY PROPOSALS

Some Guidelines

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Increasingly, not only for scholarship applications, but even for graduate school or for potential post-collegiate employers, you are going to be asked to produce written statements, ranging in length from five hundred to one thousand words. The questions may be phrased in a variety of ways, but what most boil down to: "Tell us something about yourself, the type of person you are" and "Tell us what you want to do for us or what you want to do with our support."

The main piece of advice in writing these statements is this: you will write many drafts before the final product emerges. Do not fool yourself into believing that a few minutes at the keyboard will produce an amazing and jaw-dropping personal statement or proposal. (The runner-up piece of advice is this: you will not have enough space to write everything that you want. Be prepared!)

[Since this process also parallels preparation for interview questions, going through the following checklist will not only help you in your writing, but will also help you to anticipate oral queries that will be directed to you.]

1) Prepare the checklist. Before you even set pen to paper (or fingers to keys), first compile a list of answers to the following questions. Be honest with your answers, don't try to compose an answer, but instead put down what your honest first reaction to the question is.

For Personal Statements:

- a. Who is your favorite author(s) and why? What five books that you have read have had the most influence on your development? Do not censor your list and delete fiction or devotional materials; do not substitute books or articles that you think are important but that you haven't actually read.
- b. What did you want to do when you were ten? fifteen years of age?
- c. Describe your family life. Who has had the most influence on your personality and development (mother, father, grandparent, non-relative).
- d. What class that you have taken in college has had the greatest impact on your intellectual development? What out-of-class experience (job, travel, internship) has had the greatest impact on your intellectual development in college? By intellectual development here we mean in terms of shaping your ideas, your philosophy of life.
- e. What class or activity has had the greatest social impact on you while in college, that is, changed or affected the way you view or treat or relate to others?
- f. What would you say your greatest mistake in high school was?
- g. Your current course of study: planned, chosen after careful contemplation, random, inspired by parents or other outside influences?

For Study Proposals:

This is a bit more complex and will depend on the type of scholarship or program that you are applying to. Here, the checklist is a bit more complicated:

- a. The key question to ask yourself: what do I want to do with my life--or at least, what do I want to study? Why is this important for my future plans? For example, if you want to practice law, then it becomes pretty clear why you need to go to law school.
 - b. The second key question: what do I need to get from point A to point B in terms of classwork, actual experience, and resources to support those plans? Expecting to complete a Ph.D. dissertation on a year's worth of funding, for example, is not practical at all, but completing a one year master's program that is part of the process of getting a Ph. D. is very feasible.
 - c. Research: where are the institutions I might need to go? What programs are available? Who are faculty that I would like to work with--what are their backgrounds and research interests? For example, if you were interested in graduate work at the Institute of Church-State Studies, you could visit our homepage (http://www.baylor.edu/~Church_State) and gather information on our programs, and just as importantly, on our faculty--our interests, research projects, and areas of study. This information is extremely useful in formulating an informed proposal. I would say that you want to have the following items covered before writing any proposal:
 1. types of degrees offered, length each degree takes to complete, and any required background to undertake the course of study (language, coursework in the field, etc.)
 2. faculty and the courses they offer
 3. research facilities, libraries, exchange programs, fellowships offered
 4. requirements for admission
 5. contact information so that you can obtain more direct information on the program and correspond with someone who can answer more specific queries
- 1) Examining the wording of the essay questions: This is especially important if you plan to apply for multiple scholarships, fellowships, and graduate programs. Be aware of subtle changes in wording and intent of questions. Shape your essay to fit the questions asked.

For example: How does your program of proposed research fit in with your long-term career goals? IS NOT the same question as: Describe your proposed program of research and how this correlates to your current academic program. The core of both essays is going to be the same--the research you've gathered on your specific program or course of study--but the style and intent of the essay will differ. In much the same way, one personal statement may ask, "Where do you see yourself in ten years?" versus "Describe your personal odyssey through college." Some essay questions ask for reflection on your past life or academic career with relevance for today; others ask for you to speculate how what you are doing today will affect your future.

- 1) Creation of an outline. Before you start writing either a personal statement or a research proposal, create an outline (at least mentally, if not on paper). The following model is not ironclad; do not slavishly imitate it, but use it as a guide.

ESSAY OUTLINE:

- a) introduction--anecdote, personal story, hook for the essay. For example, foreign travel experience, classroom encounter, family experience, when I was growing up, etc. This should set the stage for the rest of the essay. One good essay for a Rhodes committee that I once read had the applicant talking about being on the bridge of a destroyer on a dark and stormy night in the Adriatic Sea (he was a naval academy grad). It was a good setup for why he wanted to study international relations.
- b) first main paragraph: bridge from your introduction into the main body. Why the introduction relates to the rest of the essay. "It was this experience which set me on the path ..."
- c) each paragraph should flow from the previous one. In a personal statement, depending on the wording, this may take the form of setting forth a chronology of events, a chronology of development, or the clustering of themes; in a research proposal, your essay should flow logically, from statement of research interests, to why this research is relevant, where you hope to undertake it, with whom and with what resources, how you can achieve the research.

FOR EXAMPLE: Combined personal statement/research proposal, let us say, from someone who wants to study public interest law at Manchester (names, etc. intended to be fictional; no similarity with actual persons intended):

After introduction and first 'bridge' paragraph:

outline para. 2: experience on high school debate team awake interest in policy and philosophy
 outline para.3/4: coursework in college; reference to a specific class, author, or policy/theory that most influenced you

outline para. 5: outside influences--perhaps an internship or community service, that validates classroom experience

outline para. 6: where you envision your next steps in academia

outline para. 7: identification of specific program (Public Law in the European Union) and/or specific faculty (I would hope to study with Professor John Ryland IV; I read his Public Law for an Emerging Federal Europe ...)

outline para. 8: this fits into my future plans of returning to US and pursuing career in Public interest law with regard to international environmental or workers' issues

- a) Concluding thoughts: you may wish to tie back into your introductory story, or make the case for why you would be a good investment
- 1) The above is an OUTLINE. Don't begin writing yet. Assemble the outline first and ensure that each paragraph has a defined, single theme. Essentially, a good rule of thumb is that each paragraph should thrust home one principal idea. Now, with outline in hand, begin writing. Don't worry about word count at this point, simply write the essay for a first draft. Don't edit yet, simply get the writing done.
 - 2) EDITING: Once you have draft in hand, now begin the editing process.
 - a) excess verbiage. Check for sentence length; especially examine if you can reduce excess verbiage by using adjectives and subordinate clauses instead of whole sentences. For example: In his first term of office, President Clinton called for a reduction in the number of cars which were failing to meet stringent emission standards and for the inclusion of more pollution-control devices on autos. (36 words) This might be reduced to: During his first term, President Clinton called for reducing pollution by equipping

- more cars with pollution control devices and removing those failing tightened emission standards. (24 words)--a net savings of 12 words.
- b) eliminate repetition of credentials or other facts
 - c) decide whether the inclusion of any particular fact or anecdote serves your purpose. If it doesn't seem to flow logically from previous statements in the essay, remove it. For example, on the outline essay regarding studying public law at Manchester, including a note about your sports activities might be superfluous, unless, perhaps, you played in a rugby team here and are looking forward to the opportunity to play in Manchester.
- 6) **READ, READ, READ.** Have other people read your essays; do they make sense? Ask them whether or not the points you are trying to make are getting across. Be prepared to continue to rewrite and edit. Draw in roommates, teachers, and friends.