

Composing a Personal Statement: An Invitation to Frustration

by Kyle Mox

Imagine the following scenario: You enter a large, darkened room; a blinding spotlight clicks on. Your footfalls echo hollowly as you step nervously towards what you assume to be the center of the room, followed along the way by the unblinking eye of a spotlight. You sense eyes upon you, watching and evaluating your every move. Suddenly, you become acutely aware of every minute action, from the length of your strides to the way in which you swing your arms. You suddenly wonder if you should have worn your hair differently, or if your shoes are in need of a polish. Mind racing, you begin to doubt everything you know and everything that you know about yourself. An unseen voice announces, “Justify your existence to the committee. You have four minutes.”

Fortunately, most people never have an experience like the one above. Then again, if you are reading this document, you will likely be applying to graduate or professional school or for a competitive national scholarship. In either case, at some point you will likely be required to compose a “short personal statement describing your academic and other interests.”

Those nine words strike fear in the hearts of many, especially high-achieving, goal-oriented, motivated students like yourself. I suspect one main cause of this terror is that, aside from the word count, there are almost no parameters or expectations for the essay. Throughout your educational career, you have likely excelled at most academic tasks assigned to you. When asked to prepare a report on genetic variations in *Drosophila Melanogaster*, you happily obliged. When asked to analyze the extended metaphors in *The Awakening*, you did so with glee. When asked to detail the history, causes, social implications of polydactyly, you jumped on it.

But now you have been asked an open-ended question on a topic that you cannot Google, a subject that you cannot find on Wikipedia, a body of knowledge previously unexamined in the laboratory: you.

Complicating factors is the stress so cleverly illustrated in the metaphoric first paragraph of this charming document. One cannot ignore the fact that every single word that gets set to paper could make or break the entire application. If you have ever written down anything in the way of your hopes, dreams, and ambitions before, it was likely in your personal journal or a letter (or email) to your grandma. Now, a faceless, nameless committee will be reading your self-evaluation with extreme prejudice.

To complicate factors, you are required to write about yourself, but you don't want to come off as self-centered. You want to sound confident without sounding arrogant, funny without being flip, focused without seeming one-dimensional, well-rounded without seeming like a flake, motivated without seeming overzealous. To top it all off, you have to figure out what it is, exactly, that your audience wants to hear.

And what *do* they want to hear, anyway? Why couldn't they have just told you what they wanted?

This document will outline the top nine basic rules for composing personal statements. I know that most readers would anticipate ten rules—I have just illustrated another rule: know when to stop talking. My nine rules are as follows:

- 1) Only losers keep score—the personal statement *is not* a resume.
- 2) KISS—Why are you interesting?
- 3) Five W's and an H—What do you do? Why do you do it? What *will* you do? Why? Where? When? How?
- 4) “Thus Spake Zarathustra”—develop a consistent theme
- 5) Achtung!—For the love of all that's holy, avoid hyperbole as if your life depends on it.
- 6) Cast Not the First Stone—admit your faults, don't hide or justify them.
- 7) The Defense Rests—Understand The Hidden Value of Argument
- 8) Is This Thing On?—Understand Your Audience
- 9) If it Ain't Broke...

Rule 1: Only Losers Keep Score **The Personal Statement *is Not* a Resume**

Rare is the graduate school or scholarship application that asks only for a personal statement. Ordinarily, the hopeful student must also complete an application form comprised of blanks that allows one to list significant awards, honors, titles, jobs, leadership positions, volunteer experiences, and so on. Essentially, the same task could easily be accomplished with a well-written resume, but admissions boards and selection committees like consistency, and, apparently, use ponderous application forms to weed out the weak-willed.

With this knowledge in hand, why would a prospective applicant be consciously redundant? Many students feel the need to elaborate on every item on their resume—that feeling is understandable. Any student who has learned the basics of composition knows that any sort of short expository essay should have a point—a *thesis*—followed by supporting points. In this situation, your implied thesis is “I am the best choice.” You might take a narrower approach, something like, “I am committed to academics,” “I have significant leadership experience,” or even, “I have won many impressive awards.” If you are a smart writer, and I know that you are, you would support this thesis with examples that illustrate your premise.

Let's consider another metaphoric example (you'll notice my penchant for *showing*, rather than *telling*).

You're invited to a party hosted by a casual acquaintance. You don't know this person well, but you also don't have a valid reason for not going. Unfortunately, your date pulls out at the last minute, and you must go it alone. Once you arrive, you make a beeline for the hors d'oeuvres and try to blend in. Just as you pop a canapé into your mouth, a dapper young man approaches you.

“Hello,” he says. “My name is James. In my freshman year, I joined the campus chess club, and in my sophomore year, I became its president. Over the course of two years, I increased our membership by 200%. I also have significant research experience. In the summer of 2002, I worked in Dr. Allahooey’s lab, studying the reactive qualities of photovoltaic cells. Over my entire academic career, I have maintained a perfect 4.0 grade point average, and...”

How long would you stay in this conversation? If it were me, I’d feign choking and happily take a ride in an ambulance to escape this situation.

The purpose of a personal statement is to allow a selection committee insight into who you are as an individual. I hope that my party example illustrated exactly *not* how to accomplish this task. Anyone who simply starts spouting a narrative version of their resume is a terrible conversationalist, a bore. The sooner that you can accept the idea that the personal statement is simply a one-sided conversation, the better off you’ll be.

When considering the content of your personal statement, put yourself on the other side of the conversation—when you are getting to know someone intimately (imagine a first date), what do you want to hear about? I want to hear about the other person’s hopes, dreams, and motivations. I want to know why they did what they have done, why they do what they do, and why they will do what they plan to do. I want to know about their background, who they are, what has shaped them, the turning points in their lives, their biggest mistakes, their regrets, their proudest moments, their passions, their fears. In short, I want to know what makes them tick; if what I hear turns me off, or even worse, bores me, I’ll pull the plug.

KISS **Why Are You Interesting?**

I am not suggesting that you try to suck up to the selection committee. “KISS” was a favorite acronym of one of my high school football coaches. He would shout it loudly every time I started asking too many probing questions about pass routes or blocking schemes. It means Keep It Simple, Stupid.

In the 2005 Rhodes Scholarships Competition, over 930 students, each of whom was nominated by their college or university, applied. In the end, only 32 were selected. You can be sure that every one of those 930 students was considered a talented student, confident leader, and all-around good egg by the people who nominated them.

And, relative to their peer groups, they were. Most had 3.8 – 4.0 GPA’s, held one or more campus leadership positions, devoted countless hours to community service, participated in varsity athletics, and was kind to children, dogs, and old people.

Relative to the applicant pool, however, most of them were nothing special.

Often, what clearly separates a Rhodes Scholar from the other 900 or so Übermenschen is that the Rhodes Scholar is exciting in one or more dimensions. She is an *interesting* person, a person whom you would want to meet, a person with whom you wouldn’t mind talking while munching on canapés.

More importantly, however, is that one can express what makes a Rhodes Scholar so exciting in three, or fewer, sentences.

Consider, for example, the following (edited) excerpts from the biographies of recent Rhodes Scholars:

The “Super Teacher”

Jane Doe spent a year teaching English in Japan and living with her maternal grandparents. She teaches inner-city elementary students how to think and speak critically about art. As president of the University of Nowhere’s student filmmaking organization, Jane received a major university arts grant to shoot a documentary in Zambia about the work of math and science teachers.

The “Environmental Activist”

As a Truman Scholar and Udall Scholar, John Smith has researched and promoted environmental sustainability. In 2005, John traveled to a rural Ugandan village to teach soil conservation to rural communities, but after seeing a need for better early childhood education he raised the funds and developed the village’s first nursery school program. John has used his presidency of the Student Government Association to engage students in campus and community activism.

The “Genius”

At the age of fourteen, Jane Smith entered the University of Somewhere through the Early Entrance Program, and she remains committed to making theoretical mathematics more accessible, both to younger students and to scholars in other fields. She has taught enrichment classes at elementary schools in Somewhere and served as a teaching assistant for Honors calculus. Her studies have been supported by a NASA Space Grant scholarship, a National Merit award, an Undergraduate Scholarship, and through the Mary Gates Endowment for Students. She was awarded a Goldwater Scholarship in 2003. In addition to her mathematical interests, Jane is a short story writer.

Many would accuse me of grossly oversimplifying the entire matter, especially by affixing labels to these students. I would agree.

I would certainly *not* recommend that a young student determine their own label and spend the next four years trying to live up to it. Labels are like nicknames—you can’t pick out your own.

My examples were attempting to illustrate that a prospective applicant must be judiciously selective in what she chooses to share about her life. If you try to explain everything, the important bits will probably get lost in all the noise.

If you live your life correctly (yes, I’m going to make that judgment), simply and elegantly expressing your life’s purpose in three sentences shouldn’t be difficult. As you progress through your educational career, remain aware of how one accomplishment or activity relates to another, and, in a broad view, how they all work together.

Even if your interests are as diverse as art education, economics, and AIDS research, your ideal career would find a way to synthesize all three topics.

The trick to discovering this synthesis, however, is to do so instinctually. You should pursue activities because they seem important and interesting, not because they will look good on your resume or help you get into med school.

An exception to this rule would be if the activity is a stepping stone to long-term goal. For instance, you are unlikely to obtain a position as an area campaign manager if you have no political campaign experience—i.e. working the phone banks, going door-to-door, licking envelopes. So, a certain amount of calculation is required, but generally, if you listen to your instincts, follow your passions, and keep in mind your long-term goals, what may at first seem a jumbled mess of frenetic activity will evolve into a coherent, sensible curriculum vita.

It seems that I've wandered off topic a little bit, but I can express my point succinctly: *do what you love to do to the best of your ability and think about how you do it differently than everyone else.*

Five W's and an H

What do you do? Why do you do it? What will you do? Why? Where? When? How?

I don't mean to beat a dead horse here, but you *must* keep in mind your audience's needs and wants. What your audience wants: to give admission or money to the best candidates. What you want: admission or money.

The economics of this situation are a bit more complex than that, though. What selection committees want is to bring students on board that are going to represent their organization, school, or foundation well, increase their prestige, and allow them to recruit even better students in the future. These students need not only perform well while enrolled, but in the long-term future. Scholarship foundations and graduate schools love to brag that they had a hand in producing a Nobel-prize winning physicist or a U.S. President.

On an abstract, altruistic level, these selection committees also want students who, over the course of their lives, are going to improve the general condition of humanity. They consider their money, time, and resources an investment in the future, and, like any investor, they expect a substantial return

With that in mind, the applicant's goal isn't necessarily to gain admission or to secure scholarship funds; these objectives are merely pathways towards one's *overall* goal. Winning a Rhodes Scholarship isn't the only path one can take to obtaining a seat on the Supreme Court, to solving world hunger, or to uncovering the secrets of the human genome and ending cancer. A Rhodes Scholarship certainly shoots you to the front of the line, though.

So in reality, you and your audience share the same goal: to make the world a better place. Your task, then, is to convince them that you are the horse on which to bet.

I've always been a fan of the "...walk a mile in his moccasins" cliché, so we'll go down that road once more. Imagine that you're waiting for the bus when some guy comes up to you and asks you for \$20. Take ten seconds and imagine the ensuing conversation. After that, keep reading and compare your conversation with this one:

You: "Why?"
Him: "I need it to help some people?"
You: "Who?"
Him: "There's these guys who live in the park. They don't have no money, so I want to help them."
You: "How?"
Him: "I'm going to buy them some food."
You: "From where?"

Him: "From that grocery store over there."
You: "What are you going to buy?"
Him: "I'll buy bread and meat to make sandwiches, bags of oranges, and peanut butter."
You: "When are you going to do this?"
Him: "Right now, if you give me the money, turkey!"
You: "Why are you doing this?"
Him: "Somebody helped me once, and I want to pay it forward."
You: "Why did you ask *me*?"
Him: "You have a kind face...and your clothes are name-brand, so I figured you had the money to spare."

And so forth. The point is that no sentient being would ever just give a stranger money just because they asked for it.

Be sure that your personal statement clearly and obviously expresses the basic facts of why you need to be admitted or given money. And don't make your audience hunt around for it, either.

As before, also anticipate questions. The most important question to consider (and the one that most prospective applicants fail to address) is "why?" Specifically, "why us?" You must make a case for why the institution or foundation you are beseeching is the best possible choice for you. If a better, or at least more obvious, option exists, you must anticipate this objection and address it. For instance, a student applying for a Marshall Scholarship to study forestry *anywhere* in the United Kingdom would have to explain why they weren't applying to, say, the Yale School of Forestry.

The clearer you can be about your basic motivations, the more you will express about your nature, and, more importantly, your priorities. If your priorities are in line with your audience's, and you are highly qualified, you will be selected. KISS.

Achtung!
For the Love of All that's Holy,
Avoid Hyperbole as if Your Life Depends on It!

When I have my blue pencil in hand, one of my first targets are superlatives (biggest, most, best) and adverb qualifiers (very, quite, somewhat). I also suffer a small brain aneurysm every time I read the words "very unique" or "most unique" (go grab a dictionary and look up "unique"). I tire of reading about a student's "darkest day," "most trying experience ever," "happiest moment," "moment of clarity," or, heaven forbid, "epiphany."

When dealing with a topic as weighty as their life's meaning, many students feel as though they must pull out the big guns. For some reason, in a personal statement, every experience in one's life suddenly becomes a turning point and every obstacle seems insurmountable. Our intrepid reader is forced to traverse the highs and lows of the student's life, from the moment that had the "biggest impact" to the "end of everything" that the student knew.

And by the way, how tall is "very" tall? Six-one? Seven-foot? Is one who is "very tall" likely to be taller than one who is "extremely tall?"

I'll be succinct:

- 1) More than likely, you only have 500 to 1,000 words, so don't waste any.

- 2) English is an enormous language, lexically speaking—over 500,000 standard words, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. More than likely, you can find one that means *exactly* what you mean to say.

To quote Forrest Gump, “That’s all I have to say about that.”

“Also Sprach Zarathustra” Develop a Consistent Theme

Even if you’ve never seen Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), you would immediately recognize the movie’s dominant theme music, the opening of Richard Strauss’s “Also Sprach Zarathustra.” It is a weighty piece, full of blaring horns and aggressive timpani, the perfect musical backdrop for the event that changes human history forever (if you haven’t seen it, go rent it).

While I’m certainly not encouraging any would-be applicants to affect Strauss’s grandiose fanfare in their writing style, I do encourage them to consider the value of theme music – think Star Wars, Batman, The Simpsons. The main themes from each of the preceding works promotes a desired emotion in the viewer and carries with it the correct *feel*—epic adventure, dark mystery, cartoonish comedy, respectively.

To make the connection, your personal statement, not to mention your application as a whole, should be unified and present a clear, concise picture of who you are. As well, just as the themes from Gilligan’s Island, Friends, or The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air have the ability to stick in one’s mind for weeks at a time, your statement should stay with the reader long after he has read it. A memorable application is a good application.

As well, given that, in most cases, the length of your statement will be limited, you are going to have to make some tough decisions about what to include and what to cut. If you establish a unified theme for the statement, you can easily make that choice.

For instance, if you are applying for a scholarship that values leadership and community service, you’ll want to emphasize your experience as a youth mentor, campus activist, and government intern. If the scholarship in question emphasizes academic research, talk about your duties as a lab assistant, your interest in cutting edge developments in your field, and your long-term academic goals. Your life is certainly richer and more varied than can be expressed in 1,000 words, so you’ll have to pick and choose.

The pre-writing stage (often called “brainstorming”) stage should be your opportunity to look at your life through a telescope—the macro view. Write down *everything*: your earliest memories, the moment that triggered your interest in your field of study, a turning point in your life, your worst day, your best day, etc. Also, spend some time *freewriting* – that is, writing non-stop, without editing or pause for thought, for pre-determined period of time – about your priorities and your general philosophy of life. The point at this stage is not to describe *what* you want to do when you grow up, but *who* you want to be when you grow up. Fill up as many pages as you can lay hands on, and don’t dare throw anything away. Don’t judge, don’t edit, don’t correct, don’t spell check, and don’t think about thesis statements and the proper use of semi-colons.

As you move from pre-writing into the composition stage, start to think about how your short-term and long-term educational, professional, and personal plans are going to align to help you achieve those macro plans. In essence, you will move from a telescope to a microscope.

Everyone's specific process differs, but I would encourage you to ignore grammar and mechanics as much as you are able. I don't see the need in painting a wall that might just get knocked down before the house is finished.

As you lay out the skeleton of your statement, look back to the jumbled mess of your freewriting – pick out those ideas that are most important to you and figure out how they relate to one another. Write separate paragraphs about each idea. As the paragraphs grow, consider how they relate to one another, how they stitch together to make the larger picture of *you*. The thread that connects these ideas together – the unifier – is your theme.

For instance, I once worked with a student who discovered, after weeks of pre-writing, that her two greatest passions were music and the regulation of freshwater use, specifically rivers. She had no idea how to resolve those two topics into a 1000-word essay, but it seemed fairly clear to me.

She had written that she was attracted to music at first because it made her feel at peace and that it allowed her to focus her thoughts on a single task. Later, she became enthralled by the measure of teamwork required of a large musical ensemble, especially a marching band, which also required coordinated physical movement. On a larger scale, she also appreciated that music was able to carry with it such powerful emotions and that it was so important to so many people's cultural identity.

I argued that all that she had said about music could also be said about rivers – they evoke strong emotions, and, as with a musical ensemble, their proper use requires multilateral cooperation, especially if the rivers cross national borders. Most importantly, access to fresh water has perhaps been the single most powerful influence on cultures throughout the world.

When all was said and done, she had come to appreciate that it was her values, not her specific interests or activities, that motivated her. Her essay had achieved unity and had developed a memorable theme.

Cast Not the First Stone Admit Your Faults, Don't Hide or Justify Them

I wouldn't expect a young man to admit that he likes to sleep late and has no money in the bank to the father of the girl he hopes to marry, so I'm not surprised when a student involved in a highly competitive selection process are reluctant to highlight their shortcomings as a candidate.

But again, turn the table and consider your audience: the weary soul who will be reading your application will read application after application describing an unbelievable, remarkable, "very unique," driven, talented, kind, courteous, focused, humble individual. If scholarship applications are to be believed, no Truman or Marshall hopeful has *ever* made a mistake, has suffered regret, or is flawed in any way, shape, or form.

Add to that morass the honey-soaked letters of recommendation that accompany every application, and it might seem that the applicant pool is full of would-be saints and mythological heroes.

On a related note, go out and ask 100 people if they care whether or not their significant other values honesty.

Now, raise your hand if you've ever heard either of the following expressions: A) nobody's perfect, and B) Learn from your mistakes.

Put the three preceding concepts in a blender and you'll discover my next point—you are better off talking about your faults than ignoring them, especially if they're painfully obvious. Just consider the effect of showing the selection committee that you actually *are* a human being, demonstrating your ability to be self-reflective, and to admit that you aren't perfect (yet) and might actually benefit from studying at Oxford.

The irony is that you can sometimes turn a negative into a positive. For instance, if you are applying for medical school, but the lowest grades of your undergraduate career are in organic chemistry, you might want to find a spot to explain how you struggled through a painful personal crisis. If you are applying for a Rhodes Scholarship with a 3.5 grade point average, you had better persuade the selection committee to overlook it in light of your 50-hour-a-week volunteer commitment. If you are applying for a Truman scholarship without a single formal leadership position on your resume, you had better find a way to talk about your non-traditional leadership experience.

Although our topic here is the writing of a personal statement, I also encourage you to keep this concept in mind if you should find yourself in an interview. It's OK to say, "I don't know." In fact, many panels will ask ridiculous questions just to see if the applicant has the backbone to admit their ignorance or if they'll try to bluff their way through and embarrass themselves.

It's fun – say it with me: "I...don't...know."

The Defense Rests Understand the Hidden Value of Argument

There are obvious benefits of writing a personal statement: clarifying your life goals, focusing your perspective, finding a meaning to your existence. The pragmatic point of view, however, would remind us that you will also be using your personal statement to persuade your audience. You'll be trying to persuade them to see it your way, to agree with your argument, to select you as the most notable candidate in the pile.

Persuasion, however, is not easy, especially when your audience is expecting to be persuaded and would rather not be. Just think about how many TV, radio, print, and direct mail advertisements the average American wades through on a daily basis. Now just consider those bulk emails and annoying telemarketers, not to mention the talking heads on the numerous "news" channels on basic cable and the regular cycle of political advertising. As members of 21st-century's premier free-market economy and the flagship representative democracy on the planet, we have all grown a high resistance to persuasion.

And, ironically, the moment that your personal statement begins to seem like it's attempting to persuade the reader in the slightest, he will immediately cast it aside. So, you'll have to make an argument without *seeming* to make an argument – argue casually.

I won't enter into the history of rhetoric since Aristotle, but I will summarize his points, which, coincidentally, are quite good:

1. Communication is a triangle, consisting of an interplay between the audience (the reader), the speaker (you), and the message (your personal statement).

2. Every argument has three components: an ethical appeal (ethos), a logical appeal (logos), and an emotional appeal (pathos).

3. Effective argument depends on knowing when to emphasize the appropriate appeal.

Let me explain:

Ethos—Ethical Appeal

Most people misunderstand Ethos, believing that it has to do with the moral quality of your message and that your argument will be persuasive if it seems like the “right” thing to do.

Close, but no cigar.

You’ve likely heard the advertising slogan, “Because you don’t get a second chance to make a first impression.” That slogan applies to one’s writing as well. A perceptive, intelligent reader will quickly decide if they like you or not. If they don’t like you by the end of your third sentence, they’ll probably quit reading. Or worse, keep reading to see how much they actually dislike you.

The Ethos of your argument has less to do with the content of your message than it does your audience’s opinion of you as a person. Your reader needs to trust you before he can be convinced, so you need to seem trustworthy, competent, and admirable.

If it seems that you are puffing up any of your experiences or glossing over any glaring faults, you lose credibility. If your motives seem entirely selfish or you seem insincere, you lose credibility. And if you don’t know the difference between its and it’s, there, their, and they’re, you lose credibility. Therefore, for the ethos of your argument to be strong, you must be honest, use a clear writing style that represents your personality accurately, and ensure that your grammar, mechanics, and formatting are flawless.

It also doesn’t hurt to make a great first impression with an introduction that will “hook” the reader without seeming too gimmicky. You can start with an appropriate quote, an historical example, a personal narrative example, a paradox, a question, a shocking statement, or relevant statistics, as appropriate.

Logos—Logical Appeal

Assuming that you aren’t yet sick of hypothetical examples, I ask you to imagine the following: a well-dressed young man with an endearing smile approaches you on the street. He speaks with the utmost courtesy and with elegant, sophisticated diction. Overall, he is charming, likable, and seems trustworthy.

He sticks out a hand and offers to sell you what he is holding in his fist for \$80. It isn’t clear what he’s holding in his fist.

Now, even the most gullible rube would pause here. If you were in this situation, what’s the first thing you’d do?

Most likely, if you didn't just turn and walk away or call 911, you'd ask some questions, first of which would most likely be, "what's in your hand?" It seems painfully obvious to point this out, but, generally speaking, when making decisions, people like to have good reasons to do so. Good reasons, that is to say, persuasive reasons, clearly point out the benefit to the audience should they agree with your proposition. Compare the two situations:

#1

Him: Give me \$80 for what's in my hand.
You: What's in your hand?
Him: Ham salad.
You: Get away from me.

#2

Him: Give me \$80 for what's in my hand.
You: What's in your hand?
Him: Five ounces of gold.
You: Deal!

Assuming that this chap is telling the truth in either case, #2 is obviously the more logical choice, considering that gold was selling for over \$580 an ounce at the time I was writing this document. I don't know what ham salad is going for, but I can assume that \$80 worth wouldn't fit into your fist. I would also assume it isn't sanitary to eat ham salad out of a stranger's fist.

Making an implicit argument that someone should make a \$2800 profit is fairly easy. What isn't easy is making the implicit argument that a selection committee should separate you from the hundreds of other applicants for the scholarship or admission in question.

I carefully selected the word "implicit." Obviously, you don't want to be blunt or overt about this; constructing a thesis statement that reads, "You should pick me as a Rhodes Scholar for the following reasons," will not make you any friends. Effective persuasion, or salesmanship (let's face it – you are selling something), depends on understanding one's audience.

First, you *must* comprehend the stated objectives and missions of the scholarship foundation or school. Assuming that you are a suitable candidate, your priorities should be in line with your audience's—structure your statement so that it's clear that you are on the same page. If you are applying for a scholarship that values leadership, you had best highlight your leadership experience and philosophy. If you are applying to a graduate school that is dedicated to cutting-edge research, you should focus on the exciting research you've begun in that field. If you are applying for a grant to foster cultural understanding, you had better talk about your ability to do so. If it isn't clear what the audience values, play to your strengths—those skills, experiences, or abilities that most clearly define who you are.

Is This Thing On? Understanding Your Audience

To continue the previous thought, I will now focus on the necessity of understanding one's audience. Those poor souls who have had the misfortune of being writing teachers know all too well about the average student's inability to understand his audience's needs. Most student writers have, at most, two voices—the informal, or "DL," and the academic, or "Erudite." The DL voice ignores punctuation, uses shorthand, eschews format, and may or may not employ vocabulary that isn't suitable for prime-time audiences. The Erudite voice is clean and polite, conforming to every known rule of Standard American Edited English. It displays an ambitious

array of vocabulary words from the SAT, cites its sources correctly, and knows full well the power of a well-placed subjunctive clause.

The DL, however, has one thing going for it—it knows its audience. Generally speaking, the informal voice that we use when writing to our peers is efficient, expressing only the information that the audience needs (or wants) to know. If it says anything that isn't expressly pertinent, it does so for the amusement of the reader.

In comparison, the Erudite often attempts to obscure the fact that the writer in question may or may not, in truth, have, at best, a cursory understanding of the subject matter at hand. To obfuscate any deficient comprehension (and meet or exceed the oft compulsory minimum word count), it employs esoteric diction, Byzantine syntax, a remarkable degree of loquacity, and enough jargon to choke a zebu. There are a number of expletives, and the passive voice is often used. Overall, the Erudite voice attempts a certain detached, perhaps arrogant, tone, best read aloud with one's nose pointed aloft and in a slight British accent.

If I have done my job well, you should have found the preceding paragraph annoying. One might wonder, then, why a writer would choose to annoy his audience.

Simply put, one who affects the Erudite voice is more than likely doing so because they lack the skill or confidence to simply say what they mean to say. They have misjudged their audience, and they assume, incorrectly, that if they just try to sound smart, that the audience will assume that they *are* smart.

But who's smarter—the writer that can explain free market economics to an eight-year-old or the writer who takes 30 pages to explain that often tosses and turns while in bed (e.g. Marcel Proust)?

Your audience, whether an admissions board or scholarship selection committee (or second-grade classroom, for that matter), will be more impressed with you if you can clearly and efficiently express complex ideas than they will if you write with a thesaurus in one hand and the Chicago Manual of Style in the other (don't ask me how one can actually type with a book in each hand).

I am aware, however, that most honors students have probably done quite well with the Erudite voice. Yes, it often impresses overworked high school English teachers who are too apathetic or too tired to stop you, and your friends and relatives certainly aren't going to be honest with you.

Old habits are hard to break, but I'm here to tell you – *stop it.*

The second sentence of this section used a key word: need. Let's be honest—writing is just selling. A good salesman knows what his customer wants: the best product for a minimal price. With that in mind, he does his best to make the customer *believe* that he's pulling one over on the salesman.

Using that same logic, consider the needs of *your* particular audience: they want to find the best student with the least amount of work. Don't make their job any harder than it has to be. Make it the primary purpose of your statement to clearly and directly illustrate how you fit the selection criteria in question.

If it Ain't Broke...

All of the above sage advice notwithstanding, when writing a personal statement, you need to do what you know how to do in the way that you know how to do it – or as Teddy Roosevelt more elegantly expressed the same thought, “Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

If you have developed your own system for writing and expressing yourself, and you are pleased with the results, by all means, stick with it. The act of writing, especially self-reflective, expressive writing, is unique to each person who engages in it. Beware of blanket advice, avoid being told what to do, and, above all else, KISS.

The odds are good, though, that you, like anyone, could stand to benefit from a careful examination of your writing process. And if you’re saying to yourself, “Well, I *think* that I’m a fairly good writer, I mean, it did get me *this* far,” stop and ask yourself if you’re comfortable staying *this far* for the rest of your life.