



FINDING YOUR NARRATIVE: WRITING THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

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OUTLINE

- Finding your narrative
- Telling your narrative
- Tips for crafting your narrative
- Common pitfalls
- Avoiding clichés



QUALITIES OF A STRONG PERSONAL ESSAY

- Authenticity
 - Your story, your reality
- Memorability
 - Avoiding clichés
- Individuality
 - No one else can tell this (my!) story like I can
 - Your story (not your mom's, your sister's, or your friend's)
- Clarity
 - It should be apparent to the reader why *you* are applying for *this fellowship*.



WHAT SHOULD A PERSONAL STATEMENT DO?

- This is your first opportunity to introduce yourself to someone who does not know you. **What do you want them to know about you? How can you convey yourself to them?**
- Begin by breaking down your identity into categories:
 - Personality traits
 - Interests
 - Goals
 - Motivations
 - Experiences
 - Key memories
- If you're having trouble thinking of things, try answering these questions:
 - What motivates you?
 - What excites you?
 - What parts of you might not be seen in the other parts of your application (resume, transcript, etc.)?

SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY 1:

- Workshop Activity: In small groups, take 5–8 minutes to list as much as you can in the categories below (feel free to add other categories!)
- Then, share what you've listed (as you are comfortable) with the group. After each person shares, the other members of the group should respond by observing what grabbed their attention, what themes emerged, and any other helpful observations. Listeners should consider the following:
 - Did the speaker seem more excited when describing certain experiences, traits, or motivations?
 - Did you notice a narrative/theme emerging as the speaker shared?

Categories:

Personality traits

Interests

Goals

Motivations

Quirks

Experiences

Key memories



CRAFTING YOUR NARRATIVE

- Now you have your archive!
- Next step: Crafting your narrative.
- What is your “narrative”?
 - Think of it like a series of evidence about yourself (traits, character, motivations, etc.) presented in short examples that connect as a coherent story about who you are and show how you are a good fit for the fellowship.
 - If the ideal conclusion of this narrative is you getting the fellowship, what do you need to tell them about yourself, your life, and your skills to get there?

SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY 2:

Take 5–8 minutes to create a rough outline for your essay using your archive.

Consider:

- Which example/memory/characteristic/experience would serve as a good hook that grabs the reader's attention and is related to your goal of getting the fellowship.
 - Hint: *There is no one way to do this.* Some people start by talking about a research experience. Others talk about a childhood memory that is somehow connected to their current interest. Others do something totally different.
- Share your outline with the group.
 - Do the pieces fit together logically? It's ok if they don't yet, but what might you need to do to make them connect?



KEEP IN MIND:

- Give background and details but with a *light, precise* touch.
- All the examples you give, stories you tell, and traits you reveal about yourself must have a point. Don't tell an exciting or shocking story just for the shock value. It has to point toward the fellowship and what makes you uniquely suited to get it.
- Write a full, rough draft of the story you want to tell and then shorten it to the key information. They don't need to know everything. The climax is key.
- Consider: moments of change, growth, becoming
- Be creative but don't go crazy.



KEEP IN MIND:

- Beware of the model essay.
 - Read them, but don't try to imitate them. These are personal essays. If you follow someone else's model, then it will not be unique to you. Use one or two to get the juices flowing if you must but don't rely on them.
- Get feedback (but not *too much*).
 - Feedback is great and can help you catch things you'd otherwise miss. But avoid having too many people read your essay because it can result in an essay that is "too polished" and that has lost a sense of your unique style and qualities.
 - Remember that some fellowships (Rhodes, in particular) make you disclose what kind of assistance you received on your essay. The people reading your essay have read a lot of essays and can probably tell when an essay is heavily edited.





COMMON PITFALLS: CLICHÉS

Clichés are expressions, stories, or even topics that have such a general meaning that they have “lost their meaning” over time. These overused phrases do not provide a specific meaning or image and they do very little to tell us about you and what makes you stand out as an applicant.

IMPORTANT NOTE

- Just because something is clichéd (overused, commonly seen, etc.) does not mean it shouldn't be done. It just means that if you choose to do it, you have to transform a cliché into something fresh, new, and unique to you.

Pro Tip:

- Many clichés are actually excellent starting points for a striking personal essay hook. Don't be afraid to outline with clichés but do avoid submitting them.



COMMON NARRATIVE CLICHÉS

- “The most important _____ in my life.”
 - Person, moment, realization, etc.
 - “The moment I did _____, I knew _____ ...”
- Death of a loved one
 - Great example of a potentially very powerful narrative but one that must be done with care and precision.
- I gave but received so much more in return.
- The dedication / keep trying narrative.

HOW TO AVOID NARRATIVE CLICHÉS: TELLING YOUR STORY

- It must be **YOUR** story. You can use someone else's story if it is part of your own and you make it very clear how it is part of your own.
 - Family narratives / heritage
 - Talking about others' mistakes – best to avoid
 - Stories of failure (but aren't really about failure)
 - Stories of heroism and triumph
- Avoid talking about someone else's watershed moment. You must make it clear why something is important for you, for your life, for your decisions.



HOW TO SPOT & AVOID CLICHÉS: PHRASES TO AVOID

- "Comfort zone"
- Passion
- Dedication / hard work
- Dream
- When I was young
 - (p.s. You are still young!)
- All I've ever wanted
- Good things come to those who wait
- Every cloud has a silver lining
- Little did I know
- I learned more from them than they did from me
- In modern society
- Throughout history
- In this day and age
- In the current climate
- From the dawn of man



STRATEGIES FOR AVOIDING CLICHÉD PERSONAL ESSAYS

Questions to ask yourself:

- Could someone else tell this story?
 - Is this the right story to tell?
 - Is there another way I can tell this story to make it clear that it is my own? Consider perspective.
- What does this story tell/reveal/show about me?
- Am I exaggerating?
 - In most cases, if you think you are exaggerating, you are!
 - If you think you are exaggerating, other people will likely be able to tell. (This is where peer reviewers come in!)
- Why is this memorable?
 - Is it memorable in a helpful way? Avoid writing shock value and trauma dumping.



AUTHENTIC, INDIVIDUAL,
MEMORABLE WRITING STARTS
WITH . . .

- Brainstorming
 - Create your archive
- Outlining
- Drafting
- Revisions (& Peer Review!)

USING THE WRITING CENTER: FELLOWSHIP WRITING PARTNERS

Best Practices:

- Schedule ahead of time / Plan ahead
- Not copyeditors
- Great for help with brainstorming!

Questions?

- Email Alana at alana.felton@yale.edu





TELLING YOUR STORY

Marshall / Rhodes Summer
Advising Series, Session #4

THINGS TO CONSIDER AS YOU PLAN A PERSONAL STATEMENT

Personal statements are not “one size fits all” – be sure to tailor your statement to the requirements and expectations of a particular fellowship.

1. What is this specific fellowship looking for?
2. Are you being asked to provide a personal reflection, or an overview of your academic and professional achievements? (Or both?)
3. Who will be reading this? (Especially worth considering if you're applying for another country's Rhodes constituency – are there cultural differences you should anticipate?)
4. How does your statement relate to the rest of your application?

THIS YEAR'S RHODES PERSONAL STATEMENT

“In your personal statement of up to 1 000 words, we ask you to address each of the following prompts by weaving them into the narrative of your statement (the word allocation across the three is up to you):

1. Tell us how you overcame a challenge in your life. Which Rhodes Scholar character qualities did you draw from? What did you learn from the experience?
2. What would you like to learn from and contribute to the Rhodes community in Oxford?
3. From your place in the world, how will you use your energy and talents to address humanity's pressing challenges?”

***For this statement, are you being asked to provide a personal reflection, or an overview of your academic and professional achievements? (Or both?)**

BREAKING DOWN THE PROMPT

1. Tell us how you **overcame a challenge** in your life. Which **Rhodes Scholar character qualities** did you draw from? What did you learn from the experience?
2. What would you like to learn from and contribute to the **Rhodes community** in **Oxford**?
3. From your place in the world, how will you use **your energy and talents** to address **humanity's pressing challenges**?"

Red = personal experience

Green = Rhodes / Oxford fit

Purple = potential for meaningful impact

***What do you think is most important to highlight in your response?**

BREAKING DOWN THE PROMPT FURTHER: DESCRIBING CHALLENGES YOU HAVE FACED

Remember: you own your story; you don't owe anyone your story.

If you're thinking about sharing experiences you've had that were traumatic, ask yourself the following questions:

1. How necessary is sharing this?
2. How relevant is this story to the rest of your personal statement, and the rest of your application?
3. What is your motivation for sharing this?
4. Would this story draw attention away from your achievements?
5. How much detail do you need to include? (Possibly less than you think! You don't need to prove the story's validity.)
6. Who will be reading this? Do you feel comfortable sharing your story with them?
7. Would you feel comfortable elaborating on this story in a high-pressure interview context?

THIS YEAR'S MARSHALL PERSONAL STATEMENT

“Personal Statement (750 words): This should be a short statement in which candidates describe their intellectual development and other interests and pursuits.”

***For this statement, are you being asked to provide a personal reflection, or an overview of your academic and professional achievements? (Or both?)**

***Is this prompt asking you to provide the same kind of content as the Rhodes prompt?**

***Any significant differences between the Rhodes and the Marshall prompts?**



BRAINSTORMING

Please take three minutes to jot down some notes about how you would address the Rhodes and Marshall personal statement prompts.