**Representing Yourself on Paper**

As you search for how to write college essays and scholarships, many advisors tell you the standard, be careful, be yourself, be thoughtful, be creative, and proofread, proofread, proofread. This is good advice because it is true, but how will you present yourself?

*Tell your story. Never underestimate the power of a story. Stories have the ability to grip a reader and make them remember you.*

Through stories you are able to let committees *know what your passions are, what you are going to do, and why and how you do what you do.* Discussing failures is fine as long as they are not the end of the story. Don’t be defensive about any dark alleys into which your lives may have turned. Just emphasize what you have to contribute to the program. What did you learn from these mistakes?

A longtime friend and school counselor, Christa Coates offers this wisdom, “students often tout their praises by saying things like, ‘I am a hard worker who is committed to being successful . . . I believe in leading by example. When given a project or assignment, I know how to get the job done,’ however, they don’t give specific examples of how they’ve done these things. Students should give a specific example for any quality they claim about themselves. In short, *do not say it unless you can follow it up with a story or example that illustrates the trait*.” The burden of proof rests on you.

**Think about why the admissions or scholarship committee is asking the question. What do they hope to learn by asking it?**

**Think from Their Perspective:** A favorite professor of mine, Dr. Taylor of ECU gave me these guidelines, writing that, “A rhetorical approach to the problem of constructing a “Statement of Purpose” might first consider audience.” Admissions offices may have differing sense of what makes a good student. On a few things, most agree:

1. **Verbal aptitude**. Does the candidate use words thoughtfully, selectively, imaginatively, precisely? These are formal essays, so avoid contractions, slang, etc.

2. **Record of performance**. What experience does the candidate bring—that would suggest accomplishment, dedication, and intelligence?

3. **“Fit.”** Do the student’s plans fit the program resources of the university and department? This is a good way to show that you know who they are and what they have to offer.

4. **Background**. Does the student’s educational history suggest preparedness for advanced work?

5. **Direction.** Does the student have the beginnings of an agenda? (This is not as important for undergraduates.)

Taylor also notes, “From an audience standpoint, the statement of purpose might be used to address these questions. Then there is the matter of persona. I don’t know how you can “be yourself” in a two-page essay to an academic committee, although those folks are—arguably—human. I suppose you should be your most serious and ambitious self.”

*The purpose of the document is to allow committee members to take a second look* *at you after they’ve looked at the numbers. They want quick answers to the above questions.*

Stylistically, practice conciseness and packed content. Leave nothing to misinterpretation, especially statements concerning your commitment. At the very least, demonstrate that you can put together a decent essay.

**Some final thoughts on what works:**

1. Tailor your application to the school or scholarship. This means take time to find out about them, what they offer, what they stand for, or why they donate. Don’t have only one generic application!

2. How will you use the scholarship uniquely?

3. Mix the creative and informative.

4. Show intellectual curiosity.

5. Show how you made an impact in a community, how you saw a need and filled the need. A community can be small, like a school, or large, like a city, state, or even international group of people.

6. You don’t have to repeat the question. In fact, you will stand out more if you don’t. Just make sure you do answer the prompt.

7. Do proofread. You do not want to be the student who used spell check, but forgot to proofread. To describe his tutoring experience he wrote, “I *torture* students every week. I find much satisfaction in *torturing* students.” The Park Scholarship committee actually received this in an essay.

Contending with these applications may help you know yourself better, but it will certainly help you articulate what you want and prepare you for your destination. Know that you have many people who want to see you succeed, and that I am one of the ones on your side.

Best Wishes,

Mrs. Daly