

## Writing the Rhodes Personal Statement

Mira Debs

Assistant Director and Scholarship Coordinator

Office of College Enrollment, The University of Rochester

When I interviewed for the Rhodes scholarship in 1998, I spent the entire summer writing and revising my essay, only to be told in my University's endorsement meeting that the committee members thought my essay was weak and did not lay out ambitious goals for my future.

I rewrote my essay that weekend, sobbing over my computer for much of the time. But I have to admit that they were right: my original version had been a meandering and indulgent discussion of my accomplishments with no central idea - what I now call the "resume essay". I was proud of the final result (and it served me well), and I continue to use the insights I gained from the experience, and from the 150+ Rhodes applications I have read as a selection committee member when I advise current scholarship applicants.

The personal statement often seems very nebulous, and is perhaps the most daunting part of the application to prospective scholars. It is also a critical one – you are demonstrating an ability to write well and think analytically about your life, experience and goals. A personal statement is not the only reason you will get an interview, but without an excellent personal statement, you can not hope to get an interview.

This writing opportunity should be a chance for you to reflect on your values, your experiences, and to set ambitious goals for the future. It is an exercise in logic – can you make all of the pieces of your life fit together in an ordered form? In some senses you are writing an academic argument (similar to a research paper, except it's about your life) that answers the questions:

*What makes me unique?*

*Why do I deserve this scholarship?*

*What is the larger motivation that drives the work that I do?*

Answering these questions may involve considerable soul searching and conversation. Devote yourself to the process! Be prepared to write 10-15 drafts of your essay.

The best essay is able to lay out a clear argument and narrative thread between the work that you have done and the work you hope to do in the future. How you do this is really up to you – there are a million ways to write a personal statement and the best essays are the ones that are the most unique. That being said, there are some general things that you should do in the essay.

- Have a strong opening sentence, or a "hook" that pulls the reader in. Avoid bland clichés like "All my life I have wanted to help people." "I have been fortunate to achieve a great deal in life so far, and I see the Rhodes as the logical next step." "I have always been passionate about rocket science." One essay I will always remember began with the image of a man in Siberia surrounded by a cloud of mosquitoes so thick they almost formed a cloak. I absolutely wanted to meet this writer at an interview.
- Have an argument or a motif that ties your essay together. Some riveting essays I have read included a Rhodes winner who began with a fear of birds. In her essay, she wrote about getting over her fear by learning the names of different birds which led her to realize the importance of

language and categorization. She connected this to studying English and Anthropology through which she hoped to devote her career to making the military more culturally sensitive. Another recent essay used a childhood passion for the World Book Encyclopedia as a motif for the applicant's intellectual journey into many different academic and social realms. In both cases, the applicants featured their accomplishments, but in the context of proving a larger argument.

- Avoid a resume essay – your readers will have a copy of your resume to begin with and repeating it in your essay will put them to sleep. “First I did this, then I did this, then I did this...”
- Avoid clichés at all costs. September 11<sup>th</sup> may have had a powerful effect on you. But unless you experienced it in an unusual way, your essay will likely sound like a news broadcast.
- Include vivid visual examples – this is the evidence in your essay. Feature your experiences, but with specificity of detail. Don't say, “I love music. I also love mathematics.” How can you convey your work in these areas with an image or a moment from your life?
- Show your diversity – not only the organizations you're involved in, but intellectual passions or activities done for fun. Are you a cellist in a garage band? Do you make stained glass in your free time? The more ways you are interesting to a committee, the more they will want to interview you. Plus, by having non-structured fun, you seem like a somewhat normal person, rather than an accomplishment-driven automaton.
- Set ambitious goals for yourself, but be aware that you are one of many applicants who may have done development work in Africa, who wants to solve problems of poverty around the world and who is planning to go to medical school. A touch of humility or self-awareness always stands out amidst pages of accomplishment hyperbole.
- Consider your audience. The people reading your application are former Rhodes scholars and distinguished community members who will likely read 60-100 other applications. Most everyone has plans to change the world and will be described by their recommenders as “one of the best students I have ever taught.” How do you distinguish yourself?
- Tie all the pieces of your argument together by projecting into the future. Provide a logical reason for studying at Oxford and articulate why it is essential to get you from where you are now to where you want to be in the future. What kind of training or experience will you get at Oxford that you cannot receive anywhere else?

Solicit criticism widely and develop a tough outer shell. This will only make your application stronger. Keep revising and revising and revising.

And enjoy this process. I will always remember a comment from a recommender who wrote that he admired the way the Rhodes application process took talented individuals and made them articulate their ambitions. Look at this experience of writing and reflecting as a valuable one to help you chart your future direction. Even if you do not receive a scholarship, keep working to make your dreams happen.

*These reflections are formed by my own experience as a Rhodes Scholar in '99 and from participation on several Rhodes selection committees. They do not represent the official attitude of the Rhodes Trust nor do they reflect the views of all scholars or selection committee members.*