**Writing the Personal Statement/Statement of Purpose**

**By Dixie Shafer, URGO Director, Augsburg University**

Know that writing personal statements is difficult for EVERYONE. We get better at it with practice and feedback and practice and feedback.

It’s ultimately about thinking more than it’s about writing.

Start by thinking, reflecting, questioning, brain storming.

Read the prompt carefully. Most applications ask similar questions, but rarely the EXACT SAME question. Answer what they are asking, not what you wrote for a previous application, although some previously written paragraphs may be relevant for multiple applications.

Write for a SPECIFIC fellowships, graduate school, or professional school. A GENERIC statement is often generic. Perhaps pick your earliest deadline or the fellowship that matters most to you and start there.

Have an audience in mind. For graduate school, faculty will be making the decisions on your application (no friendly admission staff, although the faculty can be friendly).

Pre-Write. Consider, for example, turning points in your life, academic interests and experiences (e.g., research, teaching, internships, coursework, community involvement if relevant, and overcoming barriers) or influential people. Write details down about each one.

Or Pre-Draw. Some people are very visual and do better if they use a mind map to organize their thoughts. Try drawing connecting lines between experiences and insights.

Start somewhere. There is no rule that says you have to start by writing an opening paragraph. Oftentimes the first sentence—the strong opener—is buried later in paragraph one or two.

Take note of Ann Lamott, an acclaimed writer, who counsels: write a “shitty first draft.” Start by getting anything down on paper.

Overwrite. Words can be cut easier than ideas can be added. A reader/editor can only interact with what’s on the page (unless they interview you, which is something else I recommend) and cannot make up content. If you overwrite, you are likely to have a few gems worth preserving.

As a rule avoid quotes. Readers want to hear what you are thinking in your personal statement, not what a famous author is thinking. On the other hand, you might quote some lines from a patient or a parent, or a person influential to you, if it adds to the story. You can also paraphrase.

Avoid the abstract. If you are writing about you and what you know it won’t be abstract. We often use abstract language to cover up what we haven’t given enough thought to or as filler or because we think abstract language sounds impressive. “I want to serve the world” is an abstract statement.

Details are key. They add flesh to your stories. They make you seem like a real person and someone an interviewer might want to meet. Get the details down—taste, sight, touch, feelings—and then you can always cut them back if they are overwhelming your statement.

Write something that only you can write. If you talk about your medical trip to Guatemala and say that you observed harsh conditions in the recovery room, the reader doesn’t have any proof that you were there. As Dal Liddle, Augsburg English professor and statement writing guru, says, “You could have written that on a laptop in Starbuck’s without ever having left the U.S.” But when you talk about dirt floors, blood on the walls, and reused linens or a patient who made you confront your own biases or the elderly nurse who had a smile for everyone, we know you were there.

Don’t list your accomplishments. Those are included in a resume/CV or they are elsewhere in your application. If you talk about items from your resume or application (and you will because those are important experiences) in your personal narrative, you talk about them more deeply, or go in a complimentary direction, or explain the impact of the experience or activity (so not just *what* you did but *how* did it influence you? What did you learn from it? How did it change your thinking? What did you learn about yourself?).

Show rather than tell. You can say “I’m hard working” but how can the reader believe you. But if you talk about how you got up at 5 a.m. all summer to work with dialysis patients, or that you balance 20 hours of work per week with school or athletics, the reader most likely will conclude that you are a hard worker.

Use active, not passive voice. Active: The researchers compared the behavior of 2 groups of children. Passive: The behavior of two groups of children were compared.

Chronological is one way to organize your essay but may not be the most interesting for the reader. You can start that way if it’s easier to write and then perhaps move things around. Sometimes childhood or high school won’t be relevant. Chronological writers often touch on things that took place but aren’t necessarily critical to their development or story.

Connect dots for the reader. Tell them why something was important, don’t make them assume. Use transitions, of course.

Make time for many drafts.

Have multiple readers, but not too many that they overwhelm you, or they void out your voice. Readers can have very different opinions. Listen to them, and then do what makes sense. Also, often readers are saying the same thing about your essay but simply use different words.

Keep your own voice. It should sound like you and the words you would use. Sometimes the thesaurus is not your best friend. Think about how your voice sounds. Try reading your statement out loud to a few people, asking them only to give you adjectives describing the writer. How do you come across?

One word is better than multiple words.

Ultimately, you are answering fit—why you are good for them and why they are good for you.

Avoid clichés. For example, “Your program fits me hand in glove.” Instead, describe exactly how it fits.

Avoid casual language, unless it’s part of your story.

Show how you are prepared for said fellowship or school, how you will contribute while on fellowship or in school and how what you will take from this experience to add cache to your future.

Breathe.

Breathe again.