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Helping Students to Tell Their Stories

By James M. Lang

Over the summer my oldest daughter, who just began her senior year in high school, asked me to look at a draft of an essay she had written for a summer AP literature assignment. She began with four sharply written paragraphs about her experience running a half-marathon. Her sentences bristled with rich imagery and descriptive details, just the kind of thing a writing teacher like me wants to see.

In the fifth and final paragraph, however, she made a very predictable turn: The experience had taught her to reach for her dreams, that the sky was the limit, that anything was possible if she worked hard enough, etc.

Having read many hundreds of essays written by human beings in their late-teenage years, I happen to know that, if you assign an open-topic essay, about half of them will conclude with those same lessons. So I encouraged her to look back at what she had written, think about other insights that she might draw from the experience, and try to avoid relying on shopworn language.

Had I not read so many essays in that vein from my own students, I might instead have patted her on the back and sent her on her way. I would not have thought twice about that final paragraph, or had any idea that she would be submitting an essay that might induce an eye-rolling snort of derision from her teacher. I would not have known that certain writing strategies, and certain essay topics, seem to have a kind of stranglehold on the imagination of students when they are given open-ended essay assignments.

That realization came to me in another way this summer, when two students in the honors program I direct asked me to look at the personal essays they had written for graduate-school

applications and fellowships. In both cases the essays were extremely well written, and initially I sat down to merely tighten up their prose. But the more I pored over the essays, the more I began to suspect that my lack of experience with this particular genre—the application essay—could lead me to overlook potentially tired or clichéd writing choices.

One of the essays, by a student applying to medical schools, opened with a moving narrative about how his grandmother's illness had made him want to become a doctor. The story was well told, but I wondered whether, for a medical-school application, that was the equivalent of my daughter's familiar final paragraph about reaching for the stars. Another student, applying for a Fulbright, wrote about how a semester abroad had inspired in her a hunger for more adventures.

In both cases I was able to direct the students to faculty members on our campus who had more experience than I do with such essays—our medical-school adviser and our postgraduate-scholarship adviser. But what if you lack the experience to help students with their personal essays, and your institution does not have such specialized advisers?

To assist such faculty members, I turned to an expert who could offer readers some advice on how to assist students with their application essays.

Anthony B. Cashman, director of the Office of Distinguished Fellowships and Graduate Studies at the College of the Holy Cross, regularly provides workshops on his campus and at other institutions that seek to help students write effective personal essays for their graduate-school applications. In the four years he has served in his post at Holy Cross, its students have won 30 Fulbright scholarships, placing the college among the top few institutions of its type and size for number of awards.

Students need to make three basic moves with their graduate-school applications, Cashman says. Without any guidance, students typically achieve only one or two of them, he adds. But they need to put together an application that responds to all three.

1. Applicants have to tell their story, with an eye to the opportunity they are seeking. Most students achieve that to some degree in their applications but never move beyond it. And they aren't necessarily telling their story well, Cashman says. That's true especially of the personal essay, when students trot out and showcase every award they have ever won.

"The essay should not read as a list of every accomplishment that the student has achieved," Cashman says. "Think of the application from the selection committee's point of view. The committee members have about 10 or 15 minutes to become familiar with the candidate, and that's a very brief time for such a large task. Therefore, the job of the writer is to focus the readers on those elements that best relate to the opportunity at hand."

Applicants must think beyond straight chronological accounts, which can tie them into overly long and detailed narratives. Focus on what matters, and what the committee will see as relevant. "An 'origin story'—like the one my aspiring medical student told about his grandmother—"might be true, but not nearly as important and relevant as the chemistry-research job or the hospital-volunteer position that the medical-school applicant has had."

Another mistake applicants make in their self-narratives, Cashman says, is focusing on their personality traits: "Students overestimate the importance of character traits in a personal statement. Sure, it is important to be a 'hard worker,' but what applicant wouldn't claim that? And in a pool of high achievers, character traits like diligence and creativity are taken as givens by the selection committees."

2. Applicants must, in Cashman's words, "articulate a vision of their future." Students typically have trouble with that one, he says, because they "feel anxious about trying to predict what they will be doing even a couple of years down the road." They fear they will somehow be bound by what they have written in their application, or they simply don't have a clear picture of their long-term future.

To allay their concerns, and give them a practical starting point, Cashman advises students to break this aspect of their application down into steps: "I encourage them to formulate both ideal and more-practical outcomes for both a short term (one to three years) and then a midterm (five-plus years). I do not discourage students from looking beyond five years, but that is typically where the view gets pretty foggy for them."

Most students can articulate some vision of the next one to five years, which gives them enough to work with for this piece of the application puzzle.

"What matters most in a personal statement," Cashman says, "is not the precision of that long-term future vision but rather the articulation of some tangible goal so that the selection committee can understand how their opportunity can help the applicant."

Which leads us to the third and most important part of the application.

3. Applicants have to explain how the specific opportunity for which they are applying will connect their past achievements with their future goals. Most applications Cashman sees initially fall short in making that connection.

"When I ask a student if a particular fellowship or graduate school is a good 'fit' for him or her, usually the student launches into a list of accomplishments, things that 'qualify' him or her for a position. At the outset of an application process (and applying for anything should be a process that includes a period of discernment, research, and multiple drafts of the essays), students rarely see this other side of the application—namely, how does this scholarship or graduate program work for me?

"In essence, the applicant needs to demonstrate that the school or fellowship will meet the individual's needs in the short and long term. And this deficiency, I suspect, crushes a lot of applications because, all things being equal, the selection committee will take the person or people whom they can best help with their opportunities."

My conversation with Cashman convinced me that one final piece of advice I can give to applicants isn't much different from the advice I am always giving to students in my writing classes: Think beyond your first idea. That first idea might be a perfectly good one, but it could also be the first thing that occurs to a lot of other people, too, and hence might not grab the reader's attention in the way you expect.

The best writing and, I am guessing, the best application essays typically come from writers who let that first idea simmer for a while, who play with it and push it in new directions, and who are willing to follow when it leads them down new, and less predictable, pathways.

James M. Lang is an associate professor of English at Assumption College and author of "On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching" (Harvard University Press, 2008). He welcomes reader mail directed to his attention at careers@chronicle.com.

12 comments



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graddirector · a year ago

My biggest advice to those writing graduate application essays, particularly in STEM fields, it to dispense with discussion of character traits, vague passions, and the transformative experience of college sports entirely. This is not a high school admissions essay. In most cases, admissions committees for such opportunities don't care a whit if you are "well rounded" and too many extracurriculars/too much involvement in non-science related "service" activities is a sign of a unfocused mind. Admissions committees are looking for 1) career goals, why are you applying, maybe how you reached the decision to do so 2) specific description of prior experience in the field, most STEM grad programs expect significant prior research experience, that should be discussed in such a way that makes it clear this prior experience was understood at a sophisticated level and that the applicant has passion for a research career and 3) why are you applying to the school and how programs at the school and available mentors will get the applicant to fulfill the career goals stated in the first paragraph.

Anything else is distracting fluff for these sort of applications and please do not start off with a quote from a Nobel laureate or talk about too many (or any) non-science related topics including the aunt/little sister with cancer. While a family member with cancer may have gotten you reading about the field, it is certainly not even slightly enough motivation to get you through a 5 year doctoral program, even in cancer research.

10 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share >



jolene278 · a year ago

I read essays for med school and PA school applicants. One of the things that I look for is an indication that they know what they are getting into - do you know what an MD or a PA-C actually do?

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



benno → jolene278 · a year ago

You mean it's different from E.R.?
You guyzzzz!!!!

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



ah_crank · a year ago

I agree with graddirector. The keys in the humanities as well are 1) why specifically you are interested in graduate school and the particular field and area 2) how your previous experience (senior thesis etc) has prepared you for graduate school and how it suggests that you will be successful there (because you understand what scholarship is and how it is done) 3) why this particular school/program/advisor. I do think it is possible to personalize this by constructing a narrative, but one with clear intellectual content and focus. I encourage my students to write a sort of intellectual biography with the above 3 points in mind.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



benno · a year ago

At one Ivy I worked and taught in, I would also be called upon to read Freshman applications by very discouraged admissions staff, who just wanted to hear from someone who had classroom experience with the in-coming class.

After a while, it was all I could do to keep awake reading those files.

EVERY other one quoted "Catcher In The Rye", cited how they should be admitted because they have honestly embraced "diversity" since they were born and promised to use their degree to "open doors" for "poor people".

////////////////////.....

P.S. Many of these students were admitted to several Ivies...very discouraging, but in retro-spect, not too surprising.

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lIgrasmick · a year ago

I coordinate a paid summer internship for rising college seniors. The application process includes an essay and we are always on the look-out for students who write something that is beyond the ordinary schmaltz about why they want to work at our children's hospital. I agree with the points made in the article and in most of the previous posters. But I would like to add this piece of the advice to the conversation:

When students apply for a program such as mine, they need to think about how they will help the institution meet its goals. We have reasons for sponsoring the internships. We have objectives that we hope to meet by providing these opportunities. Students often have trouble seeing beyond their own desires to grasp the needs of the people paying the bill. As a result, they often sabotage their applications by saying things that automatically eliminate themselves from serious consideration. For example, they will write about career plans totally unrelated to children's health care. We have learned that if we give the applicants a little freedom by asking open-ended questions in the interview and having broad essay guidelines, many of the students will inadvetantly take themselves out of the competition.

We may be impressed by the best and brightest students and their ability to write an essay that would please their professors. But we are going to hire the ones who are most likely to help us meet our goals for our program.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



EssaySnark · a year ago

This advice is especially useful for bschool applications - great article!

^ | v · Reply · Share >



Unemployed_Northeastern → EssaySnark · a year ago

Dear HBS,

I want to aggressively lower labor costs in order to hit whatever short-term profit forecast I am handed. I have no love save for the love of money. If the proles want to keep their jobs, they should have gone to better schools. Having already spent the requisite two years at McKinsey, I am an expert in telling clients and CEO's exactly what they want to hear, and finding justification for it later. Even though I am only 24 years old, it is time for me to become an executive. For the love of God and Rand, please admit me! I want to live in the capital gains bracket!

Sincerely,

The motivations of just about every B School applicant

12 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



EssaySnark → Unemployed_Northeastern · a year ago

Wow, can you say "jaded"?

Just for the record, the vast majority of candidates who we work with in apps to HBS and other top schools are sincere, hard-working, and interested in giving back. We've been doing this for years and the money-hungry backstabbing stereotypically selfish bschool student does exist - but there's just not that many of them out there (and we refuse to work with them when we encounter them).

Sorry you're unemployed... definitely can affect the outlook. Hope it turns around for you!

EssaySnark

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Unemployed_Northeastern → EssaySnark · a year ago

I'm jaded because I've spent too much time on the wrong side of the Cravath System of hiring* (which is applicable for most MBA employers as well as law firms) - which is why I'm unemployed, incidentally. Hire the worst graduate of the #1 school rather than the best graduate of the #5 or #10 school - it's the Cravath way. Also, I've been around more than enough young Masters of the Universe to know that what you write is either patently untrue or is washed away by the B School curriculum and professoriate.

- attorney

*See also the Chronicle of Higher Education article "Brown and Cornell Are Second-Tier," explicating a research paper into the hiring proclivities of consultancies, investment banks, major F500 companies, and law firms.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



avichka → EssaySnark · a year ago

I want to sympathize, sincerely, with both EssaySnark and Unemployed_Northeastern: I am an academic (humanities), but I spent the better part of three decades in the organizational/corporate sphere (I was a writer/editor, so didn't exactly chase the big bucks, but, still, I was there completely contrary to my preference; I found, however, that having the rent has its advantages)

My experience largely confirms UNortheastern's views. My sample size is large, so my comment here is not merely anecdotal. However, I also understand EssaySnark's response about jadedness, about cynicism. It's sad. Personally, I don't understand how more than a touch of cynicism is avoidable given the frequency with which the motivations described by UNortheastern prominently surface.

The overachieving-and-superficial-and-let's-kill-'em-and-

[see more](#)

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fairday • a year ago

Thank you for this post. I review essays for many of my students applying to graduate and medical schools all the time. The three basic moves described here will help me to do a better job of reviewing the students' essays. Great insight!

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