

THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

Helping Students Write: Clearly. Analytically. Persuasively.



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ABOUT JONATHAN

FACULTY

- Fordham University
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EDUCATION

- University of Washington
(Klepser writing fellowship)
- Columbia University's
Teachers College
- Sarah Lawrence College
- Rutgers College

AGENDA

1. The Personal Essay
2. The Challenge of the essay
3. Importance of Imagery
4. Samples of 'Original' and 'Revised'
5. The Supplements
6. Challenges for the student/parents
7. Recap

THE CHALLENGE

How do we move people in language alone?

- The personal statement is a personal narrative
- Students need to be emotionally open
- Not an academic essay – the language is less abstract
- Some risk taking is important
- Delving inwardly illuminates, but for some, feelings can be hard to access and write from.
- Some may struggle with the essay not for the craft's sake, but for the inner gaze that the genre suggests.

- What is HEAVY?

- Share

Diction

- Abstract vs Imagistic
- “Heavy” is abstract; it will not move readers; most high school students are trained to write about ideas, and their writing trends towards the abstract

SAMPLE of IMAGERY: *The Dress*

“One, two, three, suck!” my mom yelled. “ We almost have it!” I was trying with all of my might to squeeze into what should have been my home-coming dress. It was the perfect dress- light blue, sparkles, everything I ever wanted. As my face turned red from holding my breath, my mom suddenly stopped pulling at the back zipper, looked at me, and said, “It’s just too small.”

IMAGERY

“The Dress” moves us because we can see, and thus, feel the student’s pain.

Note how the text helps us understand what ‘heavy’ is for this student.

IMAGERY

Personal Statements, at their best, help the college admission folks to feel and get to know your student.

Imagery and **specificity** elicits feelings.
Abstractions, like the word "heavy," do not.

THE GIST

- The HOW of the essay is as important, even more important, as the WHAT.
- Imagery, naming and details vastly improve the writing.
- Imagery and naming help create voice and share the writer's personality.

The Architecture – The Narrative Arc

- The Opening – a scene; the narrative arc is started
- The Pull Back – context to the opening scene; the student's particular history; the narrative arc is established/contextualized
- The Return – return to the scene; share a new one. The narrative arc is completed

A. OPENING: SAMPLE "A"

I stood up in front of the whole elementary school, poster in shaking hands. My script was written on the back of the poster so I wouldn't mess up. As I started to read, the words came out at a good pace. Then, when I started to talk about the liberty bell, I froze. In front of 200 kids and 35 adults. My face was blank, eyes wide open.

A. OPENING SAMPLE “A” REVISED

Noah started to scream. The 12 year old boy I was tutoring at Temple Beth Am was furious. He clenched his fists, slamming them down on the table, his hands becoming red. I could hear him mumbling to himself that he could do better. He took a pencil and snapped it in half. Then Noah jolted, running down the long dimly lit hallway. Finally, I caught up to him.

“You’re going to be OK. There’s nothing you should be afraid of” I said, and he slowly started to decompress.

B. OPENING, SAMPLE “B”

What hit me first was a wall of humid heat, and then came a body blow of overpowering odors, followed by a sea of grasping hands. I was still reeling in shock as I was jostled through the crowd into a car, startled by the sensory onslaught I would come to know as India.

B. OPENING, SAMPLE “B” REVISED

Delhi roads are daunting. The few stoplights we encountered were blatantly ignored, their red lights left blinking. When my car finally stopped, a woman with a baby slumped in her arms reached to touch the passenger window, her nails leaving five distinct lines on the glass. Overwhelmed, I leaned back against my seat.

The “So What”?

- The theme or idea of the piece. The main point.
- It should be fairly easy to identify the main idea of the essay. If not, the writer may need to dig more.
- Some themes from tonight’s essays: self-image; identity; maturation; self-confidence; self-understanding; self-acceptance; acceptance of others, and more.

THE PULL BACK: SAMPLE FROM “The Dress”

I joined Weight Watchers and started going to the gym five days a week. I was determined to lose weight and get healthy. I skipped going to the movies and mall after school with my friends to go to the gym instead; ate apples and carrots while watching my friends eat ice cream and chips. I never had to use so much inner strength, and I started seeing results soon after. As of today, a year and half later, I have lost sixty pounds.

I have the willpower, strength, and dedication to do absolutely anything I set my mind to. I no longer think I am not smart enough to get good grades. From a 2.6 gpa my freshman year, I now have a 3.3. Also, I am not afraid to put myself in uncomfortable situations. I ran for ASB Publicity Officer and got the job! I now spend my time focusing on how I can improve and grow instead of obsessing on feeling not part of the groups I want to join.

The Closing – Sample A from “The Dress”

This fall at the Homecoming assembly, I looked around the gym, and it seemed that all of the nearly 2,000 students were cheering and smiling. And for once, I felt the same happiness as they did. As I stood in the center of the gym, dressed in my all green spirit-gear to represent my class, I couldn't help but think about what my former self would have done in this situation. Now I was in the middle of the gym, about to lead the school in a cheer. I wasn't self conscious or worried. I gripped the mic and raised it to my face, shouting the traditional ASB greeting of “Hey Warriors!” I was free.

Supplement – Sharing vs Telling

- **Q4. Please tell us how you have spent the last two summers (or vacations between school years), including any jobs you have held. (50-250, ~~150)**

- Due to the workload from my school and extracurricular commitments, I don't have much time to work on improving my violin technique during school year. I find it **frustrating** that I can't pick up new pieces as quickly because of the constant threat of tests and homework. During the school year, I get used to not being able to make much progress on new pieces . It's frustrating having to pack up my violin having made only a little bit of progress to learn the basics of the piece. It's productive and necessary, but it sounds almost unrecognizable from the recordings. Over the summer though, I have hours available to myself to practice and make more progress with the basics. I love listening to the piece as it evolves from a work in progress and speeds up to something that sounds like what I imagined when I started it.
- The highlight of all this preparation takes place in August, at the Vianden International Music Festival in Vianden, Luxembourg, which I've attended the past two summers. It's primarily chamber music-oriented, as I have a repertoire of seven pieces to prepare and perform over the course of two weeks. Within this quaint region, I performed at a small cultural center for the town, the Vianden Castle, a senior center, and a school just over the border in Germany. I also have played in masterclasses and studio classes for the rest of my teacher's studio and anyone who wishes to watch and learn from the classes.
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Supplement – Sharing vs Telling

- **Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences that was particularly meaningful to you. (50-250, ~~150)**
- I love playing the violin. I participate in orchestras, chamber music groups, and perform solo works. Chamber music is certainly my favorite medium of playing. I love how it has the depth of an orchestra, in terms of the melodies and harmonies that are created, but the ensemble is on a much more intimate scale.
- Most of my favorite pieces of classical music are chamber music, such as Brahms' *Piano Trio No.1*. That said, nothing can recreate the complexity of an orchestra. By myself, a fast and difficult passage may not be the most enjoyable section to play. But when my part is amplified with the rest of the vast string section, while the winds and brass players carry the melody over all of the excitement, it feels enthralling.
- At a concert a 7 years ago, I performed a solo work by F. Kreisler at a small community concert. Afterwards, one of the audience members approached me to mention that he really enjoyed hearing the performance, since the last time he heard the piece was when the composer played it himself at Carnegie Hall decades ago. As much as I enjoy playing music for the audiences' and my own enjoyment, that concert showed me the impact that a performance can have on someone. Beyond playing the violin, the fact that my performance can deliver feelings beyond just enjoyment to the audience is quite meaningful to me.
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RECAP

- Recognize the genre
 - Some risk-taking and sharing is “needed”
 - Opportunity for sharing; for understanding; for appreciation; for excitement; for joy
 - Narrative arc, which shows the perspective shift
- Diction – Imagery; Specific Details; Naming; some “high” dictive words are appropriate, but should not dominate
- Voice – Diction +Syntax; Voice = Personality 😊

The Challenge for the Student

- Finding a topic – What do I write about?
- Sharing/verbalizing – opening up; eliciting details
- Time management
- Drafting and Revising – Multiple drafts
- Editing – Multiple drafts
- Sophistication – the essay should show maturation
- Parents– Involved. Not involved. Too involved.
- Pressure (competition/deadlines/expectations); multiple readers; voice; balancing strategy and authenticity

QUESTIONS REGARDING THE PROCESS

- My student writes essays all the time. What's the big deal?
- How long will it take for my student to write the essay?
- When should my student start the essay?
- My student does not know what to write about?
- My student has not created a company or saved an endangered species.
- My student will not let me read the essay.
- My student heard from one person the essay is fine, and from another it is not.
- My student is a great writer, s/he doesn't need help.
- What about the supplements?
- What about my student's English teacher and college counselor?

OTHER NUTS & BOLTS

- **The Common App** offers 7 prompts.
- Most Early Decision/Action applications due **November 1st**.
Some earlier
- Regular admissions deadlines **December/January**.
- **Supplementary essays** for each school they apply to.
- Students should **visit** the schools they are interested in, and interview with an admissions person or alumnus.

2017-2018 Common Application Essay Prompts

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story. [No change]
2. The lessons we take from *obstacles we encounter* can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a *challenge, setback, or failure*. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience? [Revised]
3. Reflect on a time when you *questioned* or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your *thinking*? What *was the outcome*? [Revised]
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution. [No change]
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or *realization* that *sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others*. [Revised]
6. *Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?* [New]
7. *Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.* [New]

The College Process

- From 9th to 12th Grade
- In a nut shell: <http://www.commonapp.org/9th-grade>

THANK YOU!

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