

Making a Statement

Reprinted from the Chronicle of Higher Education

By JANE BAST

Last Tuesday, I heard a satisfying clunk as my final graduate-school application hit the bottom of a mailbox at the post office. I'm finally finished applying to grad school, and it only cost me \$1,500, not including postage.

(Why so much? The average application fee has burgeoned to \$60 to \$75, the Educational Testing Service charges \$15 for each test score it transfers -- not to mention the cost of taking Graduate Record Examination's general and subject-oriented tests, which are around \$120 a piece -- and some colleges charge students to send transcripts, although not mine, thankfully. Multiply those costs by the fact that many students apply to 10 to 15 different graduate schools, and you get the picture.)

Most of the application process is done on the Web, but you still have to mail a few things the old-fashioned way, namely a writing sample and a personal statement about why you want to pursue a Ph.D.

The writing sample is easy enough, but the personal statement? On the surface, writing a personal statement didn't sound like a very difficult thing to do -- it seemed like a slightly harder version of the application essays I wrote to get into my undergraduate college. But now that I've finished writing mine, I realize it was the weightiest thing in that mailbox.

About four months ago, as I prepared to start crafting my personal statement, I stopped in to visit my mentor, Bill Jeremiah, to get some tips -- just in case I encountered writer's block.

"Bill," I said. "I've never written a personal statement before. Any advice?"

He glanced at me from over the mountain of undergraduate essays he was grading. "Well," he said, "the personal statement is probably the single most important part of your application. It has to be absolutely perfect."

"Perfect?" I gulped. "What do you mean by 'perfect,' exactly? Are you suggesting an objective standard by which mine and all other personal statements will be measured? Or are you saying, perfect in the sense that my statement is an accurate portrayal of an individual life, with all its flaws and yet noble qualities as well? I mean, how could a personal statement even be 'perfect' when, by its very nature, such statements are subjective?"

Bill sighed and laid his pen gently on his desk. "Don't worry about it. Just be yourself and you should do fine."

When I returned to my apartment, Bill's exhortation rang through my head, "It has to be *perfect*." I tried to think if I had ever written -- or ever read -- a perfect document, when I was suddenly reminded of my favorite "Far Side" cartoon. In it, Abe Lincoln stands in front of a podium with a crowd of people gathered around. The reader can see over Lincoln's shoulder. On the podium rests a piece of paper, which reads:

And the bartender said, "That's not a duck!" (Pause for laughter.) Four score and seven years ago ...

Right! I thought. Begin with a joke or a funny anecdote to get the reader's attention. Show that admissions committee that although I am a serious-minded scholar, I can appreciate a good knock-knock joke or well-placed pun. I mined my brain for amusing personal stories that somehow related to my desire to pursue a Ph.D. in English literature, but came up empty-handed. I needed help, so I turned to the guidebook on applying to graduate school that a professor had given me as a graduation gift. Under "personal statements," I read the following: "Do not attempt humor."

As the walls of writer's block began to collapse in on me, I remembered Bill's other piece of advice, "Just be yourself." I took a deep breath, sat down at my computer, and began to type:

Occasionally, when I read a book, there are moments when the gulf between past and present contracts, and I am suddenly aware of my connection to a larger community, a great chain of readers stretching back into history, who have all interacted with this work, just as I have now. Those moments always leave me with the sense that literature has gravity -- that the ideas put forth in novels, poems, and stories have weight and should be reckoned with. Perhaps that feeling first inspired my love and passion for the study of literature.

The next morning, I sent Bill a copy of my first draft. I expected to see a response in a day or two, something jocular, but brief, saying, "Great job, good start, just a few things to fix and you're set." But about an hour later, I received the following e-mail message: "We need to talk."

When I sat down in Bill's office, he held a copy of my statement so red with ink that it looked as if it had been attacked by wild beasts. "I don't know quite how to say this," Bill began, his brow furrowed with concern, "but I have to say, if I were on an admissions committee and read this statement, I'd put it on the rejection pile."

"Oh?" I said. "That's very interesting. What's wrong with it?"

"Well, let's look at this word, for instance," he said. "I'd recommend you not say 'love.' It might communicate the wrong message. What about 'commitment'? Jane, I'm going to be honest with you; your statement sounds a little critically naïve. Are you sure you're ready for graduate school? You shouldn't go just because you love to read -- grad school is about preparing for a profession. It's not a book club."

"I know it's not a book club," I said. "I was just trying to show that I care."

"Yes," Bill said. "But that's not the point of a statement like this, really. The people who read these things want to know whether or not you will be an asset to their program. You have to prove that you have the potential to eventually publish, teach, and make presentations. You have to present yourself both as professional and as someone who is able to be taught."

In that light, I could see why my statement must have been such a disappointing shock. I pictured Bill at home, sitting in an overstuffed leather chair in a book-lined, walnut-paneled office. In one hand, he holds a glass of an estate-bottled Napa merlot, in the other, a copy of my personal statement. He begins to read. Suddenly, he sees them -- red-flag words scattered through my essay like land mines. He chokes on his wine; does she know how this sounds? He can picture the admissions committee descending on my statement like a pack of wolves on a wounded dog. Words like "love," and "passion" do not belong in a personal statement about doctoral study in English. They belong in a Harlequin romance. The

statement is childishly idealistic and lacks the proper level of critical detachment needed in a serious scholar. Somewhere outside, echoing across the snowdrifts, he hears a howl.

I returned to my apartment and looked at my statement. Bill was right. It did seem naïvely idealistic. Too much like *Dead Poets Society*, and not enough like *Discipline and Punish*. As I sat down at my desk to begin again, I tried to channel my inner Foucault so that I could think about my work and my abilities with the appropriate critical distance.

This, it seems, is the real challenge of academic writing -- how to write about a topic in an engaging, yet detached manner. I don't think I've quite mastered it, though I'm trying.

When I was an undergraduate, I began to notice a change in my writing style as I entered upper-level English courses. My essays tended to be jargon-heavy and full of what Hemingway called \$10 words. When I read them now, I'm reminded of when I was a young girl and used to walk around the house in my mother's high heels, tripping in my attempt at sophistication. My writing sounded like I was playacting at being an academic rather than actually being one.

Like many students in my position, I am still weaning myself from the notion that graduate school is analogous to college. On a rational level, most of us realize that graduate school will be difficult -- much harder than our undergraduate course work. But on an emotional level, many students believe that graduate school will somehow fulfill unsatisfied intellectual desires -- that it will be a haven for ideas, or a place to finally prove our genius.

My eureka came when I realized that graduate school is not a summer camp for intellectuals; it's more like boot camp for future academics. The purpose of graduate school is to train students for a profession. It's like an apprenticeship of sorts, except for at the end of it, you're not necessarily going to find a job.

The more I thought about graduate study as a job, the easier it was to write my statement. No longer did I feel compelled to divulge my innermost hopes and dreams; that wasn't what this particular assignment required. Instead, I needed to state why I should be hired to be a graduate student.

And I think I made a good case for myself -- maybe not a "perfect" case, but a solid one nonetheless. Now I just have to wait and see if anyone else agreed.