

FELLOWSHIPS: REVISING THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

In her book, "The Situation and the Story", Vivian Gornick talks about the power of a strong narrative and the development of a persona. "This narrator becomes a persona. Its tone of voice, its angle of vision, the rhythm of its sentences, what it selects to observe and what to ignore are chosen to serve the subject; yet at the same time the way the narrator - or the persona - sees things is, to the largest degree, the thing being seen." (p6-7) She later goes on to say, "It is the instrument of illumination." (p7)

We are our own best editors, especially when drafting personal statements. We know the nuances of our life more than anyone else. However, the complexity of these internalized stories can result in jumbled narratives that perhaps do not fit at first within the context of a prompt for a post-graduate fellowships application.

So how do we make sense of it all? Take Gornick's quote. Bit by bit, break it down, and apply her list about personas to your own writing. Using that, what can you do to make your draft better?

**Step 1: Print out your essay and grab a pen.
The best editing will happen AWAY from your computer screen.**

Step 2: Read your draft five times, each time looking at one of the below tasks. Make notations addressing places where you can address: 1) tone of voice, 2) angle of vision, 3) the rhythm of sentences, 4) what it selects to observe, and 5) what to ignore, with grace and strength.

Tone of voice

Are you striking a formal or casual tone? Does this tone match with your intended audience? Who is your audience? Is this prompt part of a larger series of essays, and does your tone need to change for each prompt (i.e. the Knight-Hennessy questions versus the Stanford graduate program prompt itself)?

Angle of vision

Fellowships selection panels are looking for specificity in goals and purpose. Re-read your essay and think – could anyone from a similar undergraduate major/ from my country/ from my personal background have produced a similar essay? Do I have a clear focus of how I am using these ideas from undergraduate as **SPRINGBOARD** into the future, not just in the fellowship program itself, but for life after the fellowship?

The rhythm of its sentences

Read at a sentence to sentence level. Which sentences feel fluffy? Which sentences go on for five lines? Which sentences don't fit with your thesis? (PS – do you have a thesis? Underline it.)

What it selects to observe

Some prompts are wanting to understand your true academic capacity whereas some prompts are looking to better understand the holistic person. Selecting the best evidence is key here. Reverse outline your piece to highlight your facts that you are using. Make sure they are the best pieces of supporting evidence.

What to ignore

Context is key. Much like in an academic essay where you integrate several primary and secondary texts to support your idea, you must apply the same concepts here. The only difference is that your life is becoming a “primary text” as well as the larger canon of literature and research in your intended field of study. Pick and choose. Find the most compelling evidence, and leave the remaining scraps of the cutting room floor.

Finding Gornicks’ “instrument of illumination”

In our first drafts, this “illuminating light” is perhaps at about 50%. The light will become stronger with each draft. Take the time to address these five points above, and your prose will become stronger, your thesis more precise, and your longer term vision more refined.

Onward!