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 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.

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