

If you are applying for nationally competitive scholarships, for graduate school, or for a number of post-

The Rhodes and Marshall competitions require a 1000-word personal essay: the Fulbright, a “*curriculum vita*.” You are asked to share your “academic and other interests.” A clearer charge might be: compose an essay that reveals who you are, what you care about, and what you intend to do in this life. Tell this story in a compelling manner, and do so in less than a thousand words. What’s so hard about that? Simply make sense of your life. (right.) But what does that mean? What will it look like?

of you as a person, a student, a potential scholarship winner, and (looking into the future) a former scholarship recipient.

The reader must be invited to get to know you, personally. Bridge the assumed distance o

While you may draw on experiences or observations captured in your personal journal, your essay should not read like a diary. Share what is relevant, using these experiences to give a helpful context for your story. And include only what you are comfortable sharing—be prepared to discuss at an interview what you include.

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Who do I want to be?
What kind of contribution do I want to make, and how?
Why does it make sense for me to study at Oxford (or York, LSE, Cambridge, Sussex)?

The personal statement comes from inside you, passionate and gutsy. Its composition is organic, a natural growth dictated by an obscure, internal logic. You don't "make it up"; instead you listen. You "get it down."

First, you must trick your brain into letting you play. It wants everything nice and tidy, arranged in neat, labeled cubbyholes. Your artist brain is messy; like playing with finger paints. Lull your logic brain to sleep:

Engage in mindless, repetitive activity. Turn off the TV and stereo; go for a run, do dishes, dig holes. Do anything that keeps you busy but allows your mind to wander. Be sure to keep a micro cassette recorder handy! Ideas may come thick and fast. Begin writing as soon as you wake up in the morning. Don't shower, don't eat (OK, you can have coffee), just turn on the computer. So you're not fully awake; that's good. Neither is your logic brain.

Now do this everyday. Well, maybe not every single day; make appointments with yourself. You won't have brilliant ideas each time. Some days you sit and stare at the computer screen. Nothing happens. You develop imaginary rashes that need immediate medical attention. You suddenly remember a test you should be studying for. But you sit there; you focus; eventually, an idea bubbles to the surface. You start writing.

From Getting Creative with the Truman Personal Statements, written by Jane Curlin, Ph.D.; Director of Student Academic Grants & Awards, Willamette University; writer and consultant.

Reflect on some specific questions that may lead you to a more general expressimay