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THE RHETORIC OF SELF-PROMOTION IN PERSONAL STATEMENTS

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THE RHETORIC OF SELF-PROMOTION IN PERSONAL STATEMENTS

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## THE RHETORIC OF SELF-PROMOTION IN PERSONAL STATEMENTS

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Rhetoricians have all but ignored what may be the single most important text that students write in their undergraduate careers, a personal statement for a post-baccalaureate degree program. Business school, medical school, law school, and graduate school all require one with an application, but nowhere in the curriculum are students taught how to write it—an irony, it would seem, for institutions to overlook the document demanded of any who wish to rise in their ranks. Filling this void, a plethora of popular guidebooks promise to lead applicants through the narrow rhetorical straits of writing a personal statement; unfortunately the advice therein suffers from an unsettling amount of inconsistency. The asymmetry between popular and scholarly literature on personal statements may owe to their being a “homely discourse” (Carolyn Miller)—too instrumental in function and limited in circulation to have attracted much scholarly notice. Since the time that Miller called upon researchers to regard workaday genres, many have taken heed, but comparable attention to the personal statement is long overdue. The genre deserves critical attention, not only for the sake of future applicants, but for the sake of elucidating the interplay of some abiding interests in rhetoric and composition—genre, identity, and professional socialization. This dissertation brings together a series of empirical studies on personal statements written for two different programs of study:

doctoral study in clinical psychology and medical school. Methodologically these studies coordinate data from multiple sources: discourse analyses of original texts, interviews with applicant writers and expert readers, and observations of writing center consultations. Results show how a profession's partisanship along the research/practice divide requires strikingly different self-identifications from its novitiates: apprentice scientists of psychology must craft identities as empirical problem-solvers in service to the scientific community; aspiring doctors must craft identities as altruistic healers in service to humanity. The writing center study proposes a method of conversation analysis based on politeness theory in sociolinguistics in order to analyze the co-invocation of absent audiences in tutorial. The project concludes with a defense of personal writing against the denigration it has suffered under the epithet of expressivism.

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## PROLOGUE

A feeling of uncertainty, darkened by a soupçon of dread, came over me when I finally stopped procrastinating and turned to write my personal statement. It was fall 1999, and I was already feeling vaguely millenarian. I was desperate to leave a doctoral program in theater where I had been at odds both intellectually and interpersonally with the department's triumvirate of graduate faculty. While enrolled in the program, I had worked as a composition TA in the English department to support myself. In my misery, this moonlighting had given me hope. Having kept a foot in my old discipline, I was desirous to return to it fully as a doctoral student.

Before I could plan my homecoming, however, I faced the difficult rhetorical task of plotting a continuous narrative from a discontinuous past. I did not deem it wise to own up to my disaffection with the theater program as a reason for leaving. How could I convince my audience that the program itself was the source of my trouble and not me? Would not the mere mention of disaffection risk self-indictment? In the end, I decided to gloss over the disjuncture rather than attempt an apologia. I pretended that my time spent in the theater program had been part of some master plan leading inexorably to rhetoric and composition. On the matter of what exactly theater history contributed to this trajectory, however, I was purposely vague. Like a magician, I sought to train my reader's attention on the emerging rabbit while kicking the sham hat in the wings.

I felt pressed by what Paley (1996) has termed the "rhetorical paradox" of writing application essays. She attributes the discomfort of writing college application essays to the countervailing currents of the rhetorical situation. On the one hand, applicants are

encouraged to open up, to speak frankly about their lives; on the other hand, they know all too well that gatekeepers will judge these self-representations for their institutional compatibility.

On occasion, at unguarded moments, the “other side” will own up to the imbalance of power inherent to the rhetorical situation. Here is one such admission from the commentary page of *Northeastern Law Magazine*:

What is the personal statement, after all, but an opportunity to bare your soul to a group of complete strangers in hopes that they will fulfill your most ardent professional, and sometimes even, personal desire. Accept me, embrace me, be impressed by me, the personal statement begs, cajoles, even screams. This is who I am, how can you deny me?

And yet denying people is what it is all about. At the School of Law, we accept only a quarter of our applicants. The rest receive the dreaded “thanks, but no thanks” letter. (Feldman, 2002, p. 40)

After coming to the University of Texas at Austin and having the idea of researching personal statements, I wondered if my experience writing one would be comparable to the experiences of others. Had they too felt vaguely disassociated from the “I” that fingered them from the page? After asking around, I learned that I was not alone in my unpleasant memories about writing the personal statement, even among those who had nothing particular about their past to hide. They spoke of second-guessing what the reader wanted to hear. I soon decided that writing a personal statement amounts to writing in a rhetorical void.

A writer's audience may always be a fiction, as Walter Ong (1975) has said, but the audience for a personal statement is surely more a work of fiction than most. A vexingly unknown quantity, the reader in this instance is not really an identifiable individual at all, but a nameless, faceless plurality existing somewhere . . . else. What could one possibly know about this audience other than that they read personal statements in mind-numbing doses, and therefore one must try to shake them from their stupor? But then how exactly does one attract attention of the good sort? The endeavor is a walk across a balance beam: To sound eager while not wheedling; sincere, but not confessional; intellectually focused, but not rigid. A thin beam indeed!

After a number of retrospective commiserations with fellow graduate students, I learned that we had all suffered in silence and isolation; the beginning of remedy lay in bringing us isolates together.

Here then, I decided, were the makings of a dissertation project—a genre of instrumental importance cloaked in mystery. Along with a chance to allay some of the anxiety that this mystery causes applicants, I determined that an analysis of this genre would also speak to some enduring intellectual interests in the field of rhetoric and composition such as identity construction and professional socialization. As a textual site upon which these rhetorical processes converge and commingle, the personal statement is a genre whose examination can tell us how students employ the art of rhetoric in what may be the single most important text they write in their college years.

This dissertation brings together a series of empirical studies on personal statements written for two different programs of study: doctoral study in clinical

psychology and medical school. Methodologically I coordinated variant sources of data: discourse analyses of original texts, interviews with writers, interviews with expert readers, and observations of writing center consultations. In approaching the genre of personal statements from these multiple vantage points, I sought to avoid isolating it as a formal object. Faigley (1992) has taken linguistic analysis to task for concentrating on text structure to the exclusion of contextual milieu. In taking a multi-modal approach to genre analysis, I have tried to follow recommendations by others who advocate context-sensitive text analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Barton, 2002; Huckin, 1992).

Chapter 1, an introduction, applies the label “homely discourse” to the personal statement and asks why this genre of pragmatic importance has been all but completely ignored by rhetorical scholars. Chapter 2 provides theoretical background for the project in recent genre theory.

PART ONE, comprising chapters 3 and 4, concentrates on personal statements as texts. Both chapters perform a variant of content/stylistic analysis on a textual corpus: the first one, a corpus of clinical psychology personal statements and the second, medical school personal statements.

PART TWO, including chapters 5 and 6, shifts attention from texts to the writers who produce them, drawing on interview data to document the experiences of applicants both during and after writing their personal statements.

PART THREE, encompassing only chapter 7, examines the role of a third party who participates anonymously in the drafting of many personal statements, the writing center tutor. This chapter reports the results of a conversation analysis of consultation

dialogues designed to identify patterns of talk that either complicate or facilitate mediation of the absent evaluator.

The conclusion, chapter 8, makes a spirited defense of personal writing against the denigration it has suffered under the epithet of expressivism. Lastly, a coda brings the discussion home, so to speak, with a brief look at personal statements in the discipline of English.

## INTRODUCTION

The idea of carrying out a research project on personal statements first occurred to me while reading Carolyn Miller's (1984) landmark article on genre theory, "Genre as Social Action." Devitt (2004) credits Miller's article as a pivotal in shifting the concept of genre away from a study of "critic's classifications to a rhetorical study of generic actions of everyday readers and writers" (p. 1-2). The major claim Miller makes in the article is that rhetoricians should move beyond thinking of genre as a typology of formalistic text features to thinking of genre as a situated "social action," a transiently typified response to a recurrent rhetorical situation. Writers who continually find themselves needing to achieve a particular communicative goal will develop and refine, over time and through trial and error, a textual vehicle that effectively achieves this goal. Since, however, the rhetorical conditions under which writers communicate with readers are not fixed, genres themselves are continually adapted by their users to meet altered conditions. What had once been a term largely reserved for particular schools of literary analysis acquired, as result of this theoretical revamping, a gravitational pull for intellectuals in rhetoric and composition.

This theoretical revamping of genre aligned the concept with the "social turn" that was then beginning to overtake the field as a whole, shunting scholarly interest away from cognitive approaches to writing research toward sociocultural ones, an orientation that remains predominant today. Whereas cognitive research had primarily studied individual writers producing individual texts, genre, once socially "rehabilitated,"

provided researchers with a concept subsuming both individuals and their texts. Genres are not the property of individuals, but rather the property of “discourse communities” (Swales, 1990); thus genre is an analytical construct suited for inquiry into the effects of social milieu on the production and reception of texts.

Coming to Miller’s article two decades after its publication, I appreciated the historical significance of its major claim, but what galvanized me was a minor claim that she makes almost in passing: she asks rhetoricians to pay serious regard to what she terms “homely discourses.” These homely discourses are mundane genres that, while enjoying neither wide public circulation nor high profile, often carry significant instrumental importance. Since the passage in which Miller makes this plea has been frequently reproduced in subsequent genre studies (cf. Swales, 1990; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995), it is worth quoting verbatim:

To consider as potential genres such homely discourses as the letter of recommendation, the user manual, the progress report, the ransom note, the lecture, and the white paper, as well as the eulogy, the apologia, the inaugural, the public proceeding, and the sermon, is not to trivialize the study of genres: it is to take seriously the rhetoric in which we are immersed and the situations in which we find ourselves. (p. 155)

Since the time that Miller made this call to broaden the scope of genre study, many have taken heed. In what may be the most influential of descriptive genre analyses of academic discourses, homely and otherwise, Swales (1990) in his book *Genre Analysis* examined not only the academic research article, but also ancillary texts that support it

such as abstracts, grant proposals, and reprint requests. Following Swales with another book-length study of genre, Bhatia (1993) took up the analysis of homely discourses such as academic job letters and dissertation introductions. In another book-length study, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) treated a number of low-profile texts including peer review letters. As for chapters and journal articles on pedestrian academic texts and parts thereof, Motta-Roth (1998) anatomized academic book reviews; Danahay (1996) analyzed curricula vitae; Connor and Mauranen (1999), grant proposals; Faber (1996), conference abstracts; Hyland (2003), dissertation acknowledgements, and Precht (1998), letters of recommendation.

When I originally read through Miller's list of homely discourses, I immediately thought of the personal statement as a potential member of this rhetorical underclass. And after conducting a search in the literature, my hunch was confirmed. Only three published studies on the genre existed--two of them on application essays at the undergraduate level (Paley, 1996; Hatch, Hill, & Hayes, 1993), and only one on personal statements at the post-baccalaureate level (Graff & Hoberek, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the slender body of scholarly literature, there is a bulky body of popular literature on the topic. A large number of how-to books promise to rescue applicants ready to embark on the task but already finding themselves at sea. Some of the more hope-inspiring titles include *How to Write Winning Personal Statements for Graduate and Professional School* (Stelzer, 1997), *Perfect Personal Statements* (Stewart, 1996), *Graduate Admissions Essays: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why* (Asher, 1991),



and *Essays That Will Get You into Medical School* (Kaufman, Dowhan, & Burnham, 1998).

I first became acquainted with these guidebooks in my work at the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). Since nowhere in the curriculum is the personal statement taught, the writing center effectively takes up the slack. I cannot help but find it ironic that an educational institution would abnegate responsibility for providing curricular support for a genre that students must produce in order to rise in its ranks. And the demand for support is great, if writing center statistics are taken as any indication. Of the approximately 10,000 consultations logged annually at the writing center at UT, around 15%, or some 1,500, are for personal statements. As I tutored students applying to a variety of professional and graduate programs, I occasionally consulted the guidebooks for assistance. At first glance the advice therein seemed sound enough, but when I started to examine them more carefully in preparation to undertake this research, I occasionally found myself confused.

Much of the advice falls short of true utility for being too vague or too pat: “Although it was expressed in many different ways (be honest, be sincere, be unique, be personal, and so on) it all came down to the same point: ‘Be Yourself’” (Kaufman, Dowhan, & Burnham, 1998, p. 7). At other times, the shortcoming is more troubling, as when advice across books—or, worse yet, in the *same* book—conflicts. For instance, Stelzer (1997) quotes an admission officer who recommends that “People simply ought to write something that’s revealing about themselves. What’s written should be an honest representation of the writer and not something artificial that’s done to satisfy a reader” (p.

117). This counsel seems straightforward enough only if the reader has already forgotten what another admissions officer recommended on the apposing page: “I think that instead of just looking at the essay entirely from their own perspective—‘how am I going to use this space?’—applicants should consider how it will appear to the reader” (p.115-116). These conflicting directives are difficult, if not downright impossible, to reconcile.

Such discrepancies would seem to cry out for the arbitration of rhetorical research. In Stephen North’s (1987) history of the field of composition, he argues that researchers need to subject the “lore” about writing that informs much writing instruction to systematic testing in order to legitimize composition as field of intellectual inquiry. In North is right, then why have rhetoric scholars left the lore that fills these how-to books untouched?

Perhaps this lack of attention owes to the general devaluation of personal writing that has resulted from the controversy surrounding it in composition pedagogy. In the long-standing debate between expressivists and social-constructionists, expressivism has decidedly come out the loser. The debate generated widespread skepticism about personal writing as a naïve holdover of romanticism incongruent with a poststructuralist understanding of language. Expressivism is not entirely obsolete, of course, but when espoused, it is done so on the defensive. The label “expressivism” has taken on a pejorative meaning that chafes those who want to reclaim personal writing from its debasement (Paley, 2001).

Two of the most influential opponents of expressivism in the debate were David Bartholomae and the late James Berlin. Bartholomae's objections to expressivism were principally epistemological in nature whereas Berlin's objections were ideological.

Bartholomae (1995) associated personal writing with the reproduction of cultural commonplaces students absorb from dinner table conversation and then offer up in their essays as original thought. He accused expressivists of perpetuating the illusion that students could transcend the institutional structures of the writing classroom and write with originality and authority about their life experiences. The prose generated from this illusion he termed "sentimental realism," which he dismissed for being unmoored from its present context—consequently ahistorical, apolitical, and arhetorical. In its place, Bartholomae championed a writing pedagogy of critique, insisting that students acknowledge and continually pry apart their imbrication in the multiple layers of the sociocultural present.

From a more overtly politicized position, Berlin (1988) insinuated that expressivism was complicit with consumer capitalism in its concentration on the individual as a monad capable of crafting his or her own authentic identity. Expressivism, he maintained, could inadvertently promote inequities of the status quo by atomizing individuals and thereby preventing the sort of collective action necessary for widespread change: "in the name of empowering the individual . . . [expressivism's] naivety about economic, social, and political arrangements can lead to the marginalizing of the individuals who would resist a dehumanizing society, rendering them ineffective through their isolation (p. 492).

In the aftermath of the debate, some have come to the defense of personal writing: Sherrie Gradin (1995), Karen Paley (2001), and Thomas Newkirk (1997) have all written books on the subject. Newkirk, for one, finds irony in the turn of events:

There is a strange schizophrenia about narrative in English departments. On the one hand they are built upon the narrative—it should come as no news that students become English majors to get academic credit for reading narrative fiction. Yet in writing classes there is the sense that narratives are relatively *easy to write* and *academically suspect*” (p. 20, emphasis mine).

In concurrence with Newkirk’s observation, I will make the case (expressly in the conclusion) that the personal statement is neither 1) easy to write nor 2) academically suspect. I believe that serious regard paid to this homely discourse will give us reason to rethink the devaluation of personal writing that has largely held since the time that Bartholomae and Berlin made their withering critiques.

#### NOTE

1. It is worth noting that since the time I began the project, scholarly interest in the personal statement has emerged. Through informal networking at academic conferences, I met others who had conducted research on the genre but had yet to find a home in print for their work. Therefore, three of us banded together and proposed a special issue on the personal statement to the journal *Issues in Writing*. The editors agreed to pass editorship of issue 15.1 to me and co-editor Ellen Barton of Wayne State

University. The special issue on medical school personal statements is due out in spring 2005.

## **THE PERSONAL STATEMENT AS A READERLY GENRE**

Since the time of his influential *Genre Analysis*, John Swales (1990) has continually refined his thinking about genre. In 1996 he revisited the subject of subsidiary academic genres in a book chapter titled “Occluded Genres in the Academy: The Case of the Submission Letter.” His notion of an “occluded genre” is a useful one for characterizing the personal statement.

In Swales’ coinage, “occluded genre” refers to those texts that buttress crucial endeavors of the academy but never see the light of publication. Furthermore, because they are seldom the subject of explicit instruction, novices have few occasions to practice them. The personal statement qualifies as an occluded genre given its tightly circumscribed circulation. Typically, a personal statement is read only by members of an admissions committee and no one else. My own difficulties in finding departments that would allow me IRB-sanctioned access to their personal statements on file attests to their occlusion.

Here is the list of occluded genres as Swales enumerated them in his 1996 chapter:

1. Requests letters (for data, copies of papers, advice, etc.)
2. Application letters (for jobs, scholarships, etc.)
3. Submission letters (accompanying articles, etc.)
4. Research proposals (for outside funding, etc.)
5. Recommendation letters (for students, job seekers, etc.)
6. Article reviews (as part of the review process)
7. Book or grant proposal reviews (as above)
8. Evaluation letters for tenure or promotion (for academic committees)
9. External evaluations (for academic institutions) (p. 47)

His stated logic to the ordering is reverse seniority: established scholars may use any one of the listed genres depending on the occasion while junior scholars mostly use the early entries until career advancement opens up to them the entire range of rhetorical occasions. Personal statements clearly belong to the second category in the list, application letters, which rank low in the hierarchy of seniority. Although Swales acknowledges that all items after number four require a writer to engage in evaluation, I do not believe this distinction goes far enough in accounting for the significant qualitative change that differentiates the first four items from the remainder.

The qualitative difference between items 1-4 and items 5-9 is an inversion in the balance of power between writer and reader. In the first four genres, the reader is the one who has greater power because in each case the writer is making some request of the reader. In the remaining four, however, the situation reverses, and it is the writer who wields the power to evaluate, judge, or bestow something requested by the reader. As a refinement to Swales' characterization, I would call the first four, genres of *supplication*, and the last five, genres of *evaluation*.

If we view Swales' list as including two qualitatively different groups, distinguished by a differential investiture power in the writer as compared to the reader, and we were to order the items according to variable of power, then the personal statement would come very first in the list since it is the most supplicatory genre of them all. As compared to the first item in Swales' ordering, request letters (for data, copies of papers, advice, etc.), the personal statement carries far higher stakes for the writer. After

all, if an applicant cannot gain entry to a degree program, then the rest of the list becomes moot, as a career will have been arrested before it has even begun.

The dynamic of power as exercised by writer as compared to reader is an important factor not always acknowledged in conceptions of genre, but the personal statement provides a compelling case for why it deserves more consideration.

Consider the definition of genre as given by Bhatia (1993) at the beginning of his book *Analysing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings*:

Genre is a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Most often it is highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value.

These constraints, however, are often exploited by the expert members of the discourse community within the framework of the discourse community to achieve private intentions of socially recognized purpose(s). (p. 13)

It is worthwhile to consider each of the three components of Bhatia's definition in relation to the personal statement, which, I believe, satisfies the first two, but challenges the third.

[1] Genre is a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs.



All post-baccalaureate degree programs—graduate school, law school, business school, medical school—require a personal statement as part of an application. Of all the parts that make up an application, the personal statement is the only one under an applicant’s control at the time of preparing of an application. Standardized test scores, GPA, coursework taken, extracurricular activities, letters of recommendation—all these other components have already been determined. These will speak for the applicant; the personal statement, however, is the one place in an application where the applicant get to speak for herself. The personal statement grants applicants the opportunity to synthesize and annotate their credentials, to mobilize past experiences and current interests into an argument for their future potential. Applicants must make the most compelling case possible for their preparation and fitness for the target program. For applicants, the purpose of the genre is plain: to gain entry into the desired degree program.

[2] Most often it is highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value.

There are several strictures that impinge on personal statements: 1) they must be short (typically 2-3 pages); 2) they must address a prompt; 3) they are submitted as part of a larger application file or “genre set” (Devitt, 2004). These strictures mean that applicants must choose carefully what content to include in a personal statement, as the textual space allotted to them is precious.

[3] These constraints, however, are often exploited by the expert members of the discourse community within the framework of the discourse community to achieve private intentions of socially recognized purpose(s).

The third proposition in Bhatia's definition of genre is the one that does not map so well onto the personal statement because expert members of the discourse community do not write personal statements. While it is true that they produce genres of familial resemblance such as fellowship and grant applications or job letters, these genres differ in the degree to which the self itself is the object of promotion. In producing these documents, established members of a profession are not enjoined to account for the why and wherefore of their motivation. Disclosing one's personal motivation is only demanded of those who wait at the gate. Thus, contra Bhatia's third characteristic of genre, authors of personal statements are limited in how much they can "exploit" the genre according to their "private intentions."

Aberrantly, the personal statement is a genre largely under the control of its readers rather than its writers. Not only are readers far more familiar with the genre through their repeated exposure to individual instantiations of it, they also exercise control in deciding whether or not an instantiation achieves the genre's goal, namely whether or not the applicant gains admission to the targeted program. While it may be true that each applicant brings to the task his own proprietary content—a set of individual life experiences and future ambitions—it is the reader who ultimately determines whether this content counts as relevant. In judging the relevance of the content, readers well acquainted with the genre's range of permutation will approach each text with evaluative

schemata honed and conditioned by prior reading and an attention span curtailed by competing demands on their time. Writers whose statements fall too near the prototype are likely to be dismissed as unexceptional, while those who try for novelty may alienate readers by flouting too many expectations. As a genre operating at the valve of professional inflow, the personal statement has strictures governing its reception that tend to promote conservatism in those who produce it.

Readers who screen applicants tend to take their task seriously. An admissions officer for a medical school characterizes his screening responsibilities as nothing short of a moral obligation:

The members of a medical admissions committee are responsible for choosing the next generation of medical doctors. These are the people who will be healing our children, curing us and our parents, and literally saving lives. Put it in that perspective and the responsibility we feel is enormous. For this reason, we're going to choose to accept someone we feel we know, trust, and like. (Kaufman, Dowhan, & Burnham, 1998, p. 7)

The stress placed upon the applicant's character is clear here. When applicants recount their formation of character, they are not simply telling a story about themselves, but, synecdochically, a story about the profession at large. In order to make a compelling case for their future promise in the profession, applicants must affirm the profession's mission by celebrating the principles that endow its members with a sense of purpose.

But sometimes one reader's synecdoche is another reader's poppycock.

As part of my research into personal statements in clinical psychology, I interviewed faculty members in the clinical program at the University of Texas at Austin. I asked each interviewee to read and comment on a sample personal statement written by an applicant who had been denied the year before. I was particularly interested in how they would react to the opening anecdote of the statement. By this time, I had already conducting a textual analysis, and I was fairly confident in my prediction of how they would react. My confidence was completely unfounded.

Here is what they read:

“Look around you, you are surrounded by valedictorians, class presidents, yearbook editors, and captains of sports teams. Welcome to Penn.” The words of my freshman advisor are still fresh in my mind. Six months earlier, I was honored as the valedictorian of my graduating high school class, a distinction that I earned through years of diligence and sacrifice. However, the first two years of college were a humbling experience. My high personal expectations were challenged, and I began to lose confidence in my abilities to achieve my academic goals. I made the difficult decision to withdraw during the spring of my sophomore year. In hindsight, this choice had an extremely positive influence on my academic career and personal well-being.

Taking a semester off gave me the opportunity to reevaluate my goals and priorities. For the first time in my life, hard work had failed to yield the scholastic outcomes that I desired. In time, I came to realize that these obstacles were merely challenges and learning experiences on my journey to becoming a more

well-rounded student. During those months of personal reflection and discovery, the self-knowledge that I gained made me a stronger, more confident young woman. No longer do I measure myself by the grades that I receive, nor do I sacrifice my emotional well-being for academic goals. Though I am still highly motivated and a perfectionist at heart, I have reorganized my priorities. I returned to Penn with a newfound understanding of myself and my ambitions.

Two of the professors I interviewed responded favorably to the story: one liked that the applicant overcame hardship; the other liked the fluidity of the prose. Offsetting these positive responses, however, were two negative ones: one professor responded flatly that the narrative did not work for her, and the other called the story “bullshit” because he thought the writer contrived it to drop the name of her ivy league alma mater.

I find it unsettling that these reactions run the gamut of negative and positive possibility, but even more unsettling is that fact they do not even reflect the same evaluative criteria. One reader expressed approval of the writer’s theme of overcoming hardship, but another’s reaction was based on writing skill with no reference to content. And yet a third “reads into” the story an ulterior motive for the writer who allegedly sought to aggrandize herself. These irreconcilable differences of opinion prove a point that Erving Goffman (1959) makes in his theorizing about the performance of self in everyday life. Goffman remarks that despite their best efforts to promote a particular persona, people communicate much more by what they “give off” than by what they “give”:

A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect, arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (pp. 252-53)

When it comes to crediting or discrediting a character, the interviewees' discrepant appraisals might well lead us to believe that the audience is a weathercock.

In his analysis of Coles and Vopat's collection of best student essays, Lester Faigley (1992) argues that teachers' assessments of student writing owe more to their assumptions about acceptable authorial subjectivities than teachers would be willing or perhaps even able to admit. That Faigley even needs to make such an argument shows how well teachers try to police themselves on the matter of prejudice. But with admissions committee readers, self-restraint is lifted because no previous acquaintance (in the majority of cases) links writer to reader so that the reader does not have to justify whatever judgment he or she passes on the text. Distance and anonymity attenuate the need for answerability. At the site of textual reception, admissions readers need only accept or deny an applicant—no explanations required, none given. Add to this circumstance the further factor that admissions committees are not assessing the writing, but expressly the writer. It is self that is for sale in a personal statement, as any distinction between logos and ethos has effectively collapsed. For these reasons, I

believe one can fairly say that the personal statement, however self-expressive, is thoroughly a reader's genre, a reality whose effects ripple through all the chapters to come.

## **PART ONE—TEXTS**

### **3**

#### **EMPIRICISM OVER INTUITION**

##### **Self-Fashioning in Clinical Psychology Personal Statements**

Applicants seeking help in preparing their personal statements can find an abundance of popular guidebooks promising to give them a competitive edge. Unfortunately, as noted in the introduction, these guidebooks do not always offer consistent advice. The example cited earlier illustrating this inconsistency came from a one-size-fits-all guidebook for law school, medical school, business school, and graduate school inclusively (Stelzer, 1997). The problem of conflicting advice does not end, however, when the intended audience narrows, but can also be found in niche-market books, such as those aimed at would-be clinical psychologists.

For instance, conflicting advice can be found when comparing Norcross, Mayne, and Sayette (2002) to Keith-Spiegel and Weiderman (2000). Norcross, Mayne, and Sayette claim that “many personal statements are ineffective because . . . the student fails to be ‘personal.’ . . . This is the part of the application where a committee gets to see you in a more personal light, an area where ‘you can be you’” (pp. 61-62). This invitation to applicants to be personal is qualified by Keith-Spiegel and Wiederman (2000), who caution applicants not to mention instances of trauma or treatment in psychotherapy (should they be part of the personal) because they “do not have control over the images such information might conjure in the minds of evaluators” (p. 209). The authors go on to acknowledge the “concealed agenda” of graduate admissions: to a large measure, an



applicant's success depends on whether the applicant "appear[s] capable of fulfilling the needs of others!" (p. 38). The authors register shock here, but in light of the forthcoming analysis, this revelation should not be news.

The inconsistent advice across these texts may well owe to the research/practice fault line that runs through the field of clinical psychology. Graduate programs in clinical psychology tend to align themselves with either research or practice in their training of graduate students, and, depending on their alignment, programs screen for different qualities in applicants. Comparing clinical program profiles in *Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical & Counseling Psychology*, Lawson (1995) found that programs with a practical orientation valued work experience, public service, and extracurricular activities more than research-oriented programs, which placed more importance on research experience.

Taking Lawson as a starting point, this chapter explores how these preferences affect the evaluation of personal statements. Reported here are the results of a comparative corpus analysis whose objective was to identify rhetorical features that distinguish the personal statements of admitted applicants from those of denied applicants. The statements of admitted applicants tend to exhibit rhetorical features resembling those characteristic of academic papers in the sciences. These features index an epistemic stance consistent with the objective orientation of scientific inquiry. In the main, writers of successful statements devote less space to describing their personal lives than they do the lives they have led and will continue to lead in a laboratory setting. These findings suggest that applicants applying to a program comparable to the one studied here may

increase their chances for acceptance by the degree to which they project a professional identity committed to a problem-based research agenda.

### INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

The institutional setting for this study is the psychology department at the University of Texas at Austin. Clinical psychology is the largest of seven subdivisions in the department and the area in which competition for graduate admission is fiercest. For academic year 2002, approximately 200 applied to clinical, and only 5 matriculated.

A few years ago the department adopted the mentor system under which faculty assume direct responsibility for the graduate students they admit. When newly admitted students arrive, they immediately join the professor's laboratory and begin to contribute to ongoing research projects. The mentor system has changed the way the department conducts its admission process. Applicants apply to one of the seven departmental divisions and are asked specify the faculty member(s) under whom they want to study. Once received, applications are passed directly to the specified faculty who then exercises complete autonomy in choosing which applicant(s) to admit. Before making an offer of admission, however, a faculty member typically conducts telephone and in-person interviews with top-choice candidates. The files of any who are passed over by the first faculty named are then forwarded to other professor(s) named if any.

The department's graduate advisor informed me that before the mentor system was instituted, GRE scores were the single greatest determiner of an application's success. Under the mentor system, the personal statement has taken on increased importance as the only place where an applicant can elaborate a research interest sufficiently to allow

faculty to judge how well that interest dovetails with their own. An informational leaflet mailed to those requesting an application from the department states that “considerable attention is given to upper-division coursework, letters of recommendation, and the applicant’s personal statement.” Another internal leaflet for the department’s own undergraduates informs them that “your personal statement is very important.”

There is ample reason to believe that the personal statement is a crucial component of an application to this program, but how comparable is this program to others? The *Insider’s Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical & Counseling Psychology* (Norcross, Mayne, & Sayette, 2002) reports the self-assigned ratings of programs on a continuum from practice oriented (number 1) to research oriented (number 7). This program ranks itself as a six, relatively high on the research end. Of the 184 schools listed, 74 rate themselves at four or above, and of those that rate themselves at exactly six, there are 34 in number. This program shares its rating with many peer programs across the country, including state schools such as Colorado, Arizona, Arizona State, Georgia, Minnesota, Virginia Tech, Maryland, Wisconsin, Berkeley; and private schools such as Duke, Vanderbilt, Yale, Pennsylvania. Personal statement prompts available to applicants online show a high degree of similarity from one school to another, suggesting that the results of this study can be generalized with some confidence to other clinical programs inclined towards research.

Although a department’s rating along the research-practice continuum indicates its commitment to research, the rating does not indicate the theoretical leanings of its faculty. There is, however, another parameter included in the same profile that furnishes

information about the theoretical preferences of faculty. Comparing the 1994/1995 edition of *Insider's Guide* to the 2002/2003 edition reveals a significant change in the theoretical preferences of the psychology department. In the 1994/1995 edition, the department reported 23% of its clinical faculty having a psychoanalytic orientation and 46% having a cognitive-behavioral orientation (Mayne, Norcross, & Sayette, 1994). In the 2002/2003 edition, the department reports no faculty with a psychoanalytic orientation and 75% with a cognitive-behavioral orientation (Norcross, Sayette, & Mayne, 2002),

This trend reflects the department's decisive preference for empirically confirmed methods of psychotherapy over psychoanalytic alternatives. In a textbook aimed at psychology undergraduates, Stanovich (2001) blames the widespread misconception of psychology as quasi-science on Freud, whose theories, he claims, fail to meet the criterion of falsifiability essential to Popperian science. According to Stanovich, the problem with Freud's baroque theory of mind is that its individual postulates only make sense within the entire psychodramatic theory of personality development whose constituents do not admit of validation through isolation and controlled testing as required by the scientific method. In short, Stanovich calls psychoanalysis a form of hermeneutics rather than a science, and the legacy of Freud, as virtuoso exegete and speculative theorist, continues to haunt psychologists who would rather practice a recognized science.

True to its commitment to empirically valid psychotherapy, the department founded its own psychotherapy clinic in which to train its graduate students. Before the

founding of this clinic, doctoral students satisfied their yearlong practicum requirement at locations outside the university. The department decided, however, that the experiences students were having at various sites in the community were not always in conformity with the empirical emphasis of the curriculum. Thus, in order to achieve consistency, the department moved the clinical practicum in house.

This decision came at a time of growing skepticism among health care insurers over the efficacy of psychotherapy. As Krauthammer (1985) wryly puts it, “As long as psychotherapies resist pressure to produce scientific evidence that they work, the economic squeeze will tighten. After all, if psychotherapy is really an art, it should be supported by the National Endowment [for the Arts], not by Blue Cross” (p. A17). Those who promote psychology as a science, such as this department, have made efforts to secure psychotherapy’s future as an insurable treatment through scientific validation.

#### DATA COLLECTION

The corpus of texts was drawn from the pool of applications submitted to the department’s clinical psychology doctoral program for academic year 2002. The original number of texts in the corpus totaled 45: a subset of 9 statements written by admitted applicants and a subset of 36 statements by denied applicants. The comparatively smaller number of successful statements owes to the department’s admissions procedure. The department does not extend an offer to any applicant before a faculty member has confirmed the applicant’s intention to accept through a telephone interview. This prior confirmation assures that few offers extended are subsequently declined. Under the circumstances, the 9 successful statements had to be solicited directly from students

already enrolled in the program; the 36 unsuccessful statements were sampled randomly from the 180 denied applications of 2002. To establish numerical parity between the two subsets, I randomly selected 9 statements from the 36 unsuccessful ones. In final form, the corpus contained 18 texts: 9 successful and 9 unsuccessful.

As stipulated by the IRB, any information in the statements that could potentially identify their authors was blacked out before the statements were given to me. Furthermore, on account of the sensitivity of the material, the IRB declined my request for any other information from the applicants' files.

Given these constraints on my data, I supplemented my knowledge of the evaluative context by interviewing five members of the clinical psychology faculty. I asked each interviewee the same four questions:

- What do you look for when you read statements?
- How important is the statement compared to other materials?
- Is there a preferred order in which you read an application file?
- How does having a mentorship program in place affect your evaluation?

To bring the discussion to a concrete level, I also asked each interviewee to read and respond to a sample statement.

Even though interview data added significantly to my knowledge of the evaluative context, I must acknowledge the myriad variables at play in the evaluation of applications that were impossible for me to recreate or recover; therefore, my claims linking text features to admissions outcome must be taken as claims of correlation rather than causation.

Following Barton (2002), I set out to conduct an “inductive discourse analysis,” approaching “texts with the goal of identifying rich text features” (p. 24). As my goal was to ascertain what distinguishes the statements of admitted applicants from those of denied applicants, “rich” assumed the meaning of “correlates with success.” A precedent for my comparative study is the work of Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) and Faber (1996), who published separate papers on the same set of data. Both compared high-rated and low-rated Conference on College Composition and Communication abstracts to identify salient differences in the high-rated texts. As with these studies, I developed a method with both quantitative and qualitative dimensions.

#### QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

There are three content areas that constitute the core of a typical clinical psychology personal statement: Topic RE (Research Experience: participation in research projects); Topic RI (Research Interests: professed research interests for graduate study); Topic PE (Practical Experience: volunteer or paid work as a counselor). The first two topics, Topic RE and Topic RI, are specifically solicited by the application instructions: “your personal statement should emphasize your research interests and research experience.” Given this explicit mention, I hypothesized that successful statements would show greater proportional attention to these topics than would unsuccessful statements. Topic PE, by contrast, is not mentioned in the instructions. In fact, I was told by one of my interviewees that an applicant who expresses interest in pursuing a career of practice is immediately eliminated from consideration. Even though the clinical doctoral program requires a yearlong practicum, the program’s mission is to train research scientists rather

than practicing therapists. Therefore, I hypothesized secondarily that successful statements would give less proportional attention to Topic PE than unsuccessful statements.

In order to measure relative proportion given to each of the three topics, I had to first divide the statements into units to be coded. Given inevitable individual differences in the length and complexity of sentences, I chose to count T-units, defined as an independent clause (subject plus finite verb) along with any dependent or imbedded clauses and modifying phrases attached (Hunt, 1965). After marking off each of the 18 texts into T-units, I coded the T-units according to the catalog of three topics—RE, RI, PE. To arrive at a proportional figure for each topic, I divided the total number of T-units per statement by the number of T-units per topic.

Table 3.1

*Proportion in T-units of Three Core Topics*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Successful Statements</b>	<b>Unsuccessful Statements</b>	<b><i>t</i> value <i>p</i> value</b>
	<b><i>M</i> % (<i>SD</i>)</b>	<b><i>M</i> % (<i>SD</i>)</b>	
Topic RE	34% (.165)	23% (.140)	1.746 .068
Topic RI	23% (.101)	12% (.077)	2.718 .008
Topic PE	4% (.070)	9% (.068)	-1.428 .08

Table 3.1 displays that successful statements did elaborate Topics RE and RI at greater length than did their unsuccessful counterparts. Statistical results for Topic RI showed significance at the  $>.01$  alpha level, but results for Topic RE did not achieve significance. Topic PE results indicated in the reverse direction, with successful



statements devoting less attention to elaborating practical experience than unsuccessful statements. But this test too failed to achieve statistical significance.

These proportional findings prompted me to pose a corollary hypothesis: that successful applicants would not only devote more attention to the discussion of research, but also mention research earlier in their statements than unsuccessful applicants. To test this corollary hypothesis, I counted the number of T-units from the beginning of the statement to the first T-unit coded as either Topic RE or Topic RI. These results appear in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2

*Number of T-units until First Mention of Research*

<b>Successful Statements</b>	<b>Unsuccessful Statements</b>	<b><i>t</i> value</b> <b><i>p</i> value</b>
<i>M</i> 5.67	<i>M</i> 15.67	-2.117
<i>SD</i> (3.606)	<i>SD</i> (13.702)	.031

*Note.* T-test was run using the assumption of unequal variances because the variance test showed a much larger range of deviation in the unsuccessful subset than in the other.

As predicted, successful statements introduced the topic of research earlier than unsuccessful statements, a finding significant at alpha level  $>.05$ . From this I infer that foregrounding one’s identity as a researcher helps to establish one’s orientation towards a scientific career.

The following paragraph is an example taken from the subset of successful statements that illustrates this foregrounding of the writer’s research interests:

My interest in psychology stemmed from the need to explain my mother’s depression. In beginning my undergraduate studies, I soon realized that

psychology encompasses so much more than clinical therapy. While I remain interested in therapy and clinical outreach programs, I am fascinated by the more empirical power of psychology. In college my particular research experience focused on eating disorders. Currently, at the [Name of Hospital], I assist in research about obesity as well as the behavioral and cognitive effects of sleep apnea in children. This background has fueled a desire to continue research with eating disorders and is why I am applying to the Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program. I hope to work with [Professor X] on body image and eating disorders.

This paragraph displays a remarkable chronological compacting of the writer's past. The first sentence might have launched an early life story running for many lines, but the second sentence leaps forward in time to the writer's undergraduate years, while the third sentence breaks off the pattern of chronological sequencing. As result, by midway through, the paragraph begins to read more like an expository essay rather than a story. The remaining sentences of the paragraph further define the writer's interests in research, with the final sentence naming a future research direction. The organizational pattern of the paragraph above is a hybrid of chronological (past to present) and deductive (general to specific) patterning. This paragraph illustrates one way in which successful applicants draw on the conventions of scientific reports in their statements.

Through its chronological compacting and funneling specificity, this paragraph communicates the writer's commitment to the values of science. As soon as the second sentence, the writer distances herself from the practical application of psychology and aligns herself with the "more empirical power" of research. Her professed allegiance to

and privileging of the epistemology of science situates her ideologically within the disciplinary community of academic psychology. What this paragraph suggests is that successful applicants do more than simply foreground and emphasize research to a greater extent than unsuccessful applicants; they signal their socialization into the belief system of science.

The rhetorical features that correlate with such epistemology, however, do not submit easily to coding and quantification. As the above paragraph shows, scientific epistemology is evinced by certain lexical choices, e.g. “empirical,” but to interpret these words as indexical of a value system requires close attention to context. For this reason, pursuant of deeper analysis, I departed with the method of coding and counting in favor of close comparative reading, the type of context-sensitive analysis more often associated with literary study. Like Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995), I felt that methods of corpus linguistics would not provide suitable evidence for substantiating claims about a writer’s epistemic orientation.

Results from the proportional analysis do suggest, however, where a close reading for rhetorical features indicative of epistemic stance would be best repaid: Topic RI. Since statistical tests showed that the greatest disparity between the two subgroups of successful and unsuccessful statements occurs in their emphasis on research interests, it follows that there would be more differences here than length alone, as it is the place in a personal statement where applicants reveal their conversance with scientific thinking.

## QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Responses I heard from faculty during interviews repeatedly emphasized that applicants must demonstrate their acquaintance with the scientific method in order to gain admission. One interviewee explained that strong applicants are those who “think like a scientist.” For this interviewee, thinking like a scientist means appreciating the importance of novelty. He looks for applicants who can recognize anomaly and are prepared to pursue an unexpected explanation for a phenomenon. Another interviewee explained that strong applicants are those who recount their research experience as the testing of a theory rather than merely collecting or coding data. It is crucial that applicants have the capacity to conceptualize a research project, so he looks for those who express their research interests as the formulation of a problem.

Faculty screen candidates for evidence of scientific socialization, but given time constraints, they must arrive at their judgments quickly. As mentioned earlier, more than one interviewee told me that any applicant who indicates interest in practice is immediately eliminated from the pool. From this comment I surmised that faculty read personal statements with well-formed expectations in place, not unlike the schemata informing the reading practices of the physicists whom Bazerman (1985) studied. For these productive scientists to stay atop the proliferate literature of their specialty, they had to read with narrow interests. If a similar adaptation informs the reading habits of faculty when working through a stack of application files, what are the cues that trigger their schemata?

From my interview data, I inferred that an applicant's scientific socialization could be summarily assessed according to her self-positioning among a constellation of related binary oppositions where there is a privileged term in each pair. These binaries offer something like a rough gestalt for quickly plotting an epistemic orientation to scientific research. In my schematic of three binaries, there is a directional preference in each case toward one term, and successful applicants are more likely than unsuccessful applicants to indicate orientation in the preferred direction. Below are the three binaries and the preferred directionality of each.

- Intuition → Empiricism
- Application → Basic research
- Egocentricism → Communitarianism

In the presentation of qualitative results that follows, I provide explanations of the pairs and analyze passages from the statements that exemplify success or failure at effecting proper directionality.

#### Intuition → Empiricism

Psychology privileges empiricism over intuition like any science, but to a greater degree than any other, psychology must face down folk wisdom—the ragbag of theories about human nature that people collect through life experience. Frequently, folk wisdom circulates as maxims, but almost any given “truism” about human nature has its antipode. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, but out of sight, out of mind.

E. O. Wilson (1998) reminds us that human consciousness did not evolve to introspect, but to survive. The philosopher's creed to know thyself comes late in the

development of an intelligence shaped by adaptation to its external environment. People learn what they need to know of their immediate environment to go about their lives; “that is why even today people know more about their automobiles than they do about their own minds,” writes Wilson (p. 97).

The two excerpts below come from statements written by unsuccessful applicants who reverse the preferred directionality by placing intuition before empiricism:

(1) After being introduced to psychology, I felt that I had finally found a discipline that called out to me, that seemed to naturally accommodate the way that my mind already worked.

(2) [I] entered college as a natural sciences pre-medicine major. All freshmen at [Name of School] were required to take psychology so I signed up for Introduction to Psychology along with basic science courses. . . . To my surprise, I was completely enthralled with this new information. I felt much more of an aptitude for psychology than for biology or chemistry. Psychology made sense to me; its concepts were intuitive to me. I had found my passion in psychology.

For the writer of excerpt (1), psychology conforms to commonsense, whereas psychology as a science would submit commonsense to the disconfirming potential of empiricism. The writer of excerpt (2) also misguidedly fits psychology to intuition, but she commits an additional misstep when she implies a dichotomy between basic sciences and psychology.

In *How to Think Straight about Psychology*, Stanovich (2001) expresses irritability with students who, out of ignorance, exclude psychology from membership in the sciences:

[M]any who deny psychology the status of a science are themselves quite confused about the nature of sciences. Every undergraduate psychology instructor has encountered the freshman or sophomore student who has chosen to major in psychology because “I don’t like science.” . . . When the instructor asks, “Have you taken much biology or chemistry since coming to the university?” the reply is predictable: “Oh, no, I’ve *always* avoided science.” Note the irony here: The student knows nothing about the sciences but is absolutely certain that psychology is not one of them! (p. 8)

Given that the writer of excerpt (2) claims to have already taken biology and chemistry and thus should know something of the sciences, the fact that she locates psychology outside the category of true science could alienate her readers even more than the same statement coming from another student who lacked her scientific background.

#### Application → Basic Research

Stanovich (2001) further argues that in the popular imagination psychology is expected to produce “recipe knowledge,” steps that one can follow to solve personal problems. However, this demand for application does not govern the research agendas of most psychologists for whom “psychological research is largely basic research aimed at uncovering general facts and theories about behavior” (p. 201). Basic research carries

prestige because it frees the pursuit of knowledge from the mercenary demands of the marketplace.

Much of the research that clinical psychologists conduct would qualify as basic, such as establishing the etiology of psychopathologies, but clinical psychology also answers to the need for application as treatment. Yet on this point the interests of scientists and practitioners clash: like guild members of an earlier era, professional psychologists have a vested interest in guarding their practices out of self-interest, while researchers must submit their knowledge to their peers for certification (Albee, 1970). Those who promote psychology as a science decry how clinical cabalism has threatened psychotherapy's future as an insurable treatment.

Although improved practice is one goal of clinical psychology, successful applicants seldom mention practice as one of their goals. When successful applicants do mention practical experience in their statements, they evaluate it as seedstock. For instance, one successful applicant speaks of practical experience as a "treasure house" of experience to draw on for research.

The following passage from a successful statement devotes much more space to Topic PE than average for successful statements, but notice how the writer uses Topic PE as a segue into Topic RI:

As I began my Master's program, I was well-prepared for a practicum in addictions . . . or so I thought. The first two months of my practicum at [Name of Program] were overwhelming; I was thrown into a tumult of counseling and education. I co-counseled three intensive outpatient groups a week and brought



books, videotapes, and psychoeducational materials on various addictions and treatments home each night. . . .

As I grew more familiar with and confident in the field, I began noticing a number of gaps in knowledge about the addictive process. Working as a student counselor, I grew more and more frustrated as every answer led to five more questions. By the time I began working full-time as an addictions counselor, I realized that while I enjoyed clinical work, it was not academically fulfilling and, more importantly, did not answer my questions.

Later in her statement, the applicant formulates her research questions, which are not concerned with the treatment of addiction but with its etiology, e.g. “How do social expectancies influence alcohol and drug use?”

The writer’s use of Topic PE as the motivator for Topic RI may have proven a critical turn in her statement because it dispels the notion that her interests lie in practice. One faculty member told me that she reads between the lines to flush out practice-inclined applicants. Since a majority of prestigious clinical programs have a research orientation, students occasionally apply to them even when their career aspirations are practical. Many, however, are savvy enough to leave their true aspiration unstated and proclaim instead a dedication to research. Therefore, an applicant who talks at length about clinical experience, even claiming to have an interest in research, raises suspicions for this faculty member.

## Egocentricism → Communitarianism

The study of psychology often attracts students who seek insight into their own personalities and those of friends and family. Sometimes students have their first experience with psychology as a patient. Although many students may have been initially attracted to psychology for personal reasons, students with an interest in research must direct their interests away from their personal lives. One faculty member informed me that “red flags fly” whenever she senses that an applicant wants to come to graduate school for self-discovery. Witness the following passage from an unsuccessful PS:

I know that as a PhD I will have a job that I will be excited to go to every day and will inspire me. I feel that [this program] is the best place for me to begin my journey and take these first steps toward reaching my goals. . . . In evaluating my career goals, I have come to a greater understanding of who I am as a whole person and the various roles and responsibilities I have in my life. I have searched my heart to find a path that will allow me to feel like I am being true to myself, and I am confident that my decision to pursue a PhD in clinical psychology will contribute to my becoming a more enriched and fulfilled person.

Travel metaphors evident in lines such as “begin my journey and take these first steps” and “searched my heart to find a path” link the modernist promise of progress with pop psych self-absorption. For a writer to adopt clichés from self-help literature could cause a reader to question not only the writer’s motives for graduate training but also the writer’s “communicative competence” (Hymes, 1974) in the discourse of social science.

By contrast, successful applicants direct their interest outward to the public domain of disciplinary knowledge. In order to get a hearing in the intellectual community, scientists must make the case that their research intersects with the work of others—the more intersections, the more valuable the research. The scientific method succeeds insofar as scientists make their findings publicly available for verification. In this sense, science is communitarian.

But communitarianism should not in this instance be read as synonymous with “collectivism,” for a scientist, or more often a scientific team, must compete in the community in order to belong. Membership requires an original contribution to a shared body of knowledge; originality is the *sine quo non* for approval of a dissertation as well as all subsequent publications of an academic’s career. The double demands of novelty and contiguity govern the knowledge making practices of scientists (Kaufer & Geisler, 1989; Myers, 1985).

The contrast between an egocentric and a communitarian presentation of Topic RI is well illustrated by the following two extracts: extract (1) from an unsuccessful statement and extract (2) from a successful statement. I have underlined all occurrences of the personal pronouns (I, me, my, myself) as a lexical indicator of orientation:

[1] I have invested a great deal of time, energy, and thought into deciding where my interests lie and how I wanted to go about pursuing them. In my experience working with children with autism and others with ADHD and conduct problems, I have developed a personal interest in developmental aspects of psychopathology and how combinations of nature and the environment work to shape children’s

attitudes, thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. In developing relationships with the children I worked with, I found myself wondering why these kids were different from their peers and how these differences would influence other parts of their development and their lives as adults. . . . I have also had many friends struggle with drug problems and other risk-taking activities and these experiences drew me to the research of [Professor X] and her work concerning addictive risk-taking behaviors. . . . After reading some of her work . . . I became quite certain that [this program] had the best program to match my interests.

[2] My specific research interest is in the physiological aspect of sexuality in women survivors of child and adult sexual trauma. Even though both trauma and sexuality are fields amply researched, there is a penury of data in the area where the two intersect. Initial studies on the physiological changes of sexuality due to sexual trauma used self-reported measures on anorgasmia and dyspareunia. No information is currently available on other aspects of sexuality, such as arousal, the role of anxiety and arousal, the differences between women with sexual dysfunction and those with normal sexual functioning in the women survivors population. I want to perform research on these unexplored areas of the relationship between female sexuality and sexual trauma.

The goal of my research is to move away from a “victimization movement” (McCarthy, 1998) and promote a better understanding of women’s needs and strengths to overcome the biopsychosocial trauma. I intend not to

corroborate on [sic] the variables of unwanted pregnancy and promiscuity of sexually traumatized women, but rather to explore their needs and understand their struggles in rebuilding a functional life. I strongly believe that the definition of health for women survivors of sexual assault should include satisfying sexual functioning.

The disparity in number of personal pronouns—12 in extract (1) as compared to 5 in extract (2)—provides a lexical measure of an underlying difference in directionality. The writer of extract (1) continually directs her interests selfward, while the writer of extract (2) directs hers efferently to the research community.

The writer of extract (1) locates her research interest in her personal experience working with children and observing her friends. She does not, however, transform this interest into an intellectual problem suited for empirical investigation; instead it remains a matter of amateur curiosity: “I found myself wondering why these kids were different . . .” Moreover, she ends with an inversion of the Kennedy exhortation: she claims what the institution can do for her rather than what she can do for the institution: “I became quite certain that the University of Texas had the best program to match my interests.”

In contrast, the writer of excerpt (2) positions her interests in the wider intellectual community. Consistent with Swales’ (1990) CARS scheme (Create A Research Space), the writer constructs an exigency for her research interests. She begins with a review of existing knowledge but takes the additional step of evaluating it as lacking: “penury of data,” “no information available,” “unexplored areas.” Into this rhetorically hollowed

cavity, the writer posits her own research interest. If the reader accepts her evaluation of the literature and concedes the value of her proposed contribution, then the writer has met the dual demands of contiguity and novelty and has thereby demonstrated familiarity with the knowledge ways of academe.

From the point of view of stasis theory, the writer of extract (2) presents Topic RI at the proposal stasis, the forward-looking stasis of action. In doing so, she casts herself in the future role of a scientist working to solve a problem of common interest to the clinical psychologists. By contrast, the writer of extract (1) never moves appreciably beyond the stasis of evaluation. She discusses her research interests in the past tense—“I found myself wondering”; “these experiences drew me to the research of [Professor X].”

#### DISCUSSION

Given the department’s partisanship in regard to research versus practice, it is not surprising that applicants who communicated awareness of this partisanship are the ones who tended to gain admission. The quantitative analysis showed that successful applicants on average devoted more space to proposing what they would do in the future, Topic RI, while the qualitative analysis showed that applicants make their future proposal in a manner conversant with the epistemology of science through self-positioning vis-à-vis important binary oppositions. In the case of each pair, there was a preferred directionality: empiricism over intuition, basic science over application, communitarianism over egocentrism.

These findings are consistent with Lawson (1995) who found that clinical programs with a practical orientation valued work experience, public service, and

extracurricular activities more so than research-oriented programs, which attached importance to research experience. A caveat I would append to Lawson's conclusions is that any mixing of the two sets of preferred credentials could have negative consequences for applicants wishing to enter a research-inclined program. As the findings of this analysis have shown, an applicant to this program who describes any practical experience at all decreases the likelihood of her acceptance.

These findings also give us reason to question the scope of validity to Norcross, Mayne, and Sayette's (2002) advice to applicants: "many personal statements are ineffective because . . . the student fails to be 'personal'" (p. 61). It is difficult to see how revelations of a personal kind would have benefited applicants under these circumstances. Even though written in the first person, the personal statements of successful applicants were not especially "personal." Referentially, these statements were far more *abductive* than *adductive*; in other words, their authors directed attention away from themselves and outward to the scientific community they wished to join. The successful applicants were able to formulate their research interests as empirical problems whose investigation would advance the knowledge-making enterprise of the discipline. By this token, the advice offered by Keith-Spiegel and Wiederman (2000) appears more apt: an applicant's success depends on whether the applicant "appear[s] capable of fulfilling the needs of others!" (p. 38).

#### PRACTICAL APPLICATION

I bring this chapter to a close with a suggestion for how applicants might implement these findings towards the improvement of their own personal statements. As I have argued,

not only is it crucial that an applicant knows where along the research-practice continuum a psychology program positions itself, the applicant must consistently affirm the ideology that informs the program's position. If an applicant were to equivocate on the matter of her ideological allegiance, such equivocation would muddle and compromise the impression she wants to make on her reader. For a program that assiduously screens for research-minded applicants, an applicant who does not clearly ally herself with science has sealed her rejection. The suggestion for practical application I make here is aimed at helping applicants identify and rectify mixed messages in their self-representations.

As an example of a muddled self-representation, I would like to exhibit the following excerpt taken from a rejected statement in the corpus:

I recently completed a seminar on body image in which we examined theories, focusing on developmental and sociocultural influences, psychological conditions that result from body image dissatisfaction, and treatment models. I have found this course fascinating and wish to further explore this topic through both clinical and research opportunities. I would also be interested in examining the comorbidity of adolescent substance abuse with disordered eating as an extension of my current research. I am confident that I will bring to the program my love of learning, a natural ability and deep interest in reaching out to patient populations, as well as unbridled enthusiasm to make a significant contribution in the field of psychology.

These sentences come from the sample statement I presented to graduate faculty during our interviews. I asked each interviewee to read the statement and respond to a series of



questions on a five-point Lickert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. When asked whether they thought this applicant expressed enthusiasm for her research interests, four of the five responded *agree* or *strongly agree*. When asked whether they thought the student expressed a well-defined research interest, all five responded *disagree* or *strongly disagree*. Finally, when asked whether they would recommend the applicant for admission, none responded *agree* or *strongly agree*. Based on these responses, this applicant expresses evident enthusiasm, but her enthusiasm is misguided. Although this passage by itself does not account completely for the negative ratings, the mixed message contained herein surely contributed to them.

These sentences exhibit what Fairclough (2003) calls “interdiscursivity.” Discourse, by Fairclough’s definition, refers to conventionalized ways of using language associated with particular institutions and domains of social life. When discourses that belong to different domains co-occur in the same text without the writer’s acknowledgement, the result is interdiscursivity, an unintentional mixing of discourses. Interdiscursivity usually impresses itself on readers as a clash or inconsistency in the language used.

Interdiscursivity can be difficult to assign to particular words because words frequently have one or more general meanings along with specialized meanings that cannot be distinguished when the words are read in isolation; only in their collocation or proximity with other words do their meanings become clear. For instance, in the excerpt above, “comorbidity” clearly belongs to a specialized lexicon, but taken in isolation, “reaching out,” “patient,” and “populations” may be used in a variety of contexts with

different meanings. When collocated, however, these words do exhibit a distributional pattern that places the whole phrase, “reaching out to patient populations” in a different discourse domain from “comorbidity of adolescent substance abuse.”

To have traced the distributional patterns for these two phrases prior to the advent of the Internet would have been a complicated undertaking, but with the capacity to search verbatim word strings in Google, anyone can use the Internet as a giant concordance across all domains of discourse. For example, searching for the string “reaching out to patient populations” (as I did through Google on February 3, 2005) yields only one match, an article about marketing strategies used by managed care companies. The article opens with this sentence: “In today's age of consumerism, successful companies in every industry—from hotels and restaurants to banks and retail stores—are striving to achieve high customer satisfaction by providing outstanding service. Managed-care plans are no exception.” Later in the article, the exact search string appears: “Other health plans are building customer loyalty by **reaching out to patient populations** that need extra care or to groups that traditionally have been underserved by the healthcare system—namely ethnic minorities.” The target phrase hybridizes humanizing and dehumanizing verbiage in a manner often found in marketing discourse. The tactile warmth of the verb phrase “reaching out” taking “patient populations” as its complement lumps individuals into demographic groups for the purpose of strategic marketing. This conglomeration belongs to business-speak—texts such as marketing stratagems and annual reports.

By contrast, the string “comorbidity of adolescent substance abuse” points toward a different domain of origin. The first hit of five came from a book review published in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*. The exact sentence containing the string reads, “The next four chapters review the diagnosis and **comorbidity of adolescent substance abuse** and the medical and psychiatric evaluation of substance-abusing adolescents.” Unlike the marketing discourse of the previous string, this clunky collocation belongs in the domain of psychological science.

When brought together interdiscursively, these two phrases originating in different domains communicate a mixed message about the applicant’s orientation within the field of psychology. In one sentence, she speaks in the language of the researcher; in the next, she speaks in the language of the marketer. Since she has applied to a doctoral program inclined toward research, she should have aligned herself with scientific research, not with corporate healthcare delivery. The reader may recall the faculty interviewee mentioned earlier who rejected applicants who hinted at a practical orientation. The mixed message here, I fear, conveys more than merely a hint in this direction.

I do not imagine, though, that the applicant had any intention to convey a mixed message about her allegiances, let alone trip an alarm in her reader. Nonetheless, even if unintentionally mixed, the clash of discourses betrays her lack of control over her language. Gaining control over a new language requires appropriation and rehearsal prior to naturalization, so it would seem that this applicant has borrowed language not yet assimilated to her own idiolect. In the terms of sociolinguist Dell Hymes (1974), she has

not yet achieved communicative competence, which would signal her membership in a disciplinary community. Because interdiscursivity was not the intended effect, it would be difficult to expect the writer to have ever detected it on her own. Even with Google at her disposal, how would she know what phrases to search? In a case such as this, the first step toward remedy would be to consult an expert in the field.

My suggestion is simply this: Should an applicant have doubts about the uniformity of impression she is conveying in her statement, she should ask her advisor to read her statement to check for dissonance. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) employed such a method to assess the assimilation of a graduate student adjusting to the language conventions of a new doctoral program. The researchers asked his professors to read extracts from his papers and mark any “off-register” words or phrases they detected (“off-register” referring here to diction incongruent with the discourse of the discipline). Using the same strategy, an applicant could ask her advisor to read her statement and mark those instances of language use that the advisor finds jarring or inappropriate to the situation. Marking off-register words could lead to dialogue where the advisor makes his tacit knowledge about disciplinary discourse manifest to the applicant. The applicant would then be that much closer to internalizing the discourse that would signify her competence as a member of the disciplinary community.

**“IT IS MY CALLING.”****Applicants Professing Faith in Medicine**

In the previous chapter, I employed a combined quantitative/qualitative method suited to analyzing comparatively a corpus formed of two subgroups. In this chapter the analysis is not evaluative but descriptive of a single undifferentiated corpus of medical school personal statements gathered during summer term 2004 from applicants who visited the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Although lacking the objectivity of the previous chapter’s method, the method here is not without precedent. My analysis resembles the folkloric interpretation that Newkirk (1992) made of case studies in composition research. He argued that cases studies convince us of their validity not for the rigor of their methods but for the narrative form they take. In the case studies he selected for analysis, Newkirk found that the narratives bearing researchers’ results partook of larger cultural myths that promulgate shared belief and values; hence readers of the studies, he surmised, would be inclined to accept the findings because they conformed to conditioned expectations about human behavior.

**INTRODUCTION**

Recent interest in the curative power of religious faith has attracted skepticism from some medical professionals (Sloan, Bagiella, Vandecreek, & Poulos, 2000; Sloan, Bagiella, & Powell, 1999). In a statement to the press, psychiatrist and educator Richard Sloan remarked “that religion and medicine are equally important disciplines that shouldn’t be mixed. Combining them leads to weak science, watered-down religion and a host of

significant problems” (Bowman, 2000, p. 27). As an outsider to the medical profession, I am unable to weigh in on the question whether faith confers true salutary benefit, but as a writing center tutor I can attest to having seen religion and medicine mixed in the personal statements of aspiring doctors.

The personal statement serves a crucial function in a medical school application as the only place where an applicant can make a case for his or her strength of character. Medical schools want matriculates “who are altruistic, trustworthy, kind, and sensitive” (Ludmerer, 1985, p. 279), but “no one is exactly sure how admissions committees accomplish this daunting task” (Hafferty, 2000, p. 27). Certainly MCAT scores and GPAs factor heavily in admission decisions, but these quantifications do not measure character. “Our admissions process must identify individuals who will not only succeed as students,” writes medical school dean Wagoner (2000), “but who also have both the practical and altruistic qualities necessary to care for patients in the evolving constraints and opportunities of this new century” (p. 123). Given the current interest in promoting professionalism in medical education, the personal statement may assume even greater importance in admissions decisions in the future.

To learn more about the rhetorical concerns peculiar to this constituency, I conducted a qualitative study of medical school personal statements in summer 2004, collecting 14 personal statements from applicants who visited the writing center.

Once I had the 14 texts assembled before me as a corpus, I noticed a salient pattern across them. Recurrently, applicants drew upon the rhetoric of religious

testimony to communicate their commitment to medicine. Take as an example this introductory paragraph from one's applicant's statement:

The decision to enter medical school was not an easy one for me. I often looked ahead at the trials and tribulations that faced me and doubted my abilities. Because of this doubt, I explored many other avenues, but each time I was faced with my reality; I could never feel as though I had fulfilled my potential. After four years of college, I can say without a doubt that I could never be happy with any other decision, and the mountains of obstacles seem a little smaller. In retrospect I feel as though delving into my options has made my desire and resolve to become a doctor stronger. There is no one else pushing me to make this my career path; it is my calling.

If religion and medicine are not supposed to mix, then what do we make of this applicant couching her ambition in a recognizably biblical idiom? Granted, doctrinal content has here been given a secular torque, but still it is the plot of religious conversion that gives shape and substance to her proclamation. Through a series of doubt-inducing trials, she emerges with her conviction to pursue medicine newly fortified. In this applicant's self-rendering, religion and medicine do not seem inimical at all, but rather discursively interanimate.

The applicant's choice of the term "calling" brings to mind other English words for work whose etymological roots extend back to the Judeo-Christian substrate of our culture. For instance, "vocation" comes from the Latin verb *vocatio* (*vocare*) meaning "to call." Likewise, the word "profession," also of Latin derivation, refers to the vow of

devotion taken by novitiates upon joining religious orders. When we consider that “profession” originated in a speech event, it does not seem so surprising that today’s medical school applicants would find in the ministerial tradition a well-turned phraseology for declaring their vocational aspiration.

My objective in this chapter is to provide a rhetorical rationale for the religious allusions present in my corpus of medical school personal statements, even though, on the face of it, these allusions would appear to contravene the scientific precepts of modern medicine. In short, I argue that applicants turn to religious testimony as a culturally available discourse rich enough in pathos to convey their passion for medicine. In their illocutionary force these personal statements resemble speech acts enough to recall the vocative origin of “profession” itself.

#### HISTORICAL INTERNALIZATION OF CALLINGS

In the last sentence of the paragraph quoted above, the applicant locates the source of her calling within: “There is no one else pushing me to make this my career path; it is my calling.” The idea of an internal calling departs notably from the Christian tradition from which it derives. In the Bible, when a calling occurs, God hails the one He has chosen to carry His word to the people. A calling never comes from within, but is always imposed from without. Likewise, in his *Confessions*, Augustine consistently avers that his conversion experience came from an external source to which he owes everything (Beja, 1971, p. 27). Given the ineluctable nature of a traditional calling, a self-willed calling might strike modern readers as paradoxical, if it were not for the reinterpretation of calling that occurred during the Protestant Reformation.



Martin Luther is credited as the reformer most instrumental in the secularization of calling (Rehm, 1990; O'Hara, 2004). Under Luther, callings were no longer the exclusive property of the clergy but distributed widely to any who wished to dedicate their lives to promoting God's will on earth. One need only discover and cultivate his or her God-given talent in manner conducive to the Christian commonweal. This demotic dispensation of callings, which matured into the Protestant work ethic, is an important influence on the individualism characteristic of modernity. In the modern era, "professionalism aims to organize work so that workers can develop and express their individual powers through practices that contribute to . . . social value" (Sullivan, 2004, p. 4). The historical reinvention of callings that took place during the Protestant Reformation explains why an applicant today could speak of her calling as something she has freely chosen and expect her reader to accept it as perfectly normal.

#### CONTEMPORARY KINSHIP OF RELIGION AND MEDICINE

The ascendant profession of the twentieth century, medicine, with its mission to improve human life, has shouldered pastoral responsibilities that were once borne by officials of the Church (Sullivan, 1995, p. 15). For most Americans alive today, a doctor was in attendance upon their entry into the world, and another will be close at hand upon their exit. Proponents of narrative bioethics maintain that medical practitioners today should perform those benefactions that give succor to mind and soul as well as body. In the words of Rita Charon and Martha Montello (2002), "nurses, doctors, ethicists, and patients have already made local discoveries that health care's primary duties are to bear witness to patient's suffering and to honor the experience of illness" (p. ix).

The restructuring of health care delivery brought about by the growth of managed care over the past few decades has put a strain on the doctor-patient relationship, making the humanitarian practices that Charon and Montello endorse difficult for doctors to carry out under conditions where profitability intrudes. Managed care companies that reward doctors for their productivity and efficiency risk imposing a conflict of interest between doctors' personal needs and the needs of their patients (Zoloth-Dorfman & Rubin, 1995). Only when physicians can act independently on behalf of their patients' welfare can they uphold the time-honored fiduciary ethic to serve their patients without regard for personal gain (Relman, 1985; May, 2000). The fiduciary ethic has as its antecedent in the virtue of charity long associated with the Church. That doctors would appeal to *caritas* in protest to corporate medicine heightens the religious coloring of the profession's self-image (Shriver, 1980).

Parallels that span the two professions have been a subject of commentary by some of medicine's most eloquent voices. For instance, Richard Selzer (1976) waxes poetic on this isomorphism in *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*:

I must confess that the priestliness of my profession has ever been impressed upon me. In the beginning there are vows, taken with all solemnity. Then there is the endless harsh novitiate of training, much fatigue, much sacrifice. At last one emerges as celebrant, standing close to the truth lying curtained in the Ark of the body. Not surplice and cassock but mask and gown are your regalia. You hold no chalice, but a knife. There is no wine, no wafer. There are only the facts of blood and flesh. (p. 94)

Symbolic affinity between the apprenticeship of doctors and priests has been further enhanced of late with the institution of white coat ceremonies at most U.S. medical schools. From 1989 to 2000, notes Wagoner (2000), 108 out of the 126 accredited U.S. medical schools adopted the practice (p. 125). A formal induction into the profession, white coat ceremonies are designed to instill professionalism at the earliest stage of physicians' training. In the ceremony at Pritzker School of Medicine, each incoming students is presented with a white coat, stethoscope, and a book of ethics; then the assembly is led in a recitation of the modified Hippocratic oath (Wagoner, 2000, p. 125). A close approximation of liturgical pomp, the event is credited with fostering esprit de corps among matriculates.

In a concurrent and related development in education, a growing number of medical schools now offer courses on spirituality and medicine as part of their curricula. In 1994, only 17 of the 126 medical schools had such courses; by 2004, the number reached 84 (Fortin & Barnett, 2004, p. 2883).

Given the increased attention that medical schools pay to religion—both inside and outside the classroom—an applicant who likens doctor to priest affirms a larger professional trend. Notice how she extends the metaphor over several lines in the introductory paragraph:

I developed an interest in medicine at a very young age. I remember once, when I was three years old, my older sister got an unusually high fever. Nothing my parents did made it go away. In fact, my sister's condition only worsened. In desperation, they took her to the hospital. Since there was no one to watch me,

they took me along. My parents, who were normally very calm, were visibly shaken over my sister's immobilized state. Once we reached the hospital, my attention was immediately drawn to the men in the white robes. One of them came to attend to my sister. It wasn't long before her fever started coming down and she showed some signs of her old self again. I realized then that doctors, these priests in white robes, practiced a very valuable magic. All my subsequent visits to the doctor as a child were colored by this incident. I came to revere doctors greatly, and I definitely wanted to be part of their order.

During her consultation at the writing center, the applicant told the tutor that this paragraph was her second attempt at an introduction. She had originally opened with an account of her switch from business to premed, but her friends who had read it remarked that she came across as "too wishy-washy" in her choice of medicine. So, in her second attempt, she reached much farther back into her past to locate the origin of her interest. The temporal depth she achieves in recounting this early childhood memory invests her interest in medicine with almost primordial causality.

In her narrative the writer labors to recreate the perspective of a very young mind, but the significance she imparts to events reveals a mind of greater sophistication. It is difficult, I believe, to imagine a child of three making reflective observations about her parents, "My parents, who were normally very calm, were visibly shaken over my sister's immobilized state," or, for that matter, to ascribe the artfully drawn analogy between doctors and priests to so young a child. Developed over several lines, this analogy seems like the sort of association a mature mind would make, one aware of the historical

conflation of the two roles. The magical ministrations of the doctors, which she leaves unrelated and mysterious, bring to mind the miracles of Christ, who made the most demonstrative show of His divinity by healing the diseased, the crippled, even the dead.

With this vignette the writer testifies to the power of modern medicine. The rhetorical act of bearing witness is not unique to this statement, but reappears many times across the corpus. For this reason, it deserves further attention.

#### BEARING WITNESS TO THE GLORY OF MEDICINE

Excerpts from two other statements provide further exemplification of applicants bearing witness to the power of medicine:

[1] In the following year I became closer to my [paralyzed] brother than ever before. Not only did our bond grow, but I, once again, became infatuated with the medical profession. My whole life, I had enjoyed science. The study of laws and theorems fascinated me. But now I was able to see something new; this other face of medicine: the personal side. . . . I sat in awe while closely watching my brother's doctors assist him in all aspects of his complex injury. They worked tirelessly to help him overcome the barriers that stood in his way. Slowly my brother began to make progress. I worked with him everyday as he began to regain movement in his arms. I began to emulate those who worked at the hospital. The fear that had gripped me since his injury began to subside. . . .

While all professions need a solid background of education, to practice medicine effectively, a doctor needs much more. Compassion and care. Without the ability to care, the drive to succeed for a patient is not as strong. Without care,

a patient is reluctant to place their well being in the hands of a stranger. Without compassion, an honest and open discussion of the possibilities cannot occur. Without compassion, treatments fail to take effect. I have seen first-hand the power that these two qualities possess. . . .

[2] At the age of sixteen I was faced with one of my first obstacles when I broke my femur bone and later found out I had a large tumor above my knee. Luckily my bone healed and the tumor was benign, but the experience I had while I was a patient at MD Anderson sparked an indelible interest and respect toward the practice of medicine. . . . I was surrounded by children with cancer that were confined to wheelchairs due to their debilitating weakness. . . . I was impressed by the positive influence a physician could have on these children as well as on their extended families, not only as a doctor, but as a friend, mentor, and a symbol of hope in such traumatic and emotional times. As for me, I found that the breaking of my bone was a blessing in disguise because it allowed me to discover the innate interest I had in medicine, or as I would like to believe, my fate of becoming a doctor.

While both applicants are passionate testifiers to the virtues of holistic healing, the writer of the first excerpt draws on religious discourse not only in substance but also in style. During his consultation in the writing center, he mentioned that he purposely wrote these sentences as he would have spoken them. When he begins to propound the virtues of compassion and caring, he shifts into a sermon cadence. The alliterative

repetition of “compassion” and “caring” along with syntactic parallelism punctuates his prose with hieratic rhythm.

The stylistic devices that he employs resemble those employed by someone commonly reckoned one of the greatest orators of the twentieth century, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963). Below are lines from his “I Have a Dream” speech:

With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together . . . knowing that he will be free one day. And this will be the day.

Repetition, consonance, and parallelism are all in evidence here. Even though King speaks of the future, he pronounces his vision of it in such a way as to give it presence in the present—a dream long deferred now attainable, even palpable. In a similar manner, the oral quality of the applicant’s prose compensates for the disembodiment of written testimony by leaving a vocal imprint, a shadow of the writer’s presence, on his words. Cadences of the Bible evoke orality because the stories in it were transmitted orally long before they were first inscribed.

The writer of the second excerpt also testifies to having witnessed the power of compassionate care, but to a degree greater than any other applicant whose statement I collected, she speaks of her ambition in terms of destiny. Fate, she says, is the provenance of her desire to become a doctor, and a leg injury revealed to her the immanent passion she has for medicine. In consultation, when the tutor came to the final

sentence of this paragraph, she suggested to the applicant that the word “fate” might be overly dramatic. The word “fate,” she joked, made her hear “rolling thunder” in the background.

The applicant decided to act on the tutor’s advice by crossing out the word “fate” and writing “desire” in its place. This substitution relocates her passion for medicine inside, similar to the internal calling of the applicant quoted at the beginning. In a secular worldview, someone who takes up a vocation deterministically has not arrived at her decision volitionally. Fate runs counter to our culture’s faith in individual agency and self-determination. For an aspiring doctor to speak of her ambition as something *received* may well stretch to the breaking-point the homology between religion and medicine.

As a final example for analysis, the paired paragraphs below are the work of a single writer. The top paragraph is her opening story in its first version, and the lower one is the story in its final version. This applicant admitted to spending many late nights in the computer lab wringing words out of the keyboard. Composing the opening paragraph was the most painstaking part of the whole process; she felt she had to get the story just right before she could continue. After much tinkering, the story finally met with her satisfaction:

Truthfully, it has never felt like my story, and I still struggle to tell it in first person. In September of 1999, I celebrated my highly anticipated birthday, sweet sixteen, and entered a crucial year of academic performance and SAT scores, junior year. On an ordinary Sunday evening that October, my thoughts began to



race, firing randomly and uncontrollably. Pain and internal pressure soon accompanied the chaos that distinguished this from an everyday headache. The symptoms intensified overnight, and school the next day only fueled my mind with more stimulation. I experienced one final, radical shift into mental overdrive and excused myself from first period. That class on Monday morning was my last class of the semester. An acute case of rapid onset West Nile viral encephalitis warranted three months of hospitalization followed by three additional months of outpatient therapy. Brain swelling induced universal pressure that devastated my central nervous system. The frontal lobe suffered extensive damage. Its ability to process short term memory failed almost instantly, and I have no memories from month one at all. However, reconstructing the timeline hastened my recovery. I have since embraced hospital stories about my illness as real memories. Now, they are not pages torn the pivotal chapter of someone else's life but the force that led me to medicine.

In October of 1999, time screeched to a halt. Life hung in the balance. I had contracted West Nile viral encephalitis from a mosquito. In less than a week, an acute headache erupted into the fully presented infectious disease. A devastating combination of weight loss, swelling lobes, and seizures destroyed my physical strength and ravaged my short-term memory. The earliest stage of the illness will forever remain an empty wrinkle in remembered time, but stories of torn IVs and feeding tubes have remained. Armed with Tegretol and high-dosage prednisone,

the medical team at Texas Children's Hospital waged and won the war—man versus microbe—under the supervision of Dr. [F.]. Their care, compassionate and unwaveringly optimistic, is the kind I shall provide as a physician. Encephalitis has given purpose to my pursuit of a career in medicine.

From first to final version, the story undergoes distillation. The writer shortens the timeframe of the story, trimming away most events prior to the full presentation of the disease. Within this tighter timeframe, the writer introduces a new character, Dr. F., who, joined with his colleagues, takes on the role of protagonist, engaging in battle and defeating the malefic virus.

Along with distillation, the final version is told by a narrator better rehearsed in her material. By comparison, the narrator of the first version seems closer to the event, hesitant to begin, still searching for the “fully presented” story in the raw material of memory. The narrator of the final version, by contrast, is more detached and thus more capable of sizing up the experience and assigning it meaning. Not only does she command the technical vocabulary of her heroes, she fills in the previous memory void with an account of their actions as though she had witnessed them. With greater celerity and greater certainty, she arrives at the moral to her story: “Encephalitis has given purpose to my pursuit of a career in medicine.”

What I see when juxtaposing first and final version is a writer stripping her story down to its mythic essence. Many of the particulars of her subjective experience fall away as she foregrounds the glorious work of medicine. The writer's decision to mythologize her trial of illness does not comport with the advice found in the Barron's

guide on medical school personal statements available to students of my university at both the Health Professions Office and the writing center. The authors of Barron's urge applicants to personalize their essays: "Although [admissions officers] expressed [it] in many different ways (be honest, be sincere, be unique, be personal, and so on) it all came down to the same point: 'Be Yourself' . . . . The only way to let the admissions committee see you as an individual is to make your essay personal" (Kaufman, Dowhan, & Burnham, 1998, p.8). With advice in the popular literature urging applicants to personalize their stories, what rationale would warrant the reverse—to move from the idiographic toward the mythic?

#### RESONANCE OF MYTH

There is evidence to suggest that individuating oneself early in the admissions process may work to an applicant's disadvantage. In a qualitative study of medical students' socialization, Broadhead (1983) found that the application was not the place for applicants to individuate themselves, but the place to conform to what he calls "the categorical aggregate," the sense of collective identity that unites members of the medical profession.<sup>18</sup>

When admissions officers screen applicants, they are not merely looking for individuals who show promise of success; they are selecting successors. As contributors to *Medical Education* express it, "The aim of medical school admissions procedure is to select those who will perform well as undergraduates and make good doctors in the future, and to exclude those who will bring the profession into disrepute" (Lumsden, Bore, Millar, Jack, & Powis, 2005, p. 258). The gravitas freighting the word "disrepute"

suggests that admissions committees are not assessing applicants by some amoral metric of aptitude, but rather judging them according to their integrity and their virtue.

Applicants eager to join the ranks of the medical profession would thus have compelling reason to narrate their life experiences with familiar plots leading to predictable morals so that their stories resonate with the professional creed of their readers. I use the word “resonate” as Northrop Frye (1982) uses it to characterize the power of myth: “through resonance,” writes Frye, “a particular statement in a particular context acquires a universal significance” (p. 217). Myths provide individuals with rhetorical structures with which to shape singular experiences into socially intelligible forms. According to Frye, “A myth is designed not to describe a specific situation but to contain it in a way that does not restrict its significance to that one situation. Its truth is inside its structure, not outside” (p. 46).

In the contemporary U.S. we tend to equate myth with fabrication and falsification. As Karl Weintraub (1978) concluded from his historical study of Western autobiography, the pre-modern emphasis on patterning one’s life after lofty exemplars, as typified by Thomas á Kempis’s *Imitatio Christi*, gave way in the modern era to autobiography documenting the development of a unique identity irreducible to any one cultural script. Linguist Charlotte Linde (1993) has made a similar observation in her study of professionals’ oral narratives. When asked to account for their choice of career, respondents constructed narratives driven by their own freewill and agency, not by accident or circumstance.

Our investment in self-determination indisposes us to acknowledge fully the cultural forces that shape our identities, but sometimes another culture makes visible the influence of our own. For instance, I see similarities between the stories of American medical school applicants quoted here and those of midwives living in Yucatan as described by Brigitte Jordan (1989) in her anthropological study of cosmopolitan obstetrics. From her native informants, Jordan learned that a midwife's claim to expert status depends in part on her mastery of authorizing stories. Midwives, particularly those living in more remote areas, recount dream visions in which they are called to midwifery by the guardian goddesses. These stories may be conventional, stylized, almost "stereotypical," notes Jordan, yet they authenticate their tellers' bids to membership in the practicing community (p. 935).

Medical school applicants may not claim to have received their calling in a dream vision, but they do bear witness to the miraculous feats of their doctors with remarkably similar rhetoric. In this way, following Jordan, we could say that "there are certain stories the apprentice needs to learn to tell in order to be recognized as a bona fide member of a community of practitioners" (p. 935) As an admission officer quoted in Barron's puts it, "Touch on your passion to pursue medicine. For many, medicine is akin to calling, and the evaluator must get a sense that they are hearing and responding to same motivation" (p. 5). Reading this sentence, I cannot tell whether the pronoun "they" refers to evaluator or applicant. Perhaps the ambiguity of reference is as telling as the propositional content itself. The call to medicine may occur as a private event for each

individual who claims to have received it, but the injunction itself is delivered in an idiom shared by all who commit themselves to the vocation of healing.

## **PART TWO—WRITERS**

### **5**

#### **SOUNDING LIKE SCIENTISTS**

##### **Case Studies of Two Psychology Applicants**

Ever since Emig's (1971) groundbreaking research, case studies have provided an effective method for learning about the thought processes behind the production of texts. Case studies allow researchers to reconstruct micro histories of textual production, which otherwise would remain irretrievable from the material artifact. In addition to learning about writers' thought processes, another benefit of the case study method is that a researcher can learn of other parties who participated in the production of a text, even when the text reads like a seamless soliloquy.

In chapter 3, I concluded that successful applicants must demonstrate a commitment to scientific epistemology in order to gain admission to the doctoral program in clinical psychology at the University of Texas. In this chapter my aim is to document how two Texas undergraduates applying to doctoral programs in psychology made their statements more scientific-sounding over the course of creating them.

#### **DATA COLLECTION**

In fall of 2002, I recruited two participants, both female undergraduates in the psychology department, who were preparing applications for doctoral programs in psychology. Before they began working on their personal statement, I spoke to each participant over the phone to learn about her background and ambitions for graduate

school, as well as any preliminary thoughts she had about the personal statement. Below are the questions I asked:

- What kind of programs are you applying to?
- Have you selected the schools?
- How are you conducting your research about these schools?
- What are your criteria for choosing schools?
- Do you have a preliminary plan for how to approach your personal statement?
- Do you have any concerns about it?
- What do you think professors look for when reading personal statements?
- How important do think the statement figures in an application?

After the initial phone interview, subsequent interviews took place in person.

Periodically from October through December, I met an hour to an hour-and-a-half with each applicant upon the occasion of her producing a new draft. The questions I posed during these meetings focused on her latest revisions. The interviews were conducted in a style similar to what Herrington (1992) terms “discourse-based interviews,” in which the researcher asks the writer to provide a rationale for particular alterations to the text.

As a favor to me, both writers activated the “track changes” option in Microsoft Word as they reworked their texts. It is a special feature that underlines any additions and ~~strikes through any deletions~~. With changes thus flagged, it was easy for us to locate the latest revisions during the interviews. I have preserved these markings in the passages reproduced below so that readers too may benefit from this typographical



coding. To protect participants' anonymity, I have given each an alias, Vanessa and Simone, and I present my interpretations of their experiences separately.

## CASE STUDY 1: VANESSA

### Background

In anticipation of graduating later that fall, Vanessa had already submitted her senior thesis in developmental psychology. The thesis was a requirement of her Plan II honors program, a rigorous interdisciplinary degree track with a curriculum that exposes students from all schools to a wide range of liberal learning. Students in the program may opt to pursue a major in addition to the interdisciplinary degree that the program confers, as did Vanessa, who satisfied requirements for two majors, psychology and art history. She planned to continue her study of developmental psychology at the doctoral level with the ultimate goal of becoming an active researcher at a research-oriented university.

When I first spoke to Vanessa over the phone, she informed me that she had chosen to apply to six programs, all of which are prestigious. It was not prestige alone, however, that determined her choices. She chose schools on account of particular faculty members located there whose work she knew through her reading.

I asked if she had given any forethought to her personal statement. She confided that having to write a personal statement would be stressful for her. She felt she needed to imbue her statement with a "creative spark" to let her "personality come through," but personal writing does not come easily to her. Although an accomplished student of the humanities, she called herself an "A-minus" English student, who has struggled in the past to satisfy teachers who demanded that her writing be not only functional but also

“flowery.” Vanessa found relief in psychology because the discipline’s writing style is much more congenial to her way of thinking. She said she adopted APA conventions quickly and intuitively, and her writing in psychology courses has always been highly regarded by her professors.

When I asked her what she thought faculty look for when reading personal statements, she stressed the importance of research experience. She felt it imperative that she demonstrate in an efficient and lucid manner her preparation for laboratory research because her readers would not spend long reviewing her application. In her opinion a strong applicant is one who gives the impression of being able to walk into a new lab and immediately begin to contribute. Busy faculty do not want students who require remedial training in research. When I asked how much she thought the personal statement was weighted as compared to other parts of the application, she answered “about one-third,” the other two-thirds belonging to letters of recommendation and grades/test scores respectively.

When I met with Vanessa for the first time, she led me into one of the small offices adjacent to her professor’s lab. She had to snag a second “big person chair” from another room for us both to have a place to sit. She and her mentoring professor have collaborated on several projects investigating how and when children learn to distinguish fact from fantasy. In the corner lay one of the instruments used to question their young subjects. When asked a question, the child slides a bead along a dowel toward either the true or false region on the face of the box. At least this is how the box is supposed to

work in principle. In practice, though, Vanessa confided that at times the scientific study of young minds requires just a touch of art.

#### Opening Narrative

When I sat down with Vanessa for the first time, we turned our attention to her opening paragraph. When asked what she had wanted to accomplish in the first paragraph, she said the rhetorical situation called for an opening story that would locate her intellectual interest in her personal experience while also catching the attention of her reader. Yet she also wanted to avoid the cliché of locating her interest in a remote, romanticized past. Thus she decided to introduce herself as a skeptic: “I have never been one of those people who thought that childhood was a sacred period of life, a time of wonder and innocence.” When asked her how she liked the remainder of the paragraph, she replied that establishing exposition had competed with what she thought was a more important goal in the rhetorical situation: foregrounding her experience as a researcher.

When we met again a few weeks later, Vanessa had trimmed away a sizeable portion of the exposition that had troubled her before:

I have never been one of those people who thought that childhood was a sacred period of life, a time of wonder and innocence. ~~I know that these people exist because I have met some of them. They are the parents who delight in their children's behavior but find it alien and incomprehensible. They are the people who wish they could return to their childhoods; I have two friends who claim they wish they were seven years old again. You could not pay me to be seven years old again. They cite the “magic of childhood”, playing constantly and believing~~

~~in Santa Claus. I confess; I don't get it. It is not that I have something against children. In fact, quite the opposite is true. It's just that I always thought of childhood as a necessary process. In my mind, children were definitely different from adults in that they were not adults yet, but I never thought of them as particularly special. When I came to the University of Texas to study psychology, I was unsure what field I wanted to go into. I was thinking clinical, as most first-year psychology students do, but then I realized the thought of doing therapy did not really excite me. I figured I'd just do research, which What truly appealed to me was the thought of doing research, but I had no idea of what that entailed. I was sure of one thing, though—I did not want to work with kids.~~

She cut from the paragraph because she felt it was taking up space that would be better allocated to describing her research experience.

Casting herself as a skeptic at the outset of her statement presages a reversal, but Vanessa felt that to pinpoint a moment of realization would be neither true to her experience nor true to her priorities for the text. In the third paragraph, Vanessa does arrive at a turning point in the development of her academic interest, but she handles it perfunctorily: “My class work and my work in [Professor X’s] lab allowed me to start looking and thinking of childhood development as the most fascinating subject I had ever been taught.” A reader primed for an epiphany might be disappointed at this brief treatment, but Vanessa felt that the narrative of how she arrived at her research interest was far less important than how she subsequently acted on it.

Aside from the cuts, another change Vanessa made to the opening paragraph further foregrounded her commitment to research. On the surface, it is a minor revision, but it enhances volition. Rather than present research as a default decision as she had in the first draft—“I figured I’d just do research”—she recast it as something she actively embraced—“What truly appealed to me was the thought of doing research.” This revision recalled something she had told me weeks before over the phone: faculty want students who can walk into their lab and immediately begin contributing.

#### Subdued Tone

From first to second draft, Vanessa made a single word substitution in a sentence appearing in the fifth paragraph. Originally she had written, “I was so fascinated by these results that I asked [Professor X] if I could continue under this line of research in her lab under her supervision”; in the second version “fascinated” has been replaced by “intrigued.” She explained that on a second reading the word “fascinated” had struck her as having the wrong connotation, an affective coloring she thought inappropriate to the situation. Slight though the semantic difference may seem, it is noteworthy that Vanessa was concerned enough with sounding soberly scientific to make such a minor modification of diction.

Her reservations about affective diction stemmed from the same misgivings she had about the introduction. At our final meeting, when I asked if she was satisfied with her final version overall, she answered with ambivalence. On the one hand, she regretted that she had not sounded more enthusiastic: “I don’t know if my excitement comes through in here.” On the other hand, she worried that emotive language would convey

the wrong impression to her reader: “When I read it [the sentences cut from the first paragraph], I imagined not me, but the other psych kids that I see who are just really happy . . . but flighty, so I thought I wanted a more scientific, serious tone.” She struggled between these contrary pulls—the desire to express enthusiasm and the impulse to temper it—throughout the writing process, and ultimately decided on restraint.

Vanessa’s decision to subdue her tone casts doubt on advice offered by Norcross, Mayne, and Sayette (2002) in *Insider’s Guide to Clinical and Counseling Psychology Programs*. The authors urge applicants to express exuberance: “Passion is not too strong a term—even relentless, obsessed, committed, fascinated; in short, what we call catching the fever” (p. 69). While passion may motivate scientists to carry out their research, passion does not appear in the writing that reports that research. As someone trained in the style of scientific writing and admittedly comfortable in it, Vanessa would have reason to be wary of passionate professions of her interest. It was not as though she had no passion for science, only that she worried that baldly saying so would belie her familiarity with its epistemology.

#### Research Interests

Two sentences into her penultimate paragraph, when she turned to the topic of her research interests, Vanessa had initially “frozen up,” not knowing how to continue. This paragraph was to be her top revision priority, but before she reworked it, she wanted to speak to her advisor. When I met with her the second time, the paragraph was drastically altered. Gone was everything she had written after the second sentence, the point at which she had initially frozen:

~~I suppose one could say my research interests are broad, but I feel that it is necessary to remain open to all sorts of ideas in order to fully understand human behavior. I realize that to study a particular aspect of development, it is necessary to isolate it. However, in reality these abilities are not isolated, and it is possible that they work in concert. Thus, I believe it is important to study pieces of development in relation to one another in order to form a complete and realistic picture of children's cognition and behavior. I also believe . . . [k]nowing the performance of a group is valuable information, but it is incomplete if individual differences are not taken into account.~~

She cut these sentences because she feared coming across as “too idealistic.” It was not that she did not believe in what she had written or that her readers might not also agree in principle; it was that she spoke of inherent limitations to research as though they were news. But through her research experiences, she had become familiar with the concessions that psychologists must make to go about their work. Experiments require reductionism for the sake of controlling noisy variables. She did not want to give her reader reason to suspect that she did not understand the need for this reductionism. Consequently, she cut the whole section.

In lieu of this deleted passage was a new stretch of prose in which she describes two specific research interests. In both cases, she casts her interests in the form of problems that she would like to investigate: first she wrote of wanting to develop new “fantasy orientation tasks” to better measure the phenomenon of childhood fantasy; second she wrote of wanting to isolate the elusive concept of “certainty” in mental states.

In supplying these rather detailed descriptions of her research interests, she had followed the suggestion of her advisor who encouraged her to give her readers enough information about her interests so that they could determine whether she would be a good fit for their labs. Even if her interests did not correspond perfectly with those of the readers, her readers will see that she is capable of formulating a scientific problem capable of empirical testing. Perhaps then, they would conclude that this acquired skill would transfer to another sort of project.

She followed her professor's advice to describe her interests with specificity, but she also knew that those interests were specific to her professor's lab and that she would not be able to continue with her present line of research after relocating to another department. While she did not want her research interests to appear too vague and dispersed, neither did she want her interests to appear too narrow and set. Her dilemma points to a matter of conflict in the popular literature for psychology applicants over the recommended number of research interests to mention. Norcross, Mayne, and Sayette (2002) urge applicants to clinical programs to "mention at least two and perhaps up to four of your interests" so as to "cast your interests in fairly broad terms" (p. 40). Their rationale is that applicants who frame their interests inclusive of multiple faculty members at any given institution will fare better in the selection process by casting a wider net. This advice is somewhat countered by a recommendation from Keith-Spiegel and Weiderman (2000) who write, "Applicants who will most impress evaluators in programs that value research are those who already have relatively specific research interests" (p. 206). Ultimately, Vanessa plotted a course between the two



recommendations. She capped her presentation of research interests with a declaration of pliancy: “These are just a few of the questions I have as a result of my thesis and working in [Professor X’s] lab. I realize that I will not be able to work on all of these questions, and I know I might not end up explicitly researching any of them.”

The final addition Vanessa made to her statement was to mention the particular program to which she was applying. She wrote, “At [Name of School], I would like to work with [Professor X] and [Professor Y]. In working with [my advisor] and in researching my thesis, I have become acquainted with their work, and I feel my research interests would complement their own.” Vanessa knew that these two professors were familiar with the work of her advisor. She knew as well that the professors she named were theoretically likeminded because they always cited each other and sometimes even collaborated. She had been advised never to name more than one faculty member at an institution without knowing if those named were on friendly terms. To name unrelated—or worse yet, incompatible—faculty would signal her ignorance about the department and give her reader reason to doubt her familiarity with the literature.

When asked why she kept her discussion of these professors’ work to a minimum, Vanessa explained that brevity had been a deliberate choice. She decided all she needed was to provide the names of faculty with whom she wanted to work; she would have little to gain and more to lose by adding any more. If she were to recapitulate their work only for the purpose of exhibiting her familiarity with it, she would risk summarizing it in way they might not approve of.

She also had a good idea of what her readers knew of her professor's own work and so, by dint of association, what they were likely to think of her own training. She had calculated this likelihood into her decision for brevity. Since only her readers could determine for themselves Vanessa's fitness for their program, she determined that her best strategy would be to supply them with enough information about her research experience without supplying surplus. In her estimation, to say more might be to say too much.

## CASE STUDY 2: SIMONE

### Background

Simone belongs to a field that goes by more than one name: biopsychology, behavioral neuroscience, or, simply, neuroscience. It is a field differently situated at different institutions. When it goes by the name of biopsychology, it is usually a division in a psychology department; when it goes by the name of neuroscience, it tends to be interdisciplinary with participating faculty ranging across fields such as psychology, pharmacology, psychiatry, ethology, and biochemistry. Notwithstanding its variant appellations and intra-institutional residences, biopsychology examines neurological structures and biochemical activity correlating with behavior. If cognitive psychology studies the mind, then biopsychology could be said to study the brain.

Simone was applying to programs of both types—biopsychology and neuroscience—but felt better qualified for biopsychology given that neuroscience requires courses in biochemistry she had not taken. She decided to apply to four schools where key researchers in her field are located. At the time we met, Simone was working

on her senior thesis project, a requirement of her psychology honors program. Her project investigated the neuro-chemical effects of addiction in rats.

In our first interview over the telephone, Simone said she was not sure where to begin her personal statement. She wondered whether a personal statement should incline toward the personal or the academic, whether it should be “concrete” or “creative.” She thought faculty favor applicants who are “on top of things,” who read up on programs, and who are self-driven. She also thought that the personal statement could figure significantly in admissions decisions where applicants are closely matched on other criteria.

When asked about her prior experience with writing, Simone replied that writing generally came easy to her. English had always been her best subject whereas science had always been the toughest. At times she struggled to master her field’s content, but she found its pioneering work inspiring. She characterized a good writer as one who can compensate for gaps in knowledge as well as make the most out of introductions and discussions, the sections of a scientific paper that call for overt argumentation.

I first met Simone in the atrium of the new psychology building. The department had only moved into the building the previous summer, and professors like Simone’s advisor now enjoyed more spacious laboratories. Knowing that her advisor uses rats in her research, I asked Simone if animal rights activists had ever demonstrated against her advisor’s lab. She said, no, but added that it would not surprise her if the lab’s occluded location happened to be more than accidental.

## Opening Narrative

When we sat down together for the first time, I asked Simone what she thought of the narrative that began her draft. Her reaction to what she had written was mixed. On the one hand, she took genuine pride in her accomplishment; on the other hand, she questioned its appropriateness to the rhetorical situation:

The day was Monday, the first day of my senior year in high school. This was the day all of my friends and I had waited for for almost four years. To be older than your fellow students was to be held in the highest esteem, looked up to and idolized by all underclassmen. That was the ideal, but it was not how I felt that Monday morning when I pulled into the parking lot. What awaited me, it seemed, was another eight months of agonizing boredom and disinterest. A heavy dose of Senioritis had already set in. At the time, my mother worked at a non-traditional school that offered high school diplomas on a self-paced schedule. On Wednesday, I withdrew from the high school I had attended and been very involved in for three years, and enrolled in the non-traditional school. One week from that fateful Monday was my first day at the Academy of Creative Education. I was informed that since I had been enrolled in all of the requisite classes for graduation, I was eligible to take the state examinations for mastery of the courses. In the span of four days, I had sufficiently mastered all of the basic components of Economics and Government, and proven my skills in English and Spanish. I passed all four tests and graduated four days after my arrival at The Academy. It was perhaps my proudest moment.

When asked what impression she wanted the story to convey, she responded that she wanted to show how she had taken initiative in her high school education. Just as she had completed her high school degree outside the traditional track, she had also come by her interest in biopsychology circuitously—a psychology major who had changed majors twice before finding biopsychology at the nexus of her interests. The story of her unconventional finish to secondary education affirmed something she had said in our phone conversation: that she thought strong applicants would be those who appear self-driven. However, even though she agreed that the story illustrated self-initiative, she had started to question its appropriateness. She feared that readers might get an impression of her as a rebellious, corner-cutting type instead of the resourceful and self-motivated person she wanted them to see.

In our follow-up meeting, Simone had cut the story of high school triumph entirely because she felt its removal made her appear less “cynical.” She reasoned that an applicant who prides herself on bypassing the traditional educational route might be deemed a risk to invite into the structured setting of a doctoral program. As Simone well knew, a doctoral student in the sciences must carry out the work of a dissertation under the supervision of a faculty member with an established research agenda. A student’s own project must contribute in some way to her faculty supervisor’s research. As an undergraduate, Simone had worked more than one semester in a professor’s lab, and her decision to deemphasize self-initiative was prompted by her knowledge of how the work of science proceeds within an academic institution.

## Academic Continuity

A circumstance that complicated the writing process for Simone was her multiple changes of her major. These changes made it difficult for her to plot her undergraduate career as a continuous narrative, but she felt the rhetorical situation demanded that it seem so. Below is her first attempt at recounting her turn away from medicine:

[T]hrough working in volunteering in hospital settings, I realized that many of the patients had such profound psychological problems that the health issue itself was not necessarily improving, and the lack of motivation to cure themselves was astounding. I decided that medicine was not for me.

Upon reflection, Simone decided that her abrupt dismissal of medicine signaled a defeatist attitude to her reader, so in the next version she rewrote the passage:

The healing of their physical ailments was impeded by these factors, and I came to believe that much more needed to be done to cure the psychological afflictions and addictions before the patient would be able to enjoy any semblance of a healthy lifestyle. My exposure to this side of humanity has helped to spark a particular passion for helping enhance the quality of life for people with various afflictions of a neurological and psychological nature, and my education has thereby taken an unexpected turn away from the medical profession and instead toward neuroscience.

She had decided to reinterpret this crucial event as a moment of clarity rather than a mistake. With the positive inflection of her reinterpretation, Simone achieves greater continuity from past to present in the narrative of her education. The enhanced continuity

that she achieves is reinforced on the grammatical level by a change in aspect. Instead of the simple past, “I *realized* that many of the patients had such profound psychological problems” and “I *decided* that medicine was not for me,” she opts in the revision for the present perfect, “My exposure to this side of humanity *has helped* to spark a particular passion” and “my education *has thereby taken* an unexpected turn away from the medical profession” (emphasis added).

### Hierarchy in Science

The discontinuities of Simone’s academic career did not end with her abandonment of pre-med. She had other detours to account for. In her first draft, she had written that choosing psychology as her first major had been “a terrible mistake,” because she had “imagined that more was actually known about the brain and behavior than Pavlovian conditioning and theories of reinforcement and punishment.” Her disappointment drove her first to pre-physical therapy, then to pre-med, until finally she “found where she belonged: research. I was looking for a way to combine science with psychology, and neuroscience research was a perfect fit.”

When I first read Simone’s summation of traditional psychology as classical conditioning, I wondered how her readers would react. I could imagine a reader on an admissions committee objecting to the implication that areas of psychology other than biopsychology do not qualify as true science. Knowing that Simone was applying to three programs located in departments of psychology, I was curious to know who she considered her audience to be. She told me that she saw herself writing directly to biopsychologists rather than psychologists in general. She had chosen to apply only to

schools where there was at least one faculty member in her area. I then asked her if psychologists and biopsychologists made for good departmental neighbors. Her reply was that biopsychologists and other psychologists get along well enough because their work does not overlap, and no competition arises among colleagues who build arguments from different kinds of data.

Although she characterized the relationship between traditional psychologists and biopsychologists as one of congenial disregard, there were other moments in her text that implied a hierarchy among subfields of psychology:

When my first presentation was finished, [my professor] congratulated my effort and the TA commented that I now knew more about this disorder than the expert researcher on campus. The only reason I had not to doubt her was that this esteemed man worked not on the neurological aspect or even biological aspect of the disorder, but at the level of behavioral research and treatment.

In these sentences, Simone does not herself claim to know more than the professor, but she does express what she takes to be her TA's assumption: someone who studies only the outward signs of a psychological disorder cannot know as much as someone who studies the internal workings of the same disorder.

The scientific hierarchy implicit in this account resembles the discussion of disciplinary pecking order in Becher and Trowler's (2001) sociological overview of academic disciplines. Generalizing from interviews with professors across disciplines, the authors note that when asked to hierarchize sciences according to "hardness," scientists always rank physics, chemistry, and biology in the same order. Although in



agreement with this rank order, a chemist interviewee calls this “a hierarchy of arrogance . . . Physics represents the hardest, most abstract reasoning—people know they’re smart. Chemists feel defensive in relation to physicists, but superior in relation to biologists” (p. 102). Becher and Trowler remark that similar hierarchies exist within individual disciplines. If so, is there some assumption of “hardness” behind Simone’s story?

Perhaps hardness has to do with the capacity to lay claim to elemental causation. If perceived eminence in science is measured by a discipline’s proximity to elemental causality, then it explains why physics ranks as the quintessential science: in its attention to the smallest, most elemental particles of matter, it comes closest to arriving at first causes. Analogically, because biopsychology seeks to explain behavior by looking at the brain, it commands an immediacy to causation superior to traditional psychology, which must content itself with studying (epi)phenomena at some remove from the source. Traditional behaviorism would be in diametric opposition to biopsychology given its strict attention to observable behavior and dismissal of the mind as unknowable. Presumably, if scientists were asked to add psychology to the list along with physics, chemistry, biology, they would consistently rank it last in the hierarchy of hardness, but to attach the prefix *bio-* to *psychology* would confer some prestige from the harder discipline onto the softer one.

In revising her rough draft, Simone did make some alterations to her description of traditional psychology. She cut the summation of psychology as behaviorism, and no longer did she describe her first brush with psychology as a grave disappointment. The

sentence drawing the boundaries of science, however, remained: “I was looking for a way to combine science with psychology, and neuroscience research was a perfect fit.” What also remained was the account of her commended class presentation, which she further elaborated in the revision. She added sentences in which she acknowledged the extent of the professor’s expertise as well as her desire to collaborate with him. Along with these concessions, however, she also mentioned the professor’s name at the request of her advisor who thought some readers might recognize it.

### CONCLUSION

Taken together these case studies show how two apprentice scientists negotiated the difficulties of selling themselves on paper. There was a general trend on the part of both Vanessa and Simon to move away from the personal and toward the professional in their self-presentations. In each case, the writer cut some or all of the opening narrative in order to fast-forward to the start of her life in the laboratory. In this regard, the findings correlate with the results from chapter 3, which showed that statements by successful clinical psychology applicants had chronologically compact introductions advancing quickly to the topic of research.

The findings also reveal that more than one person was involved in the production of these supposedly single-authored texts. This was true for both writers, but particularly so for Simone. Already mentioned was one piece of advice Simone received from her professor that she acted on, but there were others. Her professor also recommended that Simone add the phrase “synaptic rewiring” to her description of the research she had carried out in the lab. Simone explained to me that her professor takes interest in any

representation of her lab's work, so she urged Simone to write that her research involved "synaptic rewiring" in order to broaden its appeal. Her advisor recommended too that Simone capitalize "behavioral neuroscience" wherever she used the phrase. Simone recognized this as unnecessary capitalization, but she decided to heed the recommendation because her professor apparently viewed capitalization as signifying the field's legitimacy. From these two recommendations, I gathered that Simone's advisor saw herself as a partial stakeholder in the document, which she considered not to be merely a representation of her student but also a reflection of herself.

## REFLECTIVE INTERVIEWS WITH APPLICANTS

This chapter continues inquiry into the experiences of applicants writing personal statements, but unlike the case studies of the previous chapter, the data presented here comes from postmortem interviews with applicants at some temporal remove from the throes of production. In the second week of December 2004, I interviewed four applicants whom I had gotten to know that previous summer and fall. They had submitted their applications some one to two months prior and were now waiting to learn the outcome. The period of time that had lapsed proved long enough for them to have gained some perspective on the experience, but not so long as to obscure its details.

Two of the interviewees had applied to M.D. programs (Jaclyn and David) and the other two had applied to Ph.D. programs in psychology (Jenny and Shruti). Each interview lasted around 45 minutes in which I posed four two-part questions—the first part asking for a quantitative response on a graduated scale, and the second part inviting elaboration to that response. Table 6.1 displays the four questions and the interviewees' numerical responses.

Table 6.1

*Numerical Responses from Reflective Interviews with Four Applicants*

Question	<b>Jaclyn</b> medicine	<b>Jenny</b> psychology	<b>David</b> medicine	<b>Shruti</b> psychology	<i>M</i>
How difficult was it for you to write your personal statement? <i>1 easy – 10 difficult</i>	8	7	7	8	7.5
Do you feel as though writing the personal statement was a valuable learning experience? <i>1 not valuable – 10 valuable</i>	7	7	9	8	7.75
Do you feel like your statement turned out to be a sincere representation of who you are? <i>1 insincere – 10 sincere</i>	9	8	8	9	8.5
Did having to write the statement affirm your choice of career? <i>1 not affirming – 10 affirming</i>	9	5	7	9	7.5

The numerical responses show a high degree of similarity across the board. The follow-up elaborations, however, revealed interesting variation in individual experience.

DIFFICULTY

According to the taxonomy that Maxine Hairston (1986) proposes in her article “Different Processes, Different Products: A Theory about Writing,” a personal statement would belong what she calls Class III writing—extended reflective writing. When engaging in extended reflective writing, writers begin with only a nebulous idea of their ultimate destination. Extended reflective writing tends to be mentally taxing for writers, for they must proceed with only the hope of discovering suitable form and content along the way. In this situation writers are “working on the edge of their abilities, operating in

unfamiliar territory” (p. 445). Although frequently the most frustrating type of writing, extended reflective writing also tends to be the most rewarding when it turns out well.

All four interviewees agreed that writing the personal statement was a difficult undertaking—an average of 7.5 out of 10. When elaborating on what made it difficult, they cited their lack of experience with writing a document of this kind. As Hairston associates with Class III writing, they were embarking on a novel writing experience without much sense of how it would turn out.

David ascribed his difficulty to the “open-ended” nature of the task that admitted of no single approach. He agonized over his opening paragraph, but once he had it in a shape that he liked, the remainder of the task became much more manageable for him. Having identifying a defining moment in his past provided him with a unifying principle for the rest of document. He could then relate the rest of his past as leading up to and resulting from this formative experience.

In describing her difficulty, Jenny remarked that she too had engaged in a lot of rhetorical invention to get started, but unlike David, she never arrived at a point where she felt like the difficulty eased up. The path she had taken to clinical psychology was unusual and difficult to narrate. The momentous turning point in her past was her switch from business to psychology; however, what was momentous for her she later decided would not be so momentous for her reader. She described her writing process as a whittling away of excess to arrive at a concise account that she gauged to be acceptable for the situation. In her description of extended reflective writing, Hairston concentrates on the difficulty that writers have of discovering content and form, but she does not

mention concern for a reader's reaction as a further complicating factor. But for Jenny, it was precisely her consideration of the reader that caused most of her difficulty.

### LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Telling stories about ourselves prompts increased self-understanding because whenever we narrate life stories we set our present and past identities into dialectic communication (Linde, 1993). Since one can never "speak the present in the present" (Linde, 1993, p. 119), any time that one tells a story about one's life, an automatic temporal distance opens up between the protagonist and the narrator that must be closed by constructing narrative continuity between past and present. As Linde (1993) says,

All questions of how am I doing?" whether in relation to one's own standards or in relation to the standards of others (if such a distinction can ever be made) require the ability to make evaluations, and the evaluations cannot be done by the immediate liver of the life; the task requires a watcher and narrator who is related but not identical. (p. 121).

It is this self-reflexivity that allows for those in-the-act discoveries that Hairston (1986) associates with extended reflective writing.

When setting out to write her personal statement, Jaclyn described her preliminary self-inventory as an occasion for disappointment, as she measured her ambitions against her reality and found disparity. The exercise made her acknowledge where she had fallen short of what she had expected to have accomplished by the end of her college career. This disappointment made it difficult for her to begin. To relieve herself of debilitating self-censure, it was suggested to Jaclyn that she try free-writing without concern for the

coherence or clarity of her prose, but she found that she lacked “the self-control to let go.” Instead, she found herself interrogating every sentence she typed for the ring of integrity. Having to connect the events of her rangy past caused Jaclyn a lot of anxiety. Using the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle, she spoke of having to trim “some pieces in order to make them all fit together.”

But by the end of the process, Jaclyn had made peace with herself. The exercise of self-narration had made explicit to her motives for pursuing medicine that before had been verbally inchoate. Despite her initial disappointment over her progress, Jaclyn found that the multifarious events of her college career added up to something after all. She found satisfaction in “pulling from her experiences” some knowledge she could apply to medicine. And for those experiences that did not yield any discernible linkage after some reflection, she found other reasons to value. By the end of our interview, Jaclyn hit upon another metaphor for her writing process that she preferred to jigsaw puzzle. She compared her writing process to drawing a line of trend through a scatter plot, as she had learned to do in her business classes. Through what first appeared to her as field of random events, she threaded a filament that, though not perfectly linear, made progress of mere chronology. By the end of writing it, “I became who I described in the personal statement.”

Jenny also described the personal statement as a valuable learning experience, but for her the learning came from her interactions with others rather than self-reflection. When she shared her personal statement with her recommenders, they engaged her in conversations about options she could pursue in the field of clinical psychology. One



professor urged her to follow the path of research because women too often choose to be therapists rather than scientists. Another recommender described the rewards of pursuing a sideline of practice rather than building a research program. Jenny took these discrepant recommendations in an expansive spirit; they opened up to her a wider range of professional possibilities than she could have imagined before. Ultimately, she decided to apply to programs across the research-practice continuum.

### SINCERITY

When asked whether their statements were sincere, the interviewees all replied in the affirmative. Their numerical responses to this question yielded the highest mean, 8.5. Although David admitted to feeling self-consciousness about coming across as sincere, he did not let his self-consciousness hijack the writing process. For Shruti, it was imperative that she represent herself as honestly as possible; otherwise, the cost of misrepresentation could be dear. She would be under the tutelage of one professor for a long period of time; therefore, if she were ill-fitted for the professor's research agenda, she could find herself in an irreparable situation. For this reason, she said she owed it to herself to be as sincere as she could, and her attitude toward the document approached something akin to a contract.

### CONVICTION

For Jenny, firmer conviction for her choice of profession had come once she "put to rest" her decision to leave the school of business. She felt that in making the switch from business to psychology, she had incurred a big risk. She had swapped a tradable baccalaureate degree for a lengthy apprenticeship and delayed gratification. In writing

her statement, she had pared down the story of her transition from business to psychology from two paragraphs to two sentences, so by the end, the event seemed rather inconsequential. But telling it mostly for private consumption had been cathartic for Jenny, as she had gained a sense of “closure” on this fraught decision.

Shruti gained conviction for her career choice as result of the positive feedback she received from those who read her statement. Specifically, she mentioned one faculty member who praised her for her clarity of expression and grasp of the discipline. This compliment had come from a professor at one of the programs to which she had applied, someone who knew nothing of her but what he learned from her personal statement. Affirmation from a virtual stranger had provided powerful reinforcement for her choice of profession.

Although none of these writers would have ever written a personal statement voluntarily, they appreciated the experience in retrospect. The sense of accomplishment and increased self-awareness justified the toil. All four writers would assent, I think, to this statement from Carson (1997): “Stories, with their beginnings, middles, and ends, redeem life from contingency and make it something other than a meaningless succession of events. [They] disclose to us something about ourselves that we need to know” (p. 233).

## **PART THREE—TUTORS**

### **7**

#### **INVOKING ABSENT AUTHORITY**

##### **Consulting on Personal Statements in the Writing Center**

In chapter 4, I directed my attention to the texts that medical school applicants brought to their writing center consultations; in this chapter, I direct my attention to the consultations themselves as texts. As a veteran writing center tutor, I have advised many applicants writing personal statements. But more than for any other program of study, medical school applicants are those I have helped the most.

The University of Texas at Austin is the flagship university of its state, but it has no medical school attached. Applicants must open a file with the Health Professions Office on campus, but this overtaxed and understaffed office cannot counsel applicants in the drafting of their personal statements. Those who desire feedback at this stage are referred to the writing center. Consequently, a high volume of applicants pass through the writing center during the summer months. In summer 2004, they accounted for around 1/3 of all visitors: 290 consultations in total. This sum gives evidence of the important service that the writing center provides aspiring doctors at my institution.

Consulting on personal statements presents a challenge to student and tutor alike when it comes to establishing the identity of the audience. Under these circumstances, consultants do not enjoy the same recourse that they do when working with a coursework paper. With a coursework paper a tutor can presume the student already knows the audience and so can question the student about the audience's expectations. Whatever

the tutor learns from asking questions of the student she can supplement with a review of whatever course material the student has brought along, such as assignment instructions, a syllabus, a rough draft with comments. By contrast, when a student arrives with a personal statement, tutor and student must work together to imagine who this audience might be. The challenge for tutor and writer faced with this situation is how to construct and mobilize a mutually acceptable representation of the audience to assess the writer's rhetorical choices.

Invoking an absent audience should ideally proceed as a cooperative endeavor between tutor and student, but it does not always occur this way. In their linguistic analysis of writing center conversations, Blau, Hall, and Strauss (1998) describe a situation in which a tutor invokes authority to cut through conflict:

By the end of this exchange, the tutor is clearly frustrated with the client not taking her advice to check the accuracy of the term and goes as far as to create a hypothetical teacher to take on the burden of the direct question "What board of education?". This is a creative way to skirt the issue of being too directive in the session. While maintaining the role of non-directive collaborator, this tutor invents a sterner and more directive persona (teacher) to ask the direct question that she feels is outside her role. (p. 26)

It is understandable why a tutor would invoke a teacher to play the part of the heavy. After all, a nondirective approach to consultation encourages tutors not to press their own opinions on students, but to help students arrive at informed rhetorical choices on their own. Seen this way, the instance of invoking authority above could amount to no more

than a politely indirect means of doing the unpleasant work of correction. But does such a practice at some level subtly undermine the spirit of nondirective tutoring? Or, to put the question more pointedly, if a tutor protects her coequal status by nonce borrowing of authority that she otherwise disowns, does this not pervert genuine egalitarianism? I would submit that it does, or at least can, under certain circumstances. The peremptory invocation of absent authority, I will argue, has the potential to confound consultation.

The qualitative study reported here analyzes how tutors and students work to manifest absent authority through their dialogue. An analytical method based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) sociolinguistic study of politeness is applied to two focal sessions. Results from this analysis are used to support the claim that invoking an outside audience can confound a consultation when student and tutor do not agree upon the audience's expectations. Although appealing to third-party arbitration may appear to preserve a tutor's nondirective stance, in reality, it may only attenuate authority through an act of ventriloquism. The chapter concludes with a suggestion for how tutors can address conflict with students arising from discrepant interpretations of the audience's needs.

#### THE SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF POLITENESS

P. Brown and Levinson's sociolinguistic theory of politeness has found many creative applications by other researchers: from speeches in Shakespeare's tragedies (R. Brown & Gilman, 1989) to bad news delivery in business communication (Rodman, 2001). Still others have applied Brown and Levinson's ideas to tutorials in math and science (Person, Kreuz, Zwaan, & Graesser, 1995; Bills, 2000). These latter two studies illustrate the utility of Brown and Levinson's ideas in analyses of one-on-one pedagogical interactions,

which tend to blend the structured talk of the classroom with the unstructured talk of casual conversation (Davis, Hayward, Hunter, & Wallace, 1986). In writing center research, Mackiewicz (1999) has described how tutors enact strategies of politeness to “equalize what would otherwise be a hierarchical relationship” (p. 81). Engaging in politeness helps tutors promote student autonomy over their texts; hence Brown and Levinson’s theory provides an illuminative method for analyzing writing center discourse.

According to Brown and Levinson, politeness, like a tacit social compact, promotes smooth, harmonious human relations despite inevitable conflicts that arise in social interactions. Far from being mere ornament on otherwise referential discourse, politeness operates at a fundamental level in the generation of conversation. Politeness obeys a rationality of its own even when it prompts locutions that appear to flout Grice’s cooperative maxims of conversation, such as those against prolixity and equivalence. The desire to maintain amicable relations often leads speakers to engage in circumlocution and indirection, but such verbal behavior should not be construed as a sign of inconsideration, but rather as the reverse, an indication that participants are acting out of respect for one another’s face.

The notion of “face” is at the heart of Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness. They define face as the public image that individuals claim for themselves and wish others to ratify (p. 61). As a psychological reality, face has two wills: the will to pursue one’s wants without impediment (negative face) and the will to be approved by others (positive face). At times these wills come into conflict when efforts to secure the approbation of others necessitates that one forestall the single-minded pursuit of his own

wants. Face-threatening acts (abbreviated FTAs) are actions that potentially endanger the face of interacting participants. If, on the one hand, an FTA involves an imposition from one party onto another, the act is said to threaten negative face. If, on the other hand, an FTA endangers one party's self-esteem, it is said to jeopardize positive face.

Whenever speakers try to lessen the force of a FTA, they are engaging in strategies of politeness. Positive politeness is reparative action meant to spare positive face through building solidarity and conveying approbation. Negative politeness is reparative action meant to save negative face by minimizing coercion, signaling restraint, and recognizing freedom of action. Although politeness has paralinguistic and kinesic realizations, Brown and Levinson limit their discussion to linguistic strategies, which they catalogue in detail across three languages. On the model of generative grammar, Brown and Levinson derive rules for achieving linguistic politeness that participants know intuitively, though may not always act upon in full consciousness.

It is easy to imagine why writing center consultation would occasion many FTAs, given that writing is usually "dear" to its author in one or more senses. More than most scholastic activities, writing involves the ego, particularly when a text represents the self, as a personal statement does. Also, the activity of writing exacts high cognitive costs for most writers, particularly inexperienced writers who understandably may be loath to launch wholesale revisions of a text once having painstakingly produced it. However, as writing centers are in the business of critiquing texts and coaxing writers to revise them, consultations inevitably occasion FTAs. Threats to positive face in consultation typically

occur when a tutor evaluates a student’s text; threats negative face follow when the tutor suggests that the writer revise the text accordingly.

Brown and Levinson note that in circumstances where participants are strangers but relative coequals, the need for politeness increases. This observation has bearing on writing center consultation because leveling the imbalance of power between tutor and student is a central tenet of nondirective tutoring, and tutors tend to engage in politeness strategies precisely in those situations in which they wish to “downgrade the apparent power relationship” (Bills, 2000, p. 46). Furthermore, student and tutor typically do not know each other prior to the consultation; thus the social distance between them is greater than it would be between the same student and his teacher who are already acquainted. For these reasons, one would expect to find politeness strategies abundantly employed in writing center consultation.

Key terms from Brown and Levinson’s theory are summarized in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1

*Key Terms from Brown and Levinson’s Sociolinguistic Study of Politeness*

	Face	FTA	Politeness
Positive	Desire to be accepted and appreciated by others	Acts that compromise self-esteem (i.e. disagreements, corrections, disapprovals)	Redress in the form of alliance, approbation, optimism
Negative	Desire to pursue wants freely without impediment	Acts that compromise freewill (i.e. favors, recommendations, orders)	Redress in the form of hesitancy, mitigation, indirection

## METHOD

The two consultations (of the 14 observed) that I have chosen for analysis make for an instructive contrast in how well tutor and applicant were able to negotiate audience



expectations. One consultation was judged by the participants to be successful whereas the other prompted ambivalent reactions. In follow-up interviews, tutor “Paul” and applicant “Daniel” of the successful consultation described their session as productive, while participants in the unsuccessful session, tutor “Jane” and applicant “Charlotte,” described their session as meandering. Along other parameters, however, tutors and applicants were comparable. Neither pairing was previously acquainted. The tutors had both worked many terms in the writing center and had prior experience working specifically with medical school applicants. The two applicants, in turn, exhibited no remarkable disparity in their writing ability nor any notable disparity in their professed commitment to pursuing medicine.

Two segments from each consultation are transcribed below. The first of these is taken from early in the consultations when tutor and student are setting an agenda; the second is taken from points later in the consultations after tutor and applicants have turned their attention to the text. The method of transcription, keyed in Table 7.2, follows the system developed by Gail Jefferson, the standard in conversation analysis (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984), with one noteworthy adaptation: realizations of positive and negative politeness are underlined in the transcript and labeled in the margins—positive politeness in the left margin, negative politeness on the right. Coding instances of politeness “tells us something about how [tutors] hoped to construct their relationship” with students (Bills, 2000, p. 43). What’s more, the distributional patterning of politeness across the two consultations offers one compelling explanation why the first session was judged less productive than the other.

Table 7.2

*Transcription Key*

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
-	interrupted or aborted utterance
=	latching (no pause across speaker turns)
//	onset and end of overlapping speech (used in pairs like bookends)
<i>italics</i>	emphatic intonation
:	prolongation of pronunciation
“speech”	reported or imagined speech
[comment]	transcriber’s interpolation
...	omission
<u>Please</u>	politeness strategy

RESULTS PART I: THE CASE OF JANE AND CHARLOTTE

<i>Positive Politeness</i>	<i>2:05 minutes into session</i>	<i>Negative Politeness</i>
affirmation	(1) C: The thing is, you want to show them, you want to be (2) unique. . . . You want to stand out. At the same (3) time, you want to think about the audience in terms, (4) you know, it's doctors and you have older (5) doctors and then younger doctors, but you have to (6) appeal to both of them= (7) J: <u>=Right.</u>	
echoing	(8) C: And you need to be personal, but I think at the same (9) time you need to be a little bit formal. (10) J: <u>A little bit formal though in your own voice=</u> (11) C: =Yeah. (12) J: <u>And</u> what information do you think they'll be (13) looking for about you?	
affirmation	(14) C: Um [pause] basically they want to see why you (15) want to be a doctor, they want to see your (16) motivations for being a doctor . . . it's really not too (17) defined. (18) J: <u>Okay, s-, I-, certainly they want to see your</u> (19) <u>motivations, and</u> what got you interested in the (20) beginning, <u>and</u> , um, they want to see, they <i>need</i> to	
pragmatic particle	(21) see, <u>right?</u> , you're someone who's going to take (22) // hold // (23) C: // Yeah, yeah // (24) J: <u>And</u> go with it= (25) C: =You need to show your strengths	
echoing	(26) J: <u>Your strengths a:nd</u> what you've done along (27) // the way // (28) C: // Uh-huh // (29) J: That shows you on this path <u>and</u> you intend to stay on (30) this path right on through med school, so, <u>an-, you</u>	
optimistic question	(31) <u>feel you've included all of that in here?</u> (32) C: I, I-, I [pause] think so. [pause]	
inclusive pronoun	(33) J: Okay. Well what <u>we</u> 'll do is read through it.	

Figure 7.3. Jane and Charlotte's Consultation, The First Segment

In this first segment, Jane and Charlotte are setting an agenda for their consultation, and there is no overt sign of disagreement, but plenty of instances of positive politeness. As Davidson (1984) notes, conversation participants at some social distance from each other prefer not to disagree outright, but to preface their disagreement with token agreement.

This tendency helps to explain why Jane would add so many qualifications to Charlotte's sketchy definition of "motivation" without ever openly contradicting her.

When Jane asks her question about the audience in line 12, Charlotte answers that they will want to see her motivation, but she says that the rhetorical task is not well defined. Over the next several turns Jane proceeds to specify the task much further by appending a series of qualifications to Charlotte's bare definition of "motivation," each one introduced with the coordinating conjunction "and." "And" is not a strategy of positive politeness that Brown and Levinson specifically identify, but in this context, it qualifies as one by allowing Jane to emend Charlotte's response without jeopardizing Charlotte's positive face. Brown and Levinson do make a distinction between those FTAs made "on record" and those made "off record," depending on whether the speaker actually acknowledges having broached an FTA. We could say then that Jane makes her critical evaluation of Charlotte's definition of motivation here off record.

The question that Jane poses in lines 31-32 hastens an end to agenda setting. The question counts as a strategy of positive politeness for its inherent optimism in hinting that Charlotte may be able to answer the question affirmatively. At the same time, however, the inherent optimism of the question also makes it presumptuous in not offering Charlotte an opportunity to say whether or not she agrees that she *should* include "all of that," only to say whether or not she *has*. The faltering hesitance of Charlotte's reply in line 32 could indicate uncertainty of either kind (and perhaps both simultaneously). Jane, however, does not follow up with another question but instead

introduces the next procedural step with an inclusive “we” in line 33, thereby bringing agenda setting to a close.

The importance of agenda setting in determining the successful outcome of a writing conference has been noted by Newkirk (1989). A mutually accepted agenda tends to lend direction and purpose to a consultation whereas a disputed or forced agenda tends to court conflict. Not fully apparent here but becoming so later is the problematic basis of Jane and Charlotte’s agenda. As the reader will soon see, Jane employed strategies of positive politeness to bring an end to agenda setting prematurely. In the second segment below, conflict emerges from differences of opinion that had gone unaddressed at the beginning.

<i>Positive Politeness</i>	<i>35:25 minutes into session</i>	<i>Negative Politeness</i>
affirmation	(34) C: And I want to-, one big thing in here is I really want (35) my motivation to show through, and I don't know if (36) it's showing through very much= (33) J: =Okay.	
affirmation	(34) C: It has to really show. Because they see my (35) knowledge and my GPA and my MCAT= (36) J: =Right=	
restatement	(37) C: =And stuff like that. // They see my schoolwork // (38) J: // <u>So your motivation</u> // (39) And you're saying what motivated you [pause] (40) C: Or just my motivation [pause] They don't want to (41) take someone who's going to start up for a year and (42) then drop out. (43) J: That's right. (44) C: They want someone who's going to be there for the (45) long haul, and I need to show that= (46) J: =An-, and I <u>think</u> , <u>perhaps</u> , the only way they can (47) know that is to see have you continued, have you (48) continued to pursue this interest right on through. (49) And I <u>think</u> that's where your choice to change (50) // from microbiology // (51) C: // [inaudible interjection] // (52) J: As soon as it became an available option. The (53) courses you chose to take in college= (54) C: =Yeah=	epistemic verb; hedge  epistemic verb
pragmatic particle	(55) J: = <u>How else can they judge, you know?</u> So, I <u>think</u> -, (56) these are valuable, um, so motivated and continued (57) to be motivated. . . Not only the smarts but the motivation, that's what they need to see, <u>right?</u>	rhetorical question; epistemic verb
pragmatic particle	(58) motivation, that's what they need to see, <u>right?</u> (59) And, I <u>think</u> your= (60) C: =Desire, my desire needs to show through, because (61) there are so many people, I mean they might be (62) motivated, but, you know, they're motivated by (63) money or because their parents wanted them to be (64) doctors.	epistemic verb

Figure 7.4. Jane and Charlotte's Consultation, The Second Segment

Where only strategies of positive politeness were in evidence in the first segment, in the second segment Jane engages in strategies of both positive and negative politeness. As would be expected, these strategies are most abundant when Jane evaluates Charlotte's rhetorical choices in lines 46-49 and lines 55-59. At these moments Jane

goes on record in delivering the FTA, which she had not done earlier, but the fundamental disagreement between tutor and student is never effectively addressed.

The negative politeness strategies Jane uses at these moments are aimed at mitigating the threat to Charlotte's face. In line 46, for instance, Jane uses the epistemic verb "think" to signal the subjective, and thus inconclusive, nature of her knowledge. In this same sentence, she also inserts the adverbial "perhaps" to further hedge what follows.

In line 55, Jane combines positive and negative politeness in the same sentence. By casting as a rhetorical question "How else can they judge?" what is by implication a declaration (i.e. *they have no other way to judge*), Jane softens the force of her correction. She also attaches the pragmatic particle "you know" to the end of the sentence. The meaning of this phrase does not arise from its compositionality, but from its phatic function. Speakers use "you know" to coax agreement with the propositional content of an utterance (Ostman, 1981). "You know" is even used when speakers do not assume their addressees know what they are saying, even though the phrase would imply as much. As a positive politeness strategy, "you know" seeks to cultivate comradery, but the solidarity it supposes may be no more than a polite illusion.

Although Jane broaches FTAs in the first person in lines 46-49 and lines 55-59, she still relies heavily on the authority of the absent audience to press her point. In line 58, for example, she speaks of what "they need," attaching the pragmatic particle "right?" as she had earlier in lines 20-21 of the first segment. What is different about this later instance is Charlotte's reaction, which is to break in with a change of topic in line 60. Charlotte's interruption at line 60 signals her disagreement with Jane's preferred

definition of “motivation.” This disagreement might well have come out at the beginning had Jane not preemptively suppressed it with strategies of positive politeness. Now, near the end of the 45-minute session, the matter remains unresolved, and tutor and student are still dancing around it.

Frequent changes of topic characterize what Freedman and Sperling (1985) call “cross-purpose talk,” the result of participants competing for the conversational floor. Charlotte and Jane are not vying in open confrontation here, but are routing their dispute through the third party of the absent audience. Tutor and applicant summon competing versions of the audience as a means of refuting each other’s interpretation of the rhetorical task while managing to avoid open antagonism. However, rather than resolve the conflict, this displacement only defers it.

From Jane’s point of view, Charlotte can only prove her motivation by establishing a chronological continuity to her academic endeavors. In other words, proof of motivation depends on Charlotte providing a series of purposeful actions to substantiate it. In the follow-up interview, Jane said that she felt “disoriented” during the consultation with Charlotte and attributed the source of disorientation to “different conceptions of the audience and what they needed to learn.” She felt that Charlotte had included too much “psychic” and “emotional” information when the audience would be more interested in hearing about her academic endeavors.

But from Charlotte’s point of view, motivation is a state of mind rather than a sum of experience. Evidence for Charlotte’s preferred interpretation appears in the first sentences of her concluding paragraph:



I know I will become a doctor because besides innate ability I have two other characteristics necessary for success: passion and faith. For an intellectually curious individual such as myself, absolute passion for the medical field and science guarantees that the curiosity will be sufficiently piqued to outweigh any hardship or discouragement that may be faced in medical school.

Her passion and curiosity literally speak for themselves as the grammatical subjects of both the main and imbedded clauses of the second sentence, and her “intellectual curiosity” is presupposed as a fronted phrase. The syntax here reinforces her belief that motivation is a psychological property needing no objective correlative.

This belief explains why Charlotte interjects the term “desire” in line 60. After Jane has managed to crowd out Charlotte’s preferred meaning of “motivation” with her own, Charlotte introduces a new, semantically unclaimed word to preserve it. In effect, she swaps signifiers to elide differences in reference. In the follow-up interview, when asked what she thought of the consultation, Charlotte replied that Jane had good advice on “organization” and “grammar,” but “was not too knowledgeable about what the content should be.”

RESULTS PART II: THE CASE OF PAUL AND DANIEL

<i>Positive Politeness</i>	<i>1:55 minutes into session</i>	<i>Negative Politeness</i>
affirmation	(1) <i>P</i> : So, if I'm reading this, what are the things you <i>really</i> (2) want to stand out? So, if I read it, I'm going to say, (3) "Oh yeah, this really stands out about [Daniel]." (4) <i>D</i> : Specifically [pause] things that I want to stand out. (5) Just [pause] I guess [pause] experiences specific to (6) the medical field I've done. // Those things // (7) <i>P</i> : // What are those? // (8) <i>D</i> : Um [pause] I want to, like- You want to know (9) specifically? (10) <i>P</i> : Yeah. (11) <i>D</i> : My background, I guess, as a fine arts major= (12) <i>P</i> : =All right. (13) <i>D</i> : It's kind of unusual so I want to talk about that. (14) <i>P</i> : What do you think that gives you that most med (15) school students don't have? (16) <i>D</i> : It's a broader ranges of experiences, and just, uh, I (17) think just a better, you know, deeper understanding (18) of the world and everything.	
affirmation	(19) <i>P</i> : <u>Okay</u> . I'll want to <u>probably</u> hear more specifics	qualifier
pragmatic particle	(20) about that. <u>If you can just kind of articulate . . . if</u> (21) <u>there's something, you know, kind of</u> essential about	if-clauses; minimizer; hedges
inclusive pronoun	(22) fine arts that's going to allow you to do medicine (23) better= (24) <i>D</i> : =Okay. (25) <i>P</i> : <u>Kind of</u> think about that more, and <u>we</u> 'll see if it (26) comes out in the paper.	hedge

Figure 7.5. Paul and Daniel's Consultation, The First Segment

What is notably different about the agenda setting that goes on here is that Paul asks a series of questions before stepping in with his own opinion. The open-endedness of these questions makes them genuinely Socratic: they lead Daniel to the outer limits of his thought without coercion. Paul's dialectic probing prompts Daniel to make a vague, rather circular, statement about the distinctiveness of his experience in lines 16-18. It is at this juncture that Paul sets an agenda for the session, one that promises to track the satisfaction of Daniel's own rhetorical intentions.

The majority of politeness strategies in this segment cluster around the agenda setting that occurs in lines 19-26. Given that Paul is broaching an FTA by making a request of Daniel, the density of negative politeness strategies is warranted. The first if-clause (line 20) combines strategies of negative politeness that enhance its conditionality. The clause contains the minimizer “just” (which here approximates the meaning of “merely”) and the hedge “kind of.” In laminating negative politeness strategies, Paul both diminishes the imposition of the request and leaves Daniel an “out” by not assuming that he can or will elaborate, only that he may. The FTA is heavily mitigated here, but it is not ambiguous. Paul goes on record in making his request of David.

<i>Positive Politeness</i>	<i>24:40 minutes into session</i>	<i>Negative Politeness</i>
pragmatic particle	(27) <i>P</i> : Here again is a paragraph where you ended up <u>more</u> (28) <u>or less</u> listing things instead of engaging me on some (29) sort of-, so what you ended up saying are these really (30) general things, [reading] “the insights I gained about (31) patient treatment, the investigative process, and the (30) role and responsibility of a doctor were (31) invaluable.” <u>You know</u> , I’ve never been in clinic or (32) done any of this work, but <u>if I had to pretend without</u> (33) <u>really knowing</u> , and someone said to me, “[Paul], (34) what do you think about the clinic?” <u>You know</u> , I’d (35) say, “this is an <i>invaluable</i> place.”=	qualifier  if-clause
pragmatic particle	(36) <i>D</i> : =[laughter]= (37) <i>P</i> : = <u>You know</u> , I could say that without ever having had (38) the experience= (39) <i>D</i> : =That’s true.	
pragmatic particle	(40) <i>P</i> : And those are the kind of general things, even though (41) they’re true= (42) <i>D</i> : =uh-hm= (43) <i>P</i> : =I <u>would</u> encourage you to find a more interesting (44) way to say that. And that’s what that story in the (45) first paragraph did so well because you had real (46) people, you had real experiences, you put me in that (47) place in a way that this doesn’t <u>quite</u> do it because, (48) <u>you know</u> , I can say these things without ever having (49) have that experience, so it removes me from the (50) energy and the uniqueness of that experience	conditional modal  qualifier

Figure 7.6. Paul and Daniel’s Consultation, The Second Segment

In this second stretch of talk, Paul uses comparatively fewer strategies of negative politeness than he did when setting the agenda. This relative scarcity would seem to indicate that he has taken a more directive turn. And yet, I do not believe that interpretation accurately captures what happens here. Paul continues to observe the rule of politeness, but he achieves it by turning an FTA inward toward himself rather than outward toward Daniel.

In lines 31-35, Paul constructs an if-clause that positions himself as the patient of an extrinsic demand: “if I had to pretend without really knowing,” he begins. This clause

realizes a self-reflexive turn to the FTA. Paul then proceeds to repeat Daniel's words with a different emphatic intonation: "this is an *invaluable* place." In effect, Paul temporarily appropriates David's language as if to say that the phrasing lacks the signature specificity that would make the experience Daniel's own. The words lend themselves to easy piracy for their vagueness. Daniel appears to take Paul's piracy in a playful spirit given that his reaction in line 36 is laughter.

This "self-inflicted" FTA deflects directiveness because in doing so Paul appeals to his ignorance as opposed to his knowledge. He calls attention to a problem he perceives in Daniel's text by showing that even an outsider with no firsthand experience in a clinic could summon Daniel's words. He then follows up this observation with the suggestion that Daniel reuse a rhetorical strategy he had used to good effect earlier in the statement. This concrete recommendation leaves Daniel with the makings of a revision plan without stipulating how the problem should be fixed.

In post-consultation interviews, both Daniel and Paul appraised their session favorably. Daniel remarked that Paul had been "extremely helpful" in assisting him to discern the strong and weak areas of his statement. Paul thought he had succeeded in giving concrete advice for where and how Daniel could undertake revision without simultaneously supplying the what.

## DISCUSSION

Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness explains why a tutor would want to displace FTAs of evaluation and recommendation onto the figure of absent authority. After all, it is not only the student's but the tutor's face that is at stake in consultation. A tutor

wanting to abide by a nondirective approach would have a principled reason for attributing an FTA to an outsider. However, when the figure of authority is unknown to tutor and student, its invocation may complicate rather than facilitate the negotiation of tutor/student differences. An appeal to outside arbitration cannot settle conflict when the will of the third party can not be firmly ascertained. When faced with this situation, a tutor may find it more productive to assess the student's text from the seat of his own interpretive authority.

What might Jane have done differently to prevent the consultation from devolving into cross-purpose talk over audience expectations? At the outset, she could have given Charlotte an opportunity to comment on her proposed agenda. When a student is not given opportunity to ratify, refine, or reject a tutor's proposed agenda, then tutor and student are not primed to recognize the same problems in a text. The tutor finds herself identifying "problem[s] and suggest[ing] remedies before the student is even convinced that a problem exists" (Newkirk, 1989, p. 323).

And yet, to believe that all miscommunication can be stemmed by a well negotiated agenda is surely too optimistic. No amount of negotiation can fend off all eventual disagreement as both tutor and student may alter their understanding of the rhetorical situation once having engaged the text. This unpredictable outcome of interaction is one of the educational virtues of tutorial. It follows then that the most anyone can reasonably ask of a tutor is that she recognize cross-purpose talk when it threatens to overtake the tutorial.

The best tactic for coping with this turn of events may simply be for a tutor to introduce it as a topic of conversation. In her study of writing center tutorial, Melnick (1984) describes a frustrating session marked by “symmetrical, but unmeshing, assertiveness,” in which she and a student “were not really exchanging anything or exploring anything. First I would assert something about writing and audience; she would assert something about what [the audience] did not understand” (19). In hindsight Melnick realizes that she should have stopped the session to ask the student what she thought the two of them could do to remedy miscommunication. Forthright and frank, Melnick’s recommendation formulates miscommunication as a problem for both parties to solve.

This on-record approach to negotiating conflict over audience expectations is not only productive, but also polite. Brown and Levinson explain that when a speaker perceives some danger in the immediate context as overriding the interest of the hearer’s face, the speaker generally broaches an FTA with little or no indirection. Translating this idea into a writing center context, we might call such an act an instance of “pedagogical politeness”: when a tutor determines that cross-purpose talk has overrun a consultation, she can, in good faith, confront the student about it, knowing that she is honoring the educational mission of a writing center.

## CONCLUSION

Though it may be a homely discourse, the personal statement cannot be dismissed as simplistic or inconsequential. The brevity of the document, generally no more than two or three page, is woefully incommensurate with the painstaking labor that goes into its production. The time alone that students spend working on these texts would impress any teacher of writing. A survey of Johns Hopkins undergraduates applying to medical school found that they spent an average of 18 hours preparing their statements (Newman, 2005), and the thought processes that students engage in during these eighteen hours would qualify as critical by anyone's definition. Vanessa and Simone, whose experiences were reported in chapter 5, grappled with numerous rhetorical quandaries for which there were no clear answers, certainly not to be found in the popular guidebooks available to them. The personal statement is a genre for which there is no prototype or obvious precedent in a writer's repertoire. The personal statement presents students with a stubbornly rhetorical task, rhetorical in the sense that no rules of thumb or tried formulas offer an expedient to the taxing activities of invention and arrangement. Vanessa and Simone continually tacked back and forth from their private ambitions to the social expectations they ascribed to the scientific community.

The modifier *personal* in the phrase "personal statement" tends to conceal the essentially allocentric orientation of the document. While it is true that these are texts by and about their authors, they are not explanations of an ego or histories of a personality; in their pragmatic implications, these texts function like commissives. According to



Searle's (1975) taxonomy of speech acts, a commissive is an utterance that commits a speaker to a course of action—such as a vow, a pledge, a profession. Authors of personal statements commit themselves illocutionarily to the object or other served by their chosen profession: aspiring scientists of clinical psychology presented themselves as empirical problem-solvers in service to the scientific community; aspiring doctors cast themselves as compassionate healers in service to humanity. However sober the young scientists sounded as compared to the passion of the young doctors, they shared a commissive effect to their rhetoric. This characteristic of personal statements points to a shortcoming of “expressivism” when used as a synonym for personal writing in the field of rhetoric and composition.

The equation of expressivism with personal writing has been an unfortunate outcome of the Bartholomae/Elbow debate. In fact, those who have been labeled “expressivist” did not adopt the term for themselves, but rather had it attached to them. The “arch-expressivist,” Peter Elbow has communicated his hatred for the term in private correspondence (Paley, 2001, p. 10).

The initial morpheme of the word suggests wherein the problem lies: *ex-* meaning “out” or “from,” found in other words like “exude,” “extrude,” “expectorate.” The connotation of outpouring in “express” conjures up a one-sided form of communication, one that wells up inside and spills forth unidirectionally. There is no sense of transaction in the word, no sense that any communication as would be called “expression” could be for the benefit of an addressee. In other words, expression would seem to be intrinsically arhetorical. Casaregola (1994), who also finds “expressivism” a loaded term, believes

that it relegates personal writing to the status of an etude, a finger exercise antecedent to the real work of audience-minded writing.

But in no way does the personal statement lack mindedness of audience. Vanessa and Simone repeatedly returned to stretches of their texts with questions of audience in the fore of their minds. For instance, Simone decided to eliminate her entire opening anecdote for fear that her audience would misconstrue the message she wanted to convey about her resourcefulness. Likewise, Vanessa eliminated several statements she made about the complexity of human cognition for fear that her reader would think her unrealistic about the concessions to reductionism necessary to experimentation. One conclusion that I believe is warranted by this research is that expressivism is not coterminous with personal writing because personal writing has purposes beyond airing the author's subjective experience. No would deny this, of course, but at times the way personal writing gets characterized as expressivism limits it to this single purpose.

Bartholomae's (1995) objection to personal writing, as given in his conversation with Peter Elbow published in *CCC*, is founded on his understanding that teaching expressive personal writing impedes serious learning. In his own words,

I don't think I need to teach students to be controlled by the controlling idea, even though I know my students could write more organized texts. I don't think I need to teach sentimental realism, even though I know my students could be better at it than they are. I don't think I need to because I don't think I should. I find it a corrupt, if extraordinarily tempting genre. I don't want my students to celebrate what would then become the natural and inevitable details of their lives. I think

the composition course should be part of the general critique of traditional humanism (p. 71).

In another essay, Bartholomae (1996) describes how he would respond to a student who had presented him with an organized, controlled, albeit “corrupt,” essay of the sentimental realistic sort:

For a moment, I would like to think of this essay as too good, too finished, too seamless, too professional. . . . As a faculty, we do not have a way of saying to a student, "Make that essay a little worse, not quite so finished, a little more fragmented and confused," and to say this in the name of learning. (p. 14-15)

In the interest of critique, Bartholomae believes we should push students to construct texts that are less finished, more fragmented and confused—in a word, texts we could call “open.”

“Open” is not one of Bartholomae’s descriptors, but I find in his description of preferable student writing echoes of Umberto Eco’s (1989) notion of an “open text” as contrasted to a “closed text.” According to Eco, closed texts aim to guide their readers along predetermined routes of interpretation. They are orchestrated to provoke emotional reactions at certain moments, and they resist alternate interpretations from the reader. A mystery novel, with its strategically meted out information, its planned surprises and implanted red herrings, epitomizes the closed text in fictional form. Conversely, an open text takes an entirely different attitude toward the reader; at the time of composition, the writer builds into the text points of entry for the reader. Rather than resist alternate readings, open texts invite, even demand, them. Meaning is purposely left ambiguous,

supple, and the reader must actively engage in integrating and synthesizing its edgier parts. A short story by Borges would be a good example of an open text.

To classify the personal statements analyzed in this study according to Eco's varieties of open and closed texts, I believe that they clearly belong to the closed variety. As mentioned in chapter 2, the personal statement is a reader-controlled genre, a imbalance of power in the rhetorical situation that supplies writers with plenty of incentive to construct closed texts. After all, as noted above, Simone would only stand to lose should her reader conclude from her opening anecdote that she has little patience for the structured experience of mentorship through doctoral science program. Similarly, Vanessa would not want to risk her readers finding naivety rather than wisdom in her assertion of human complexity. Given the perils they face as writers in the social action that is the personal statement genre, to construct an open text would simply defy reason.

Another illustrative instance of an applicant "closing" her text was presented in chapter 4. This was the story written by the applicant who survived West Nile encephalitis:

Truthfully, it has never felt like my story, and I still struggle to tell it in first person. In September of 1999, I celebrated my highly anticipated birthday, sweet sixteen, and entered a crucial year of academic performance and SAT scores, junior year. On an ordinary Sunday evening that October, my thoughts began to race, firing randomly and uncontrollably. Pain and internal pressure soon accompanied the chaos that distinguished this from an everyday headache. The symptoms intensified overnight, and school the next day only fueled my mind

with more stimulation. I experienced one final, radical shift into mental overdrive and excused myself from first period. That class on Monday morning was my last class of the semester. An acute case of rapid onset West Nile viral encephalitis warranted three months of hospitalization followed by three additional months of outpatient therapy. Brain swelling induced universal pressure that devastated my central nervous system. The frontal lobe suffered extensive damage. Its ability to process short term memory failed almost instantly, and I have no memories from month one at all. However, reconstructing the timeline hastened my recovery. I have since embraced hospital stories about my illness as real memories. Now, they are not pages torn the pivotal chapter of someone else's life but the force that led me to medicine.

In October of 1999, time screeched to a halt. Life hung in the balance. I had contracted West Nile viral encephalitis from a mosquito. In less than a week, an acute headache erupted into the fully presented infectious disease. A devastating combination of weight loss, swelling lobes, and seizures destroyed my physical strength and ravaged my short-term memory. The earliest stage of the illness will forever remain an empty wrinkle in remembered time, but stories of torn IVs and feeding tubes have remained. Armed with Tegretol and high-dosage prednisone, the medical team at Texas Children's Hospital waged and won the war—man versus microbe—under the supervision of Dr. [F.]. Their care, compassionate and

unwaveringly optimistic, is the kind I shall provide as a physician. Encephalitis has given purpose to my pursuit of a career in medicine.

Interesting to note, when I presented these two passages at CCCC in March 2005 to stimulate feedback from the audience, one of audience members remarked that this was a one of those rare instance when a rough draft is superior to the final one. At this comment, a few heads in the small gathering nodded assent. Since the attendees were presumably schooled in rhetoric, I cannot help but wonder whether the remark indicates a prejudice for open texts conditioned by a humanities education.

Arguably, the first version is more of an open text because the writer hedges on the matter of owning her memory much more so than she does in the final version. In fact, memory, including its fallibility, is the framing device that begins and ends the story. The writer's epistemic uncertainty toward memory cautions the reader against accepting the story uncritically. The writer even creates a metaphor that likens memory to a text: "Now, they are not pages torn the pivotal chapter of someone else's life but the force that led me to medicine." This metaphor suggests that memories are written and can be erased like texts. The logical extension to this metaphor is that memories, if indeed comparable to texts, are open to different interpretations. Enter the reader.

In fact, the reader's inferentially powers are required in the very first sentence of the paragraph which contains the cataphor "it." "Truthfully, it has never felt like my story, and I still struggle to tell it in first person," the writer muses. A cataphor is pronominal that points forward to its referent, which in this case we would take to be

“story.” However, since the story has yet to be told, the pronoun retains its indefiniteness, suspending any premature closure on the meaning of events.

How different is this self-conscious opening as compared to the *in medias res* opening of the second version. Short sentences and action-packed words hurtle the reader headlong into an unfolding series of events without pause or invitation to ponder. In my earlier analysis of this second version in chapter 4, I noted how the writer shed much of the subjectivity that appears in the first to focus on external events, the most important of which the writer does not even carry out; rather, the doctors are the ones emerge as the protagonists in the second version, transforming the writer into a patient in both a medical and a grammatical sense. In my earlier analysis of this passage, I explained why that the writer had rhetorical justification for these text-closing revisions. She needed to bear witness to the heroic actions of her doctors in order to claim with certainty that she wanted to become a doctor of the same kind. Rhetorically she is joining herself to the professional group instead of setting herself apart as a spectator, an outsider.

Compositionists who prefer that students write open texts for pedagogical reasons should recall their own texts of self-promotion such as the academic C.V. As Danahay (1996) has pointed out, the standardization of the C.V. “confirms the power of the university to elicit a prepackaged narrative in terms that ensure the reproduction of existing power relations within the institution” (352). A writer who obeys the format and chronological arrangement of the CV genre signals “identification with the norms of the profession” (361). Conversely, a writer who would opt instead for idiosyncratic

arrangement of a C.V. would, in effect, communicate contrarianism through disregard for the document's purpose and, by extension, disregard for the audience.

Similarly, an insistence on open texts in the composition class does not acknowledge audiences outside the classroom who does not valorize open texts, but have reasons to prefer closed texts instead. Bartholomae (1995, 1996) insists that students consider how they are situated within institutional structures that extend far beyond the classroom, but his pedagogy of critique, in some respects, seals off the classroom from the outside world, if he makes no occasion for students to practice writing the sorts of closed texts expected by audiences outside the writing classroom. Bartholomae's pedagogy is a rigorous and noble one but to some extent rhetorically narrow in failing to respond to student writing as any other kind of reader but one who reads "against the grain," to borrow a phrase from the front matter to his well respected textbook *Ways of Reading*, coauthored with Petrosky (2002). Not only against the grain, Bartholomae and Petrosky ask students to read with the grain of the text as well. If he expects students to read dialectically, with sympathy and skepticism, then I do not see why he would not extend the same courtesy in return.



## 9

### CODA

In this final section of the dissertation, I bring the project home, so to speak. After considering personal statements in other disciplines, I want to end with some words on personal statements in my own.

Something I omitted from my creation story was that this project very nearly died before it was born. When I first formally proposed the study, I pitched it to the English department; after some weeks of silence, the administration decided not to grant me access to applicants' statements because they decided it posed too much risk to privacy. (At this juncture, the reader may recall the phrase "occluded genre" from chapter 2). About the time I had resigned myself to scrapping the whole idea, someone suggested to me that I try another department. A few days later, a hike to the psychology department; a few years later, chapters 1-8.

Rewarding though my sojourn in the sciences has been, I feel this project would be incomplete without a glance at personal statements in the near distance. Having no firsthand textual evidence to call upon, however, my claims in this chapter are necessarily speculative and tenuous. If it accomplishes nothing else, this coda, I hope, makes a decent case why there should be further critical inquiry into the genre.

We have seen already how applicants construct self-representations emblematic of their profession's self-image. What then, we may ask, is the professional image that applicants project of English?

According to Graff and Hoberek (1999), English is a discipline that obscures the professionalism of its practices. They make this accusation based on years of experience as admissions readers for a masters program in the arts and humanities at the University of Chicago. They recall having read far too many personal statements in which applicants profess lifelong interest in literature without a hint of how they could contribute to larger intellectual conversations going on within and around the discipline. What these applicants lack, according to Graff and Hoberek, is the rhetorical wherewithal to supply exigency for their intellectual endeavors. And they blame applicants' ignorance on the discipline's faculty, who by and large, they infer, must fail to introduce students to "the broader contexts and conversations into which they might insert their work" (p. 247). Graff and Hoberek do not see this oversight only as an injustice to students, but an injustice to the discipline at large. At a time when the value of the humanities is not taken on faith, it is imperative that humanists make their ideas speak to as many constituencies as possible.

Some corroboration for Graff and Hoberek's claim comes from a recent article in the online version of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. In a short personal essay, Jane Bast (2004) describes the steep learning curve she ascended while composing her personal statement for graduate study in English. She quotes from her initial attempt at an introductory paragraph:

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.

After showing this draft to her advisor, Bast gets called to his office immediately. He reminds her that she is applying to a program of profession training, not a “book club.” “The people who read these things want to know whether or not you will be an asset to their program,” he tells her. “You have to prove that you have the potential to eventually publish, teach, and make presentations.”

For Bast this conversation is moment of eureka when she “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 . . . like an apprenticeship of sorts.” So far, Bast’s story reads like a parable designed to prove Graff and Hoberek’s plaint; however, there are other moments in her essay that complicate this tidy conclusion.

For instance, Bast imagines how her professor must have reacted when reading her first draft:

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-filled, 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.

No doubt Bast writes for humor here, but the stereotype of her professor as a high-minded aesthete walled away from the world by books betrays, in my opinion, a lingering naivety on her part. She claims to have learned the lesson of professionalism, yet her caricature of her professor, delivered without irony that I can detect, belies her claim to understanding. If, as Graff and Hoberek say, professors must relate their work “to larger professional and public sphere conversations that they wish to enter and influence” (p. 251), then the ivory tower caricature of her wine-sipping professor reeks of musty sequestration, not public engagement.

Bast does not reproduce any text from her second draft, but she does tell us that she figured out what was expected of her. Once again, though, I find troubling implications in how she expresses her understanding:

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.

Despite her self-proclaimed enlightenment, Bast sounds less like a budding scholar than a student who has figured how to make an “A” on a new assignment. In asking to be “hired” as a graduate student, she may speak more prophetically than she realizes—if,

that is, she becomes one the multitude of graduate students who give years of cheap labor to an English department and never become full-fledged members of the profession.

It would be a gross overextension to take Bast's account as symptomatic of widespread miseducation in English departments; nevertheless, until there is further research on personal statements to qualify or disconfirm it, I side with Graff and Hoberek.

Ironically, one means by which English faculty exclude students from the mysteries of the profession is the same means by which they try to make English inclusive of everyone. When selling the discipline of English to students and the wider public, faculty frequently celebrate the broad learning that an English education instills. For example, recent contributors to the *ADE Bulletin* interested in attracting more students to English make an appeal to broad learning as the virtue of the major:

Although many an employer has suggested to me that we should narrowly tailor our undergraduate program to their industry's particular needs, I usually respond that English serves a number of different constituencies and that the ample abilities that our graduates possess and prospective employers so value are the products of a broadly conceived liberal arts education. (Cohen, 2001, p. 18)

Let us assert that our students are trained for leadership in business, public service, and not-for-profit organizations because they are sensitive to the condition of all men and women, they understand the forces that complicate human, and they recognize the choices that make us heroic or tragically compromised. Our students can contextualize and historicize human experience, and they are mindful

of the tropes and narrative patterns that a society employs to represent itself.

English majors think critically and express complex ideas with clarity and acute awareness of audience. (Baker, 2003, p. 41)

These are noble sentiments, but I am not convinced that they are much more than that. In serving everyone, as Cohen would have it, English may wind up serving no one, for the consequence of having no defined outside constituency to serve may well be the navel-gazing with which Jane Bast opens her first draft. In fact, Bast and Baker sound remarkably alike, both celebrating the personal gain of reading literature as cross-cultural empathy for the human condition. But contra Baker, I do not see how this paean to literary sensibility shows “acute awareness of audience,” if, as in Bast’s case, the paean was written for a graduate admissions committee made up of readers like Graff and Hoberek.

Also in the pages of *ADE Bulletin*, Shepard (2003) has argued that English departments do wrong by their majors when they serve up the curriculum as a buffet of no particular order. When students are left to divine the discipline’s identity for themselves, then surely this is a sign that faculty, faced with disciplinary fragmentation and factionalism, have found it easier to abandon the onus of trying to explain it themselves. Whatever learning occurs inside these isolates that compose a curriculum may, best intentions notwithstanding, be anything but broad. Once again, Graff and Hoberek:

We have been trained to think of undergraduate study as broad and graduate study and professional work as narrow, but the reverse may now be closer to the reality,

at least in the humanities, with undergraduates performing disconnected exercises in close reading while those at the top of the academic star system write about Michael Jordan in the *New Yorker*, or Monica Gate in the *New York Times* (though still performing close readings). . . . [T]he decontextualized analyses that undergraduates are asked to write in many courses are poor training not just for getting into graduate school but explaining oneself and persuading others in any career or situation. (p. 252).

One way to redress the disciplinary broadness that bleeds into blur may be to ask students to articulate for themselves what connection their English education has to their professional ambitions. To place a professional value on training in English does not debase it; rather it makes English relevant and easier for students to appreciate.

At some specified time during their progress toward the degree, students should be asked to produce a document like the personal statement that requires them to forge links between their educational preparation and their professional goals. If students find the assignment challenging, as they likely will, then faculty will have to step in and help students forge these links, an exercise, I believe, that will help promote a sense of disciplinary unity, or, should this prove impossible, at least help students map for themselves the boundaries dividing up the territory. When English graduates can express with certainty and conviction the worth of their educational experience in the greater context of their lives, then more recruits may come to the major on the strength of such testimony alone.

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