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Becoming Legible: Helping Students Navigate Promotional Genres of Self-Narration

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The five-paragraph essay is a hard genre to love. Its inverted-triangle intro has enlightened us with too many “dawns” of some monolithic “man.” It reduces arguments, which tend to be rather subtle creatures, to the confines of a single-sentence thesis. It confects arguments in bland triplicate structure, as if any claim could be made more palatable by a perfectly bland Neapolitan blend. And it encourages seeing conclusions as a venue for gratuitous repetitions that insult the reader’s intelligence and memory alike. Beyond sponsoring these infelicities, the five-paragraph model, as Kimberly Hill Campbell notes in a recent issue of *Educational Leadership*, seems useless in the college classroom, and even in high school contexts it hampers rather than inspires the kinds of rich analytical and organizational thinking a teacher would hope to inspire. Its prescriptive and arbitrary rules, in short, obscure both the difficulties and pleasures of more earnestly engaged writing.

Yet there is much to love about the five-paragraph essay. It teaches students that any paper is dead without a hook; that paragraphs are not just containers of information but tools that guide the reader's attention; that arguments require structure; that claims demand evidence. The five-paragraph essay, in the end, is a kind of socialization into the world of academic writing. One must learn to play *nice* before one is able to play *well*. The lessons afforded by this preeminent pedagogical exercise of the high school years, however, are not limited to the compositional or organizational task at hand. Indeed, the most powerful lesson this form can teach relates to genre: the five-paragraph essay is a stubborn reminder that our expressive and argumentative efforts are often filtered through a set of generic expectations that can appear arbitrary and unduly constraining.

The five-paragraph essay, at least, has the virtue of clarity. Many genres relevant to national awards advising, such as the personal essay and the statement of intent, do not share this virtue. Such texts often exist in a hazy generic twilight that linguist John Swales has dubbed "occluded" genres. The individuals soliciting documents in this category generally know what they are looking for; the fellowship-seekers composing these documents, however, often find the generic expectations opaque and difficult to decipher. In such cases, anxious Googling only compounds the confusion, and even one's closest academic mentor can have difficulty helping students navigate a genre that, from an insider's perspective, seems natural and assumed.

Lia Rushton, in her lead article in this forum, captures so well the crucial work that advisors do in leading high-achieving students through a series of rigorous reflections and self-interrogations as they come to see, in a more objective light, all of those things that make them who they are: their values and talents, their accomplishments and quirks. Another crucial stage in the advising process commences just as the excavation process that Rushton describes nears completion, and it has everything to do with helping students navigate the quandaries of genre. Many of the documents that students compose for a range of nationally competitive opportunities represent a more sophisticated version of the generic game they perfected in the five-paragraph essay. Although the "moves" that comprise what genre theorist Vijay Bhatia has described as promotional genres are more multiple and complex, they are discernable and, precisely, conventional (74–75). That latter word—*conventional*—has come to signal an abundance of reserve and a lack of innovation, but its etymology calls to mind ideas of coming-together and agreement. Any well-formed discourse community will have certain generic expectations, and

the more ambitious the students, the more likely they are to encounter a range of occluded genres. It is important, therefore, to encourage honors students in particular to learn how to enter and engage these genres with confidence, to help them see the large body of self-promotional writing they will do not as representing a series of discrete efforts at self-narration but as participating in a broader generic field of possibilities.

Reductive as the following schematic overview might seem, this field of possibilities is largely defined by two master genres of promotional narration: the statement of intent and the personal statement. Introducing students to the various moves associated with these master genres leads them to develop and practice a set of rhetorical skills that they can adapt and mobilize when presented with a range of relevant opportunities—from national awards and fellowships to graduate or professional schools. Though these statements share a few key features, they are generally distinct. The statement of intent relates skills and qualifications whereas the personal essay demonstrates growth and development. The statement of intent is professional, academic, and expository whereas the personal statement is more self-reflective and narrative. Though both the statement of intent and the personal statement capture elements of the past, present, and future self, the former focuses more intently on the future whereas the latter trains its sight on the past. Even the voice one inhabits in these genres is distinct: the grounding tone of the statement of intent should be more formal and academic; the voice in a personal statement necessarily has more flexibility to accommodate a wider emotional and experiential range.

In a standard personal statement, the student begins by situating the reader in the midst of a tightly defined and dynamic thought or action that suggests some of the writer's most relevant values. Whether the essay commences on a cerebral, descriptive, or anecdotal note, the goal is to begin in the very middle of things. The second move, very much anticipated by the first, pans out to take an establishing shot, contextualizing that opening scene geographically, temporally, psychologically, or otherwise. The rest of the essay, then, is free to explore the broad middle ground between these two opening moves. Here, the student conveys relevant past experiences via well-crafted paragraphs; brings to life the growth and development between these experiences via dynamic transitions that do not simply rely on sequence; reveals character via action and details that encourage the reader to respond to the text on both cerebral and sensorial levels; and signals goals and aspirations by providing a rich and highly particular vision of a possible future world and

the student's role in it. This flexible structure, which offers ample room for variation and innovation, is easy to play around with but difficult to expertly perform.

The statement of intent—also called a grant statement—occupies the opposite pole from the personal statement. In such a statement, which is a fixture of graduate school applications as well as a range of national award opportunities, the student often begins by sketching out a problem or issue in her or his field that compels further study or research. Statistics and citations, rarely found in a personal statement, are welcome here, and such statements should always indicate a thesis, often at the end of the first paragraph, that identifies the specific opportunity at hand and offers a map-in-miniature to help the reader navigate the persuasive means to be deployed in the statement itself. The persuasive means tend to be fairly predictable in this genre. After the opening move, the student sketches out key skills and qualifications, presenting a relevant academic and extracurricular self. Next, one pivots to describe the opportunity at hand; for graduate programs, this includes relevant information about the institution and program and what draws one to it, an overview of the most enticing curricular opportunities, and a statement about graduate research goals. For independent research grants and certain PhD programs, a multi-paragraph account of research plans is likely expected.

Before moving on to sketch out future career goals, the student has an opportunity to include what I call, somewhat inelegantly, “other stuff.” In a statement that largely eschews the personal, this section offers an opportunity for the student to introduce a more rounded sense of self that has been tested, motivated, and shaped by the unique circumstances of identity and opportunity. If a personal statement does not accompany the statement of intent, this part is especially important and might also be a fine place to note relevant connections to an institution or opportunity that go beyond the academic: how one might engage a given campus, for example, and contribute to the broader life of the community one seeks to join.

A small body of scholarship in genre studies, which draws on the fields of linguistics, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and rhetoric & composition, among others, supports the preceding genre snapshots. Swales, in *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*, promoted the study of academic genres based on analysis of broader rhetorical moves and the steps they comprise with the goal of identifying broadly shared generic expectations in any given discourse community. Though no one has applied this approach to fellowship application essays in particular, scholars have explored a range of

academic genres of promotional narration, from medical school statements (Belkins et al.) to statements of intent in the fields of linguistics, electrical engineering, and business administration (Samraj and Monk). Although it is essential to keep in mind subtle disciplinary, professional, and national variations, leading students to discern the generic features of key promotional genres helps them develop an empowering and highly transferable skill. Of all the opportunities for graduate study and fellowships that students typically seek, the Fulbright U.S. student competition is one of the few to adopt the two master genres of the personal statement and grant statement explicitly. Given how seldom any application asks for the two specific statements, this generic knowledge must be strategically adapted in the context of hybrid generic spaces rather than merely applied.

By helping students fit their sprawling interests, diverse commitments, and vague intimations of futurity into a neat generic form, a fellowships advisor might seem to be adopting a genre-heavy pedagogy of seemingly arbitrary dos and don'ts—the same kind of pedagogy that turns so many students off to writing in the first place. Genre, however, is not a matter of plug-and-chug rules that one can blindly follow; rather, it is about giving students a series of adaptable tools that allow them to be optimally responsive to generic expectations, arbitrary and unduly constraining as they might seem. These expectations, after all, are constrained precisely by fields and professions and organizations that the applicant aspires to enter.

One could also argue that such an approach transforms these potentially subtle, inventive opportunities for promotional narration into just more cogs in a machine of professionalization that has standardized and streamlined what would naturally be messier and more authentic stories. In 2014, when the Rhodes Trust introduced a new policy forbidding any editorial advice on an applicant's personal statement, it was reacting precisely to this problem. For the Trust, writing toward assumed generic expectations limits free expression and veils the applicant's true self behind layers of editorial oversight. In a January 2014 letter to campus representatives that first announced the new policy, Elliot Gerson, the American Secretary for the Rhodes Trust, and Charles Conn, the Rhodes Trust CEO, articulated the kind of pre-generic or even anti-generic authenticity the Trust is looking for when they wrote that “non-formulaic, non-standard essays, clearly in an applicant's own words, often come across as fresh and compelling.” In additional guidance provided in a September 2015 letter concerning the “Rhodes Scholarship Personal Statement Attestation,” Gerson assures advisors that “real personal stories

coming from the candidates' authentic voice are often those that move selection committees . . . even when not polished." It would seem that the Rhodes Trust wants students to exist, at least for the space of their Rhodes essay, in some space of unschooled authenticity outside of perceived generic expectations. As many of my advisor colleagues have argued, this decision can seem contrary to academic ideals of collaboration and peer review as well as neglectful of how writers learn via conversation, questioning, and revision. I tend to agree, but I also think that the Trust has every right to exempt their personal statement from these institutionalized ideals of the profession.

My more pressing disagreement with the Trust's decision, however, is informed by my sense of the central importance of genre in the advising process. Though Gerson seems to want us to forget all about genre, he never firmly escapes its deeply ingrained logic. For example, he identifies with reluctant double negatives one form of feedback that would be permissible, writing in the 2015 letter that "[i]f someone presents a personal statement that is clearly unsuitable, perhaps because the student has no experience at all with personal statements, we don't want to discourage an advisor from suggesting that the student try again." Here Gerson suggests some vaguely assumed generic expectation at play about what a personal statement is or is not. He also suggests that the previous knowledge students bring to the Rhodes personal statement might be relevant—that they might get it or they might not—thus raising concerns, widely voiced in the advising community, about the privilege associated with access to such generic knowledge in the first place. In this case, though the policy was intended to level the playing field, it may not do so at all insofar as success might rely on generic knowledge attained outside of the Rhodes application process.

In an effort to clarify any confusion the new policy had created, Gerson invoked the language of genre more explicitly in a March 2016 letter to institutional representatives and fellowship advisors concerning "Personal Statement Guidance for 2016 Applications," seeking to clarify and reaffirm the Trust's stance: "We understand," he writes, "that the personal essay as a genre has become an object of extensive focus and strain from undergraduate and graduate school applications across fellowships of many types, and perhaps it seems especially our own." After a note of concern for the students forced to navigate these generic difficulties, he continues by lightly chiding what he assumes are their advisor-approved efforts that forced the policy change in the first place:

Candidly, over time too much mythology has developed about the Rhodes personal statement. Online websites hosted by colleges and universities, even paid private enterprises, provide samples of winning essays. Their content is similar and unhappily familiar to selectors: vivid vignettes of self-sacrifice or harrowing overseas experiences in service of those less fortunate. The genre parodies the objective of the essay, which should focus on the qualifications of the candidate, his or her preparation for the proposed course at Oxford, and its articulation with short- or long-term career and life ambitions. Long before we adopted our no-assistance personal statement policy, we stripped personal statements from our winners' Oxford application dossiers because we found they harmed the admissions chances of our Scholars-elect.

While I also lament the range of uneven advice available online, I do not think one should conflate a genre with its most clichéd moves. What interests me here, though, is how Gerson articulates an argument against genre while using the highly specific generic language I have drawn upon throughout this essay. The argument, as it appears here, also seems at odds with the Trust's interest, articulated in the 2014 and 2015 letters, in hearing more authentic and raw stories from their candidates. In the above 2016 excerpt, for example, Gerson laments the prevalence of clichés whose vivid and breathless revelation seems to elicit a collective cringe. Shifting the language of generic expectation from the personal to the academic, the 2016 letter indicates that the Trust is seeking a clearer account of a candidate's "qualifications," relevant details about "the proposed course at Oxford," and a reflection on "short or long-term career and life ambitions." What the Trust really wants then, at least in the context of this most recent guidance, is not some expressive narrative of the authentic self—a personal statement, in other words—but a more formal statement of intent. Perhaps it is somewhere in between. In any case, one should not be surprised that the Trust excludes personal statements from the Oxford application. Such statements are not failed efforts at generic attainment, nor do they, as Gerson claims in the long excerpt above, "parody the objective of the essay"; they are just not playing the *right* generic game. The national variations related to these genres might be a factor here as well. The anecdotal stories of growth and development that are so central in the U.S. to college applications and to the more mature genres of self-narration that we see in the Fulbright personal statement are simply not valued in the U.K., where even college application essays err on the side of formality over fluff

and where I have heard that my transatlantic colleagues often puzzle over the excesses of expressivity that U.S. applicants so readily unfurl.

Given all these complications, the Rhodes personal statement is, in the language that Swales provides, a doubly or perhaps triply occluded genre. It remains at least partially obscure to just about all parties involved: students, advisors, and the Trust itself. Some generic expectations certainly pertain, but the Trust wishes we would all either forget them or stop trying to decipher them. The knowledge, however, is already there. Gerson, for one, readily deploys the language related to the generic moves of these two master genres. This confusion would seem to make the role of the advisor all the more important in helping students navigate this intriguing and clearly hybrid promotional genre.

As a national awards advisor, I try to help students understand genre and find inventive ways to convey their experiences in the space of generic constraints. Even when students confront applications that seem to carve out their own distinct generic space—I am thinking of Truman and Udall, for example—knowledge of the essential moves related to the two master genres offers a place to begin. Genre is conventional, yes, but there is ample room for innovation. Genre itself does not breed the kinds of clichés related to the social scripts students frequently fall back on to declare passions, describe challenges, document leadership, and declaim better futures. As an advisor, I try to help students perform genre expertly while avoiding clichés on the level of both writing and thinking. Students can forge strong statements in any genre by stretching, tweaking, and even breaking certain norms, but they do so, crucially, by working within constraints to achieve something fresh, elegant, and legible in a deep, generic sense. Our students have remarkable stories to tell, but unless that telling anticipates how their stories will be received, they might as well be talking to themselves. Genre is, fundamentally, a way of talking to others in earnest.

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