WRITING WINNING PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Okay.

This post is inspired by the loopholes I have found in multiple essays I have reviewed and being a season for scholarship applications; it is very pertinent that key attention is paid to how you translate your ideas and aspirations into words. While different scholarships stipulate different requirements for personal statements, it generally cuts across defining your background, your passion for an intended subject, efforts you have made into keeping that passion alive and how you hope to give back upon reception of the scholarship.

This article is largely focused on personal statements targeted towards winning scholarships and funding; not just for admission.

A few thoughts:

1. Know the indices for assessment.

Different strokes for different folks as I have reiterated. For instance, Commonwealth Scholarships are keen on selecting people with good academic grades; Chevening or MasterCard are more interested on ways you have contributed to the growth of your community-with LESS (not none) emphasis on your academic grades. Funded spaces in the US might be keener about involvements you have carried out in time past that has prepared you and made you more fit to undertake graduate studies. In summary, since you would not use the CV meant for a marketing job to apply for a lecturing job; also tailor your essays to meet the index or parameters set by the selection committee.

2. Selection Committees are made up of experts; they know when you have not done your best.

Winning an oversea scholarship is HARD work. You are expected to do a lot of behind-the-scenes stuffs and spend weeks or months coming up with the best 500-words (or more) that can efficiently sell you, your idea and plans. Do not just write an essay in 3days and submit to a panel of Professors who have been plying their trade for decades. Sit down, read wide, reflect, ask questions, start your first draft, it might not be perfect, re-edit it, reshape it, review it, revise it, give it to others to read, look at it again, remove something, add again…it is HARD work. I got a privileged information that Asians are getting more funded places because they spend up to 6months reviewing their essays; it is such a commitment. Do not slack.

3. Take permission to be proud but maintain honesty.

Humility is good; it is one of my core values but in this case, I take exception to sell myself. Market yourself in the best possible way. Fine, you did not graduate with a First Class; it is not a drawback. There are host of people who have gone ahead to win funded spaces that (some) class toppers could not access. Tell them you are not just a First Class Graduate (they are many everywhere), remind them you graduated in the best 1% of your set.; you did not win Convocation Awards but you have mentions on Dean’s List, put it.

You were the most punctual student in your primary school; it is an award-put it where necessary. Instead of groaning that you finished with a Second Class Lower, why not say, “despite seemingly unavoidable challenges, my drive for impact not only made me finish with 68% overall; I pressed further to garner more than 3 additional certifications in my field.” You have greater things I do not have and vice-versa; maybe you have not spent adequate time to reflect and discover. You have something to market. However, maintain honesty. The big picture is more important!

4. I use to tell people, Oyinbo love figures. Do your research, get data and don’t write like a layman; you are a budding intellectual.

Get figures. Be specific.

ABC was asked why getting a scholarship to study Renewable Energy will help affect his society positively. He said, “Nigeria has no constant electricity and people cannot go about doing business easily. Therefore, when I get the scholarship and finish my studies, I would be able to change things.”

I would have written: “Statistics drawn from OPEC between 2012 and 2016 revealed that Nigeria stands as the 8th largest producer of crude oil globally. It is however saddening that a country that is supposed to sell petrol cheaper than water still imports her refined products. Her most industrialized state, Lagos is covered with 67% water; her most populous Region, Northern Nigeria is ferociously wasting energy from the Sun and is privileged to be blessed with enough wind reserves; yet the country has not been able to exploit these avenues to meet the Millennium Development Goals set for 2020………..”

Compare the two, make your conclusions. Figures, facts, specificity, you may add…

5. Improve grammar. Please. Some blunders may be pardonable but the panel can tell when an applicant is not fit enough. Grad school involves a lot of intellectual work and the most-prepared (not necessarily the best) are being sought out. Improve your grammar, read newspaper columns, listen to TED talks, learn new words, keep in touch with global trends; they help in the long run. Watching YouTube programmes channelled towards improving competencies might be better to do this time.

I might write more in the future.

Best wishes in your application.

Femi Ogunlalu, 2017.