Reviewing Personal Statements: Graduate School, Fellowships

Personal statements are essays with a biographical prompt, similar to that of college admission essays. Often required for graduate school, fellowships and some internships, too, the typical length requested can range from 500-2000 words.

When students ask you to review a personal statement or an essay for a position application, first ask for supplementary information. Questions to ask students include:

- **What does the full application entail?** (Forms, resume/cv, essays, transcripts, recommendations) This information helps identify all of the required materials and the opportunities to utilize for the applicant’s narrative to develop. Each piece of an application should fit together showing a cohesive perspective on the candidate and their reasons for applying.

- **Why do you want to apply?** The applicant in their own words can often share a fuller version of their experiences that led to the application. These can often be inspiration to draw on for revised statements.

- **When is it due? How much time do they have to dedicate to revisions?** Depending on the timing of the application, revisions may best focus on broad strategy recommendations, style and tone. If additional time allows for subsequent drafts, then perhaps deeper editing can occur.

**Offering revisions**

When reviewing personal statements, read the statement and the full application once prior to making any proposed revisions. Read through a second time and address these broad questions:

- **Overall:** Does the personal statement fully answer the prompts? Is anything missing?
- **Conciseness:** Are there any unnecessary or extraneous areas to cut out? Can the writer omit phrases and/or sentences without harming the picture?
- **Tone and unity:** Is the tone formal? Are there too many “I” statements? Does every detail lead to and support the conclusion that the writer is an ideal candidate?
- **Coherence:** Does every paragraph lead convincingly to the next? Do the writer end with smooth closure?
- **Punctuation/spelling:** Is everything correct? Are there misspellings, typos?

**Refer for additional assistance**

The Career Development Center (cdc@macalester.edu) and MAX Academic Excellence Center (http://www.macalester.edu/max/) offer support for personal statements and application essays. Feel free to refer students to both departments for additional information.