

Advice for writing a Marshall personal statement

Given how intelligent, imaginative, and remarkable most applicants for the Marshall are, it's surprising how similar their personal statements tend to look. The vast majority of applicants begin with a heartfelt personal anecdote. From this anecdote they draw a lesson—usually, a moral so familiar and so general as to amount to a cliché: it's important to listen to others; I have persevered despite hardships; some groups are unfairly oppressed; it's good to learn from lived experience rather than just from books; everyone is equal; the past influences the present; I now recognize that experience is universal. The rest of the essay then describes a sequence of experiences: academics, sports, community or public service. And the applicants typically suffuse their essays with idealistic feeling, promising to change the world.

At the moment, that's the Marshall formula: anecdote, cliché, list of activities, idealism. I want to suggest that it's not a great formula. It's not even a winning formula. Many applicants may have used it, but that doesn't mean that it has won them scholarships. If you write this way, you have to be *so* extraordinary that you stand out among a vast number of qualified applicants. But if you write in a more specific, intriguing, compelling way, you'll command the committee's attention and interest with your essay alone.

So: how to go about writing a different kind of essay? Here are a few principles to guide you as you set about the task.

1) Say something new.

Consider it your single most important job to say something the committee *does not already know* about the world. Show them how endurance running is like neuroscience, or argue that most human rights arguments get it wrong, or suggest that the biology lab is a kind of theater. That is, invite the members of the selection committee to entertain a thought that has never occurred to them before. Clichés are boring, and worse, they're often unpersuasive, so please: stay away from them at all costs. But be warned: this isn't easy!

2) Start in an exciting way.

Almost all good writing begins with a hook to grab the reader's attention. You don't need to be cutesy or dramatic, but think about beginning with some kind of surprise, a mystery or an intriguing possibility. You might start the essay with a question, or an unexpected connection between two things, or a paradox. You can start with an intriguing anecdote, of course, but that's not the only way to begin. Look at a few examples of writing you particularly like to see how good writers start off, and see if you can borrow some of their strategies.

3) Weave the essay together.

This is one of the hardest parts of writing a great essay, but it's one of the most important keys to giving your writing clarity and appeal. Try to connect different pieces of your experience together: how has your community service enriched your academic life, or vice versa? Is there a particular resonance between elements of your life—your family and your research, for example—that you can draw through the whole essay? Your challenge here is to find something intriguing or surprising that knits everything together. As always, it's crucial to stay away from clichés, so you don't want to connect your athletics to your family by asserting that both have required you to face challenges—that will be too obvious. But if you can show that your passion for particular artists matters to your future career in health care policy because those artists have explored the excruciating boundaries of experience—daring to go where other artists have not into the ugliness and intolerability of pain—then you will have something fascinating to give your readers.

4) Point to differences rather than similarities

I have suggested that you weave your experiences together, but surprisingly, one of the best ways to do this is by pointing to the differences between experiences rather than their similarities. Similarities tend to lead to clichés (everyone is alike; all my activities require endurance; I am following in my grandfather's footsteps), whereas differences typically give rise to surprises and interesting revelations. For example: my experience has taught me that different immigrant groups face different challenges; I have realized that history and neuroanatomy offer importantly different lenses onto human experience; I now understand how I've had to break from my family's traditions. You probably shouldn't stop there—just noticing the differences—but you should also allow your best analytical, critical thinking to dwell on *why* those elements are different. From there you'll produce some amazing thinking, and dazzle your committee.

5) Don't play it safe.

One reason applicants often opt for clichés is that they're afraid to offend the selection committees. This is a mistake. You're much better off saying something interesting than something so bland that no one will ever disagree with you. Marshall committees tend to be pretty worldly: they know about religious, sexual, racial, and class differences and don't mind if you come from a perspective that is resistant or unpopular. The basic rule of thumb here is: don't try to please them; try instead to interest and engage them. Feel free to say something controversial, uncomfortable, strange, or even outrageous, as long as it's something you're willing to stand by. I should add that you don't want to say something *just* to be outrageous, but don't worry

about saying it if it's what you believe. This is true for the interview as well as the essay.

6) Leave things out.

Candidates often write essays that look like lists of accomplishments and activities because they're afraid to leave things out. But lists are boring, and a lot of the information you're giving is material the committee can get elsewhere in your application. Your central goal is to write a compelling essay, and that may mean that you don't discuss something that's important to you. But you can make sure that it appears elsewhere (you can even ask one of your recommenders to mention it if it's not on your cv), and you can also add it later, once you've found a captivating theme that weaves together other parts of your experience.

7) Complicate your idealism.

Idealism sometimes looks naïve to selection committees. That's not because there's no room for it in the world; it's just that they've seen enough to know how hard it is to find workable solutions to vexing world problems. So think about the potential obstacles to fixing the crises you're interested in, and acknowledge them in your essay. You don't want to get too detailed, or too elaborate, but do keep in mind that idealism on its own may not be enough to make you seem like the best candidate. See if you can make the problems *and* the solutions more interesting, more sophisticated, and more subtle than simply a desire for change.

Good luck!