**An *If…Then* Guide to Crafting Your Best Personal Essay**

Judy Baker, August 2015

There’s no short-cut to be found here. You must OD-IT the prompt first.

Take the time to examine the task in minute detail—like a forensics analyst doing an **inquiry**. What you know you don’t know, investigate. To uncover the unknown unknowns, ask the questions that double-check what is MEANT by EVERY term *explicit*—said outright—AND *implicit*—assumed or tacit—in the task—that is, research specifics about the program’s people (departments, teachers, advisors), their implicit requirements and expectations of newbies (by, say, querying their previous and current interns/ students/ staff, talking with them directly, CollegeConfidential.com, etc).

Then OD-IT yourself—what do you know, need to know and not know you don’t know about YOU?

Once you’ve OD’d…

**IF you feel like you don’t have anything to talk about**

Ask family, friends, teachers, coaches, coworkers: “When you try to imagine what stands out about me as a person, what memory comes to mind?...How does that memory fit who I really am, in your opinion?” Try this yourself, too. Don’t ignore any answers—collect them all as data to analyze, through OD-IT, for patterns (including change!) that fit the prompt.

**IF you have ideas about what to say you honestly “are”**

Link each word/phrase that defines you to an example-as-evidence that *shows* it.

model

I talk too much in the classroom and, well, everywhere else too. Especially if I find a topic challenging personally, I lose focus on everyone else’s interests and think out loud while their eyes glaze over. The only time I am reticent is social situations where, to me, meaningless “small talk” is expected.

**IF you worry that what you honestly “are” isn’t valued by your college/organization**

Append an outcome to your word+example that shows why being this way *should be* valued.

model

…Thus, I find I can be an asset for brain-storming or trying to get the “big picture” of a problem or issue—I often bring up things no one else has thought of (yet). I have learned to then discipline myself to listen, not talk, as we work on the nitty-gritty of how to solve it. One of my best tricks for this is to volunteer to scribe or take notes. I have trained myself to not just talk through, but actually contribute to a resolution this way.

**IF you’ve got many, unrelated things to say**

Look through them all for patterns (consider binaries, maybe: before/after, in/out of comfort zone, in charge/teaming, school/real world, public/private, etc). Construct *multi-trait* statements and use brief highlights from several examples to *show* them.

model

The fact that I am both detail-focused and a committed rule-follower improves my effectiveness. I spend the time to think a situation through (often talking it out until others’ eyes glaze over), but I then target my actions on the goal. Once a decision is made or an action proposed, I follow through—even in cases where I did not agree that it was the best solution. With my colleagues, this has engendered trust that I do what I say I will, and I am willing to work the problem.

**IF you’ve drafted, but do not feel that you’re showing that you’re *special* enough to stand out**

Be sure you’re not forgetting that for admissions or hiring, readers are looking for a best fit for the program, not the most-interesting/unusual/tragic personal story (Scholarships may be more swayed by the story of a candidate, but they are still balancing it with likelihood of success—trust me, I know: I’ve never been asked to rate scholarship candidates on how “interesting” or “different” they are, but I am routinely asked to rate their skills, knowledge, experience and “fitness for their goals.”). If a “headline” represents the **best** example of how you overcome barriers, work toward goals, handle responsibility, then it’s worth talking about; if it doesn’t—no matter how shocking or moving—it isn’t.

model (what NOT to do)

It is not easy growing up the oldest child of a teen mom and an abusive dad, never having even the basics and acting as the adult in my younger sisters’ lives. But, I have overcome these hardships by working hard and keeping focused on my goals. I decided I will not make the same mistakes my parents made; and my determination will see me through anything. Studying medicine will take hard work, but it will allow me to help those in need, so it is worth it.

model

Through all the drug and alcohol talks I was given in school, I always silently thought: “Why would anyone want to lose self-control by getting high or drunk? Why take the chance of doing something stupid or dangerous?” I realize now, the answer is one word: *responsibility*. They are avoiding it, or have never really had to carry it, so they do not feel the same life-and-death burden to be sure that everything is taken care of, that has been a part of my makeup as long as I can remember. My burden sustains me as I do what is necessary—as a person, a student, a team member—to meet my obligations. Ironically the success being burdened has brought me also freed me to branch out and take on new duties that, while adding to my obligations, promised new rewards. Taking the leap forward to study medicine in college, costly, demanding and time-consuming as it is, is, to me, a justifiable risk to take, since taking responsibility is a path I know well how to travel, even when the going gets rough.

***Post-Script***

Don’t dismiss what seems mundane or “usual” *to you* in how, for example, you manage home, school, work and activities and where you’ve applied these lessons academically or in real world scenarios. The fact that these seem “everyday” to you is just a sign that they truly show who you are, how you operate and what you’ve learned from life. And, hey: Isn’t a well-adjusted, self-aware, competent young adult a good fit for *any* program?

**IF your draft does not “sound” like it’s saying anything**

You are likely—unwittingly—showing your insecurity or uncertainty about the program and/or your qualifications in your writing. That is, you’re sticking to what is safe to say and avoiding anything risky—especially if you feel like your draft is general, vague, repetitive, redundant, banal or formulaic. Push yourself to take a risk by imagining being put on the spot with these questions: If you don’t get in here, what is lost? If you do get in, what is gained? Why do these matter to *you* and to *us*?

If you cannot answer these, you probably have not taken the step of committing to a set of near-term goals…you don’t have anything much to say because you are not yet sure what you want, why and what you are willing to do to get it. Stop everything and just focus on settling this for yourself (still hard? Start with what you definitely do NOT want, why and what you are NOT willing to do—this can be very clarifying.).

model (what NOT to do)

My experience taught me an important lesson.

This was so inspiring.

It changed my life.

Being a leader helped me accomplish my goals.

My family is always there to support me.

I do what it takes to succeed.

I want to help people.

I love math/airplanes/writing poetry/people/etc.

model

I have heard all my life that I should avoid learning things “the hard way.” But, what I really know and can do, I feel I learned well because there was some difficulty I had to wrestle with in order to finally “get it.” Being told by a teacher that my writing was subpar forced me to reevaluate what I was doing and why. In the end, I came to the conclusion that my writing was communicating my ideas in my honest voice instead of adhering to a formula or someone else’s preferences. Without the kick-in-the-pants of my teacher’s judgment, I would never have examined my work and my process so closely, and I would not know now what works for me to produce writing I can be proud of. In fact, I accept (*now*!) that having something to prove to her and myself was the push I needed at the time. Grappling with new learning setbacks (inevitable in college), I am confident, will make me stronger and better. I say: Bring it on!

***Post-Script***

Wanna test to see if I’m right? Take the Barnum Personality Profile, in use since 1949

You have a great need for other people to like and admire you, a tendency to be critical of yourself and a great deal of unused capacity which you have not turned to your advantage. While you have some weaknesses, you are generally able to compensate for them. Disciplined and self-controlled outside, you tend to be worrisome and insecure inside. At times you have serious doubts about whether you have made the right decision or done the right thing. You prefer variety and become dissatisfied by restrictions and limitations. You pride yourself in being an independent thinker and do not accept others’ statements without satisfactory proof. You have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others. At times you are extroverted, sociable; while at others, introverted, cautious, reserved. Some of your aspirations are pretty unrealistic. Security is one of your major goals in life.

80-90% of people will rate this “very accurate” or “insightful” as an assessment of themselves *as unique individuals*. (Didn’t you?) But, it doesn’t say anything unique at all—in fact, it works *because* it doesn’t say anything risky or personal. Do *you* want to give a BPP (that will sound like it fits *anyone*)?!?

**IF in editing you want to make every word count (because of word limits or competitiveness)**

Booth, Colomb & Williams in *The Craft of Research*, a college textbook used at top-tier schools (I know ‘cuz I routinely check out the textbooks of universities to keep “up” with the field), lay out these principles for clear, effective college writing:

**Name**—short, specific, concrete—**the central subject in each sentence**; your topic will operate like a character whose story a reader easily follows (253).

**Express crucial actions in verbs, *not* abstract nouns**; your character will act out your ideas (255).

**Repeat key terms to link ideas**; transitions and connecting words around the terms will cue your reader (263).

Ex: Environmental degradation is the most significant problem of our time because it causes us irreparable harm. *versus* As we destroy our environment, we also destroy ourselves.

**Sequence ideas** within sentences and within paragraphsfrom **known-> new, simple-> complex, short statements-> long phrases;** your reader will feel the ideas “build” (261).

Ex: Glaciers are melting away, fires are burning unchecked, rivers are drying up—the earth is hurting. versus The earth is hurting—glaciers are melting away, fires are burning unchecked, rivers are drying up.

The authors also lay out clear, efficient steps for editing to apply those principles:

1. Take time to recall the “character” and “acts” you want to show to your reader.
2. Underline the first half of every clause (phrase) in every sentence.
3. Assess: are the underlined subjects concrete or abstract? are the verbs specific or general (*have, is*)? do the subjects and verbs match the story you want to tell?
4. Assess: are the first 6-7 words of each sentence familiar, simple and/or in short statements or new, complex or in intricate phrases?
5. Draft changes, then read the edited piece aloud to evaluate issues of flow, readability, unnecessary or missing transitions, descriptors and details.
6. Repeat steps until you have finalized changes, then check grammar, conventions, spelling.