

## THE 'ALTERNATIVE GUIDE' TO WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT FROM INDIAN RHODES SCHOLARS

*This guide is not an official communication from the Rhodes Trust. It was collaboratively prepared by some Indian Rhodes Scholars to ensure that all applicants have equal access to sufficient guidance for preparing the personal statement, which forms part of the application for the Rhodes Scholarships for India.*

### GENERAL TIPS

1. A personal statement is one of the most important elements of the selection process, and often forms the basis of the subsequent interviews. It is meant to be a reflection of your personality, and hence it is paramount that you avoid generalization, and ensure that the statement relates closely to you as a person. Through your essay, you should give the reviewers a flavor of your personality, interests and goals, almost like they have met you in person. Most importantly, your personal statement should make the reviewer want to meet you and further discuss and explore your interests with you. Remember that the personal statement must represent you well enough such that if you are invited to an interview, there should be clear congruence between what you have written and who you are as a person.
2. Through your personal statement, you should be able to convey to the reviewers a story about the larger motivation that drives your work. The personal statement should ideally have a central theme or focus, with the narrative connecting its various elements, whether it be the subject matter you wish to study, your accomplishments, your work experience or your reasons for applying to the University of Oxford. The statement should thus be a cohesive whole, held together by this narrative, rather than a collection of unrelated information. When framing a balanced personal statement, do remember the criteria the reviewers will be using to determine if you are a suitable candidate for the Rhodes Scholarship – more about those specific criteria later.
3. Ensure that various aspects of your professional and personal life are logically put together, as far as possible. The reviewers, on reading the

statement, should be able to discern what you wish to study, your career plans, and your reasons for choosing these, while sensing a strong commitment to your goals. It is crucial that your personal statement highlights a clear link between your choices and the experiences you have had. Having said that, there is no one method to put these things together. Do what works best for you and your story – after all, it is your *personal* statement.

4. Ensure that the personal statement is within the 1000 word limit as stated in the application rules. If the personal statement exceeds 1000 words, the application, at the discretion of the National Secretary, is liable to be rejected or only the first 1000 words of the personal statement may be provided to the Selection Committee.
5. Given the word limit, you cannot elaborate extensively on all points. While the reviewers should be able to follow your chain of thought, as evident from the statement, your statement should also be thought provoking, leaving room for further discussion and debate.
6. Your statement should not merely be a narration of your experiences and accomplishments but should also describe to the reviewer the impact these have had on you, and their contribution in defining your thought process. Use these to further build your narrative.
7. Ensure that your personal statement is not merely a more elaborate version of your résumé as this would be a lost opportunity. The reviewer will already have a copy of your résumé. The statement should instead connect your various relevant achievements, qualifications and experiences to the larger narrative, and describe their impact on the choices you have made. At the same time, it is crucial that your personal statement is in sync with your résumé. The statement should reflect the activities and accomplishments mentioned in your résumé, but within a larger context; the résumé should reflect the interests you conveyed in your statement. The reviewer should thus be able to make sense of one while looking at the other.
8. It is not necessary that long sentences and complex language be used, in an attempt to impress. In fact, these might hinder readability. It is best to stick to a style of writing you are comfortable with, as long as it conveys

- the message adequately. Ensure that you have proofread the essay multiple times, and there are no spelling or grammatical errors. Sloppiness and carelessness are poor signs and are unlikely to be regarded well.
9. The personal statement, particularly the portions on your areas of interest and future study, should not be technical, such that only persons well-versed in the field would be able to completely understand. At the same time, the panel reading your personal statement has probably had years of experience in assessing statements and hence it should not be highly simplistic either. The focus should be on communicating your areas of interest with clarity, and your thought process in arriving at these.
  10. To get started with the process of writing your personal statement, try thinking about why you are doing what you are doing, what aspects of it most excite you, the way in which the experiences of your last few years have shaped you, etc. Remember that people are rarely able to come up with a comprehensive and well-written statement on the first go. The key is to think about the various elements that you want to put in it and then find a way of connecting them together.
  11. It is important to remember that the Rhodes Scholarship is a merit and not a need-based scholarship. Providing gratuitous information about one's family background or indications of need are not required and will not in themselves strengthen your candidature. Of course, there are no prohibitions on mentioning these if they are relevant to your story.

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### **A. Is there some prior preparation I should engage in, before writing the personal statement?**

It would be useful to look at the website of the Rhodes Scholarships. The website, for instance, lists certain [criteria](#) the panel looks for in every potential candidate for the Scholarship. Try and ensure that your personal statement is broadly responsive to these criteria. The website also provides information about the Scholarship, along with videos of Scholars from the previous years, narrating their experiences at Oxford, as a Rhodes Scholar, including their [views](#) on writing a personal statement. It would also be helpful to read the will

of Cecil Rhodes, the founder of the Scholarship, to understand the motivations with which the Scholarship was constituted. All candidates should also read carefully the [Conditions of Tenure](#) for the Rhodes Scholarships and the information provided in the [Rhodes India Memorandum](#). Ensure that you meet the eligibility criteria in terms of nationality, age, education and academic achievement, as mentioned in Point 2 of the Rhodes India Memorandum. Point 4(g) of the Rhodes India Memorandum details elements the Trust looks for in a personal statement.

The website of the University of Oxford, particularly the [graduate admissions page](#), is helpful in assessing why Oxford might be ideal for you. It provides information on the courses offered, the faculty involved, research centres set up and pedagogic techniques utilized (e.g.: tutorials) along with the non-academic activities available at Oxford.

### **B. How useful are the sample statements of purpose available online?**

It is important to remember that there is no fixed format for a personal statement. The most important element of a statement is that it is personal and, therefore, unique to your case. To this extent, sample statements of purpose should not be blindly relied on as a template, and emulated, since the elements introduced through the essay vary from person to person. That being said, going through sample statements might be helpful in assessing certain common elements among statements, and the various methods available to convey information about yourself to the reviewer. But try and do this *after* you've done some thinking of your own. Reading others' statements can often influence your thought process in ways that are then difficult to break out of.

### **C. Are there certain elements that a personal statement must mandatorily have?**

As mentioned above, there is no set format that a personal statement should follow. However, as we understand it, through your statement the panel expects to obtain a clear idea about your areas of interest and what you have done to develop these interests/ how they came to be your core interests. The panel also looks for whether the University of Oxford is a good fit for these interests. Fi-

nally, the panel is interested in understanding how an education at Oxford fits into your future career plans. It is important therefore to demonstrate a certain degree of clarity of thought in your statement about *what you wish to study and why, why Oxford* and *what you plan to do in the future*. These need not be concrete and pinpointed, but a degree of focus will be appreciated. While it might be difficult to identify your exact career path, it is useful to have an idea of what career options you are considering and why. You can address these elements in any manner you desire, as long as you are able to clearly convey your thoughts to the reviewer.

For example, a candidate details below what she wishes to study at Oxford, drawing on past experiences and her conclusions based on those.

Course: Economics (M. Phil.)

Five years ago, I chose to opt for economics out of sheer enthusiasm of exploring it. I wanted to study a discipline which could understand the social complex of interrelationships objectively and evaluate it quantitatively. Over time, I have discovered the depths of the discipline and the implements it equips its follower with. Economics principles are like a toolchest. Through analytical frameworks and models, I feel equipped with more gear at the end of every lecture. The freedom it bestows on its student is just so enthralling – one could study anything from markets in education to health to nuclear physics. This limitless horizon has allowed me to explore my minor fields in depth along with my major. My philosophical inclinations along with a brush with Boulding's views on going beyond the rudimentary and strait-jacket assumptions of the discipline have motivated me to integrate my everyday ruminations with the principles of economics.

As I look ahead at the expanding horizon that economics has thrown open for me, I see myself doing an M. Phil in Economics from Oxford. This would equip me with more tools in my toolbox and allow me to understand the world of inequalities and injustices better. I have had a vibrant exposure to financial markets and live trading in a stock exchange during my internship and I have seen the world of poignant injustices. Capital markets offer huge dividends and bonuses, of a scale and size that people down the poverty lane, be-

low the poverty line cannot even dream of. I aim to use my learning from the study of social sector schemes in developing countries and that about capital markets to arrive at logical solutions. An M. Phil in Economics will provide me an academic base and better foundational framework within which these inequalities could be examined. I shall be in a better position to assess various developmental strategies and propose better solutions, most importantly. A dedicated focus on academic research at Oxford will help me explore the world further and allow me to go beyond limited model-specific assumptions of the discipline.

Here, a candidate explains in her essay how she developed an interest in international criminal law.

Course: Law (Bachelor of Civil Law)

The intersection between criminal law and constitutional guarantees triggered my interest in constitutional law – a direct result of my quest to understand broader issues of accountability for mass rights violations. My passion for constitutional and comparative constitutional law led to the three papers I published or presented in University, my membership on the Editorial Board of the *Environmental Law and Practice Review*, and my role in organising the first ever Mock Constituent Assembly Debate at my University. I particularly enjoyed working on a comparison of the judicial attitudes towards secularism in India and Israel, since this helped me gain a practical understanding of the operation of law in both jurisdictions. This manuscript was accepted for publication in the prestigious *Student Law Review* at my University.

Such an interest finds reflection in my grades - I topped the constitutional law course in my third year and received the highest possible grade in a Comparative Law course while on exchange at the University of Illinois. My exchange program, for which I was selected based on my academic achievements, broadened my outlook towards social issues by understanding how they manifest themselves in developing and developed societies.

The potential of the systems of criminal justice dispensation was brought out in full force for me once again when I studied international criminal law. Slowly, painfully, the world had witnessed the establishment of a permanent,

international criminal tribunal and I realised with a thrill that my generation had been entrusted with the responsibility of making it successful. This desire to promote international criminal law led to my participation in the Henry Dунant Moot organised by the International Committee of the Red Cross and the activities I undertook as an Executive Board Member of the University International Law Society. It is with a view to understanding the relationship between law and mass atrocities that I opted for the Law and Anthropology of Violence course this semester.

In this extract, a candidate elaborates on her future career plans in her personal statement, justifying these based on work she has previously undertaken.

Course: Material Sciences (MSc)

Why such excitement and fuss over solar energy one might ask. Well, the sun's energy is bestowed upon us as a precious gift, free of cost, every single day. Just consider the magnitude of the gift. The earth receives  $4.3 \times 10^{20}$  J of solar energy every hour which is more energy than mankind uses in one calendar year! In addition solar technologies are clean and do not emit harmful green house gases that contribute to global warming. Nevertheless, this technology is still not cost competitive with traditional fossil fuel based technology. This is because fossil fuel technology has had a head start of two hundred years. It is my belief that changes in policy will be crucial to bridge this gap and lead to the large scale deployment of solar technologies quickly.

Vested interests in the fossil fuel lobby delay the progress of solar technology. I got a taste of this when I did an internship in Delhi and presented a paper on 'The Hydrocarbon Sector of India'. Energy is the biggest barometer that measures political pressure as; if the cost of fuel rises the government becomes unpopular. This is true for governments of all countries. Therefore, despite the obvious advantages of solar energy most governments are uneasy about antagonizing those vested interests of fossil fuels. India needs policy makers who recognize the urgency of shifting to solar energy sources and I wish to be one of them.

In the following segment, a candidate explains the questions she attempts to address, both through her study at Oxford and her career, and how she plans to do so.

Course: Women's Studies (MSt) and Film Aesthetics (MSt)

Deeply invested in the politics of art and performance as sites for both normalization and subversion, I aspire to explore how space and time are reified, recast and rendered through filmic languages—imaginary lines, color, bodies, light, background scores. Moreover, the politics of (participatory) spectatorship, interrogating the 'male gaze', film theatres as spaces for aspiration and creation, active mediation by audiences through intra-audience interactions, new media technologies, and memory-- provide crucial arenas for research, particularly in the Indian subcontinent. I aim to address these questions through the vantage of filmic and gendered intertextualities. Keen to examine how cinema shapes and negotiates the feminine, and within the feminine, narrative ideals and deviations, it is imperative to me that this exercise is not situated in an academic vacuum.

In the future, I aim to teach film through film, exploring the possibilities, limitations and challenges the audio-visual possesses in pedagogy. I hope to bridge the gulf between theory and praxis, between seas of words and worlds of seeing, working on feminist media technologies and texts—both through the creative and the academic. It is my dream to establish screenwriting and filmmaking labs and schools, affording access to story-tellers whose voices have been subordinated, often along the intersections of class, race, caste, gender expression, and sexual orientation. I want to explore the ethics of aesthetics, through blank spaces— simple subtitles change audience viewing and mediation, and silently (violently) determine the intended audience.

#### **D. What are the 'Rhodes criteria'?**

It is important that your essay reflects elements of the criteria the Rhodes Scholarship looks for in its scholars. Literary and scholastic achievements could include your academic performance, awards received for such performance, role as a teaching or research assistant, academic papers you may have published, conferences participated in and so on. The energy to use one's talents to the full

could include involvement in a variety of activities including sports, music, debate, dance, theatre, and artistic pursuits, with special emphasis on teamwork. Truth, courage, devotion to duty, sympathy for and protection of the weak, kindness, unselfishness and fellowship could be demonstrated through work with non-governmental organisations, involvement in committees at your University focusing on public service, participation in activities contributing to society in some manner at the school, community or college level, personal interventions you may have made on issues you care about and so on. Moral force of character and instincts to lead, and to take an interest in one's fellow beings requires you to showcase leadership skills. Leadership can be of different sorts and there is no one definition - this could include leading a student union, heading a committee at your University, convening a course, leading a protest, organizing awareness movements and camps, organizing activities at your University including conferences, competitions and fests, being an Editor of a journal, undertaking path-breaking work, doing something that inspires others, and so on.

**E. Does an aspiration of pursuing a particular professional path either lower or enhance one's chances of getting the Scholarship? Further, are there any weaknesses in one's profile that foreclose one's possibility of winning the Scholarship?**

It is critical to bear in mind that there is no "perfect" Rhodes scholar. The four criteria set out by the Rhodes Trust are the guiding principles for the scholarship, and even a cursory glance at the list of past scholars and successful candidates reveals that these criteria allow for a remarkable degree of diversity. This being the case, it would be wrong to think that the Rhodes Trust prioritizes applicants aspiring to pursue a particular professional path over others who may intend to pursue a professional path not commonly linked with Rhodes Scholars.

Further, our advice for an applicant would be to not get bogged down by what you might yourself perceive as a grave weakness in your profile, such as being from an unfamiliar university or not having participated in sporting activities. There is no uniform way in which all successful applicants meet the Rhodes cri-

teria. Just as there is no one thing that is likely to make your application successful, it is equally true that one single perceived weakness is unlikely to overshadow many strengths in the application. There are many ways to satisfy the Rhodes criteria and each is unique.

Finally, instead of altering your aspirations and goals in a way that you feel would ensure that your application is viewed in a more favourable light by the Rhodes Trust, you would be well advised to focus on building a narrative around your achievements and strengths that is authentic and that you feel truly invested in.

#### **F. What should my opening paragraph cover?**

A strong opening can be one way to distinguish your personal statement from those of other candidates, and to make the essay personal. It helps to catch the attention of the reviewer right at the beginning, making her curious about how you will develop your story from that point. There is no set formula for what could be an interesting beginning. Among other things, it could be an experience you have had at an internship, an event from your childhood, a book or a movie that left an impact on you, a conversation you engaged in or a person you met. The opening should ideally be a reflection of the central theme in your statement, thus setting the tone for the entire essay. There is no real value in providing a striking quote from someone famous, especially if it has nothing to do with the personal statement.

In the extract below, a candidate begins her essay by talking about a movie, which left a profound impact on her, tying together different concepts which have always been a source of interest for her.

Course: Law (Bachelor of Civil Law)

A homosexual client. A homophobic lawyer. A deadly, incurable disease. An unsympathetic law firm. A quest for justice. As a third year law student, I watched Philadelphia, horrified as the narrative of sexual taboos and the resultant social condemnation overpowered humane considerations towards a life-threatening disease. Philadelphia made me think- long and hard- about the link

between gender, sexuality and health, putting a name to and forging a nexus between concepts that have always fascinated me.

Here, a candidate begins her essay by recalling an incident from her childhood.

Course: Material Sciences (MSc)

My first brush with solar energy was at the tender age of six. My cousin took a magnifying glass and placed a paper on my leg. Then, when the noonday sun was at its zenith, he focused the sun's rays through the lens on the paper. The paper caught fire and burnt my leg. The fire was easily extinguished, but not the memory and the mark it left on my consciousness.

### **G. How do I show that the University of Oxford is a good fit for me?**

Your personal statement should clearly specify what aspect of the training you would receive at Oxford makes it unique, and particularly suited to *your* interests. One way to do this is to identify certain specific courses, and subjects within these courses, which are relevant to your interests (though these choices might change by the time you ultimately get to Oxford). You could also look at faculty you would like to work with, research centres at Oxford specializing in your area of interest, the teaching methodology at Oxford (the tutorial system), the academic and social culture at Oxford or other factors which you can relate to, or a combination of all of these. Try and avoid generic remarks about Oxford's academic environment, history or excellence, and tailor the reasons to suit your background and interests, thus personalizing your essay.

Two candidates use a combination of several of these factors to show why Oxford would be the ideal next step for their careers.

Course: Law (Bachelor of Civil Law)

Given that my ultimate goal is to work in the field of international criminal law—whether through fieldwork, academia or practice—I feel that the BCL course is ideal for me. Many of the courses on offer seem to be tailored to specifically suit my interests. For instance, the aforementioned cross-section between criminal and constitutional law is the thrust of the Criminal Justice and Human

Rights course. Again, I feel that my understanding of individual liability for war crimes will be enhanced by understanding how the humanitarian law regime works in that context, through the International Law and Armed Conflict course. The structure of the BCL course is another incentive. Oxford University offers the unique advantage of being focused on personal tutorials, while still allowing for independence of research. I believe that such guidance will equip me better to realise my dream of engaging in the international criminal law regime.

Course: Material Sciences (MSc)

In order to amalgamate my technological insights with a clear understanding of the politics, economics and social aspects of the world's energy scenario, I intend to pursue a one year MSc degree in Environmental Change and Management in Oxford. This is a very specific program designed for people who are interested in fighting climate change. I believe that the skills I will acquire from this program will allow me to be able to frame energy policies for India. The program at Oxford is the best of its kind in the world inasmuch as the program is a fusion of people from diverse backgrounds who are associated with ministries, the United Nations and with research and development. In addition, the curriculum includes several project based assignments and field trips. I believe that hands on learning is the best method in the dynamic field of energy and thus I feel as though the program was tailored for me.

I am keen on following this up with a one year MSc degree in Materials Science as Oxford is famous for its research on renewable energy devices, in particular, second generation solar cells. Materials are the key to achieving a fundamental breakthrough in this field. A Master's degree in Materials Science would enable me to pursue my love of the sciences and pave the way for a future PhD in solar cells. Oxford has achieved several fundamental breakthroughs in metal oxide solar photovoltaics. It is for this reason that I believe Oxford is the best place for me to carry out research.

I am also deeply interested in going to Oxford because it has a vibrant chess scene. I have won the national chess tournament in India and I have participated in some International tournaments where I have won prizes. The

Rhodes scholarship will allow me to pursue my dream and I hope with all my heart that I will be given a chance to do so.

**H. Should I mention prior work experience in the field in the personal statement, considering it is already in my résumé, which is submitted along with the application?**

It is not necessary to list all your prior work experience in the field in the personal statement, as this information should have already found its way into your résumé. However, it could be useful to mention the particular experience(s) that helped mould your thinking, and define your interests. These can be incorporated into the larger narrative that you present in your personal statement. Mention particularly what you learnt from these experiences and how they contributed to helping you identify what you wish to study, drawing a clear thread between the work you have done previously and the work you hope to do in the future.

Here, a candidate refers to a study she conducted, which helped her identify certain interests crucial to her research.

Course: Economics (M. Phil.)

Fascinated by one of the attempts to eliminate injustices in the domain of health, I chose to independently study the Rasthriya Swasthya Bima Yojana – RSBY (National Health Insurance Scheme) in my summer this year. The scheme provides a handsome health insurance cover to the population below poverty line to deliver social security. I interviewed these beneficiaries to study how their lives changed.

While, philosophical parleys with peers at college always tend to bend to one side, either extreme libertarian or extreme socialist; I have learnt through this study how private sector, government and the poor can all come together in a symbiotic manner and create mutual benefits. Research has been a delightful discovery and the search for truth has instilled a new knowledge hunger in me – to find out bits of truth from the ground and supplement the mathematical rigor of economics with empirical evidence. Most importantly, I have learnt

how technology and efficient delivery can create a workable incentive matrix and create social change.

In this extract, a candidate recounts work engaged in during several projects, drawing out his interests based on these experiences.

Course: Organic Chemistry (D. Phil.)

In the summer of 2007, I worked on Resonance Raman spectra of bound end products of the human Hypoxanthine – Guanine Phosphoribosyl Transferase (HGPRT) enzyme at the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS). Later work would involve comparison with spectra of bound end products with malarial analogue of the enzyme, which would thereby help design a specific inhibitor for the malarial enzyme, which is known to have different substrates from human HGPRT, despite having considerable sequence homology.

In 2009, I was awarded the Indian Academy of Sciences Summer Research Fellowship to work at the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB), where I synthesized and studied the aggregation of the human Islet Amyloid Polypeptide (hIAPP). The aggregation of this peptide has been found to induce pancreatic  $\beta$ -cell death, and has thus been implicated in the pathology of Type II Diabetes. I attempted to study its aggregation pathway and its association with aggregation inhibitors, which could potentially be used to enhance the current treatment of Diabetes.

Although each of these summer projects were only two months long, the knowledge I gained, and the passion I discovered for biochemistry has inspired me to pursue long term research in these fields. I feel proud to have some part in the fight against malaria and diabetes, and am absolutely geared up for more. I am excited by the opportunity to pursue my D. Phil. at Oxford, as I believe I would get the opportunity to bring together my formal education in Chemistry with my interest in biological sciences involving extremely interesting, but also socially beneficial research.

### **I. Should I mention non-academic experiences in the personal statement?**

Certainly! The personal statement should not be limited to purely academic aspects of your life. As mentioned above, the Rhodes Scholarships focus on sever-

al criteria beyond the scholastic ability of the candidate, and your engagement in various non-academic activities could demonstrate these qualities. However, once again, try to weave these accomplishments in to the larger narrative of your essay.

**J. If I am applying for a one-year degree, do I also need to talk about what I will do in my second Rhodes year?**

It is fine to mention just the one degree if you feel it might make your essay more focused; you are also welcome to mention your second one-year degree if you are already clear about what you would want it to be. Regardless, it is good to have a sense of what you would want to do in the second year in preparation for the interview round, where it may come up. Whatever route you choose, the emphasis is on having clarity of thought and a desired course of action that matches this.

While it is quite common for candidates to mention only the first one-year course in their applications, the candidate below mentions a two-year plan.

Course: Women's Studies (MSt) and Film Aesthetics (MSt)  
Oxford offers two Master of Studies courses in Film Aesthetics and Women's Studies, both under the Department of Modern Languages, and ancillary Humanities' departments like History and Philosophy, allowing me to critically engage with practical implications of feminist film theory, through one-on-one mentoring, tutorial work, and resources available at the Bodleian library and Taylor Institution.

**K. I took a year off to work after my graduation, but spent my time working on something unrelated to my core research interests. How should I make sense of this in the personal statement?**

If the work experience is absolutely unrelated to your area of interest, there is no strict need to mention it in the essay. Remember: the essay is about taking your narrative forward. If something does not take your narrative forward, it need not find space in your personal statement. However, often things that seem 'unrelated' can be 'related' if they lead to skill building that will ultimate-

ly help your long-term project. For example, you may have acquired practical or soft skills that would facilitate the realisation of your long-term plans.

**L. How important is it that my long-term plans should involve coming back to India?**

There is no compulsion to state that you wish to come back to India, though there should certainly be focus on leadership and social impact as the Rhodes Scholarships have as their mission facilitating the journeys of *'leaders of the world's future'*. You could make this impact while teaching in a university in India, or equally by litigating at the International Criminal Court in Hague.

**M. The Rhodes Scholarship requires six letters of recommendation. Who should I approach for these?**

Persons giving you letters of recommendation should be familiar with you, and your work. To this extent, rather than looking for recommendations from well-known persons, you should approach people you have worked with substantially and who know you and your work as a result of this engagement. Needless to say, they should not be people who you have a personal relationship with, such as members of your family.

As per the application rules, three of these letters have to be academic, implying that you have to ask people who have taught you during your undergraduate or postgraduate degree. They have to be able to comment in detail on your academic ability and be confident that you will fare well at Oxford. Which of your teachers you choose is up to you - for instance, you could approach those who have taught you subjects particularly relevant to your stated areas of interest, or those whom you have worked with as a teaching or research assistant as part of coursework.

The other three letters may either be academic, or can be professional. The latter could include persons you have interned with, teachers from your school, etc. These referees have to, and should have had the experiences that enable them to, attest to your character and/or your involvement in extra-curricular/service

or leadership activities, commenting critically about whether you fulfil the non-academic requirements of the Scholarship.

Point 4(h) of the Rhodes India Memorandum, along with the 'Guidance for Referees' appended to the Memorandum provides information on the nature of references the Trust requires.

**N. Does the age at which one decides to apply for the Scholarship have a bearing on one's chances of being chosen as a Rhodes Scholar? Does the fact that you were unsuccessful in a previous attempt to get the Scholarship negatively impact one's chances?**

Your age (as long as it falls within the bounds set out by the memorandum) is not a deterrent to your chances of winning the scholarship. In other words, whether or not you are awarded the Scholarship will be a function of your ability to meet the criteria that the Rhodes Trust is looking for, and not of the age at which you apply. Relatedly, it is important to note that multiple attempts at the scholarship are allowed, and don't work against you - there have been multiple Rhodes Scholars who have won it on their second attempt.

**O. Will I be required to submit any test scores at the time of applying for the Scholarship, such as English proficiency test results or GRE scores?**

The Rhodes Scholarship application process does not require the candidate to pass any qualifying exams (GRE, Subject GREs, etc.) or language proficiency exams (TOEFL, IELTS, etc.) but the specific course that you are applying to may do so. Since your application for your chosen course at the University of Oxford is to be submitted after scholarship results are released, there is no need to submit any test scores along with the Rhodes Scholarship application.

**P. As an applicant from a science background, how can I convey my passion for a very technical subject in an accessible fashion and situate it within the broader context of my other interests and larger goals?**

As mentioned in point 9 of the General Tips section above, your focus should be on communicating your areas of interest with clarity, in language that captures the nuances of the points that you are trying to convey but is at the same time

accessible for a generalist audience. Annexure 2 to this Guide contains an essay submitted by a Rhodes Scholar from a science background that effectively balances these conflicting interests.

**Q. What if I have further questions?**

We have set up an informal Google Group that you can join. It is not mandatory to join it, and remember that the Rhodes Trust remains the only and final authority on the conduct of the interview. However, if you want to access the Google Group to ask us questions on an informal basis, you can join at <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/rhodes-india-application-assistance--written-round>

We have also annexed to this guide two personal statements of previous candidates (which have been anonymized). We would like to emphasise once again that there is no set format a personal statement has to follow. These have been provided solely as an example, and should not be relied on as a template.

## ANNEXURE I

The lights dim, my eyes skim the audience. We are watching *Fishing at the Stone Weir*, two parts of Quentin Brown's project documenting the lives of Netsilik Eskimos. Subtitles are provided for the hearing-impaired, but I notice something is amiss—every time the Netsilik people speak, [non-English narration] blares from below the frame, reducing their language's complexity to merely something we are not required to comprehend. Absence of human conversation is abbreviated to [sil.], short for silence. Crashing waves, sounds of the industrious architects creating the weir, breaths a woman takes as she braids her hair--all relegated to [sil.].

The lights dim, my eyes skim the audience. My second public performance, I perform an intensely personal and political piece responding to misogyny in pop culture. I gather strength from the sea of faces staring at me, indulging me, laughing with me, not at me. My universe of verse is all about pace- fast, seething, breathing, multiple rhymes. Beginning in haste, I try to say as much as I can within the first minute. Slowly, however, I register the audience's response. It is in that silence I realize that my poetry truly belongs.

I have explored my own motivations and imperatives, concluding that I am fascinated by silences, by absences—that which we render mundane, profane, not worthy of enquiry. Fortunate to have been guided by undergraduate history and literature professors, I've realized that processes of inscription and documentation are as much projects of concealment as they are of discovery. After multiple (and admittedly, challenging) trysts with Foucault in libraries, I want to interrogate those lapses, the absence of filmic texts as legitimate sources of academia, the absence of women/ femme and queer voices behind the screen, and indeed, to engage with the problematic of what makes a woman a woman, what makes a film a film, what happens when films make women, and when women make films?

I have approached pro-filmic realities at pre-production, due to my background in theatre and amateur screenwriting, production through the two projects I undertook for my classes and videos of my poetry pieces, and in post-production, with sales and marketing initiatives, as part of my internship with XYZ. I have however, yet to explore the philosophy and ontology of film it-

self—the languages in and through which it is articulated, the activation of the past through the present, the imposition of the present's politics on the past, and how films are constantly being created—not just through processes of production, but those of consumption.

Similarly, I have recognized and expressed my feminist politics through my art—registering protest against the hystericization of the feminine, queerphobia and menstrual taboos through slam poetry. As a working member and later head coordinator for the Gender Studies Cell at my University, I interacted with luminaries in the field of gender-based and sexual equality, and organizations addressing child abuse, sex work and marital rape. I have feminist awakenings while reading Judith Butler, writing poems as catharsis, or reading feminist film theory by Teresa de Lauretis, yet it is only when I ask people what personal pronouns they use, or unlearn the everyday ways in which the patriarchy manifests itself that I feel I have received an education.

It is in pursuit of these perceived trivialities, these educations hidden in what we confirm as mundane—like intimate human interaction in the frenzy of the subway, or histories of the humble bench in my neighborhood park—that I turn to Oxford. Oxford offers two Master of Studies courses in Film Aesthetics and Women's Studies, both under the Department of Modern Languages, and ancillary Humanities' departments like History and Philosophy, allowing me to critically engage with practical implications of feminist film theory, through one-on-one mentoring, tutorial work, and resources available at the Bodleian library and Taylor Institution.

Deeply invested in the politics of art and performance as sites for both normalization and subversion, I aspire to explore how space and time are reified, recast and rendered through filmic languages—imaginary lines, color, bodies, light, background scores. Moreover, the politics of (participatory) spectatorship, interrogating the 'male gaze', film theatres as spaces for aspiration and creation, active mediation by audiences through intra-audience interactions, new media technologies, and memory-- provide crucial arenas for research, particularly in the Indian subcontinent. I aim to address these questions through the vantage of filmic and gendered intertextualities. Keen to examine how cinema shapes and negotiates the feminine, and within the feminine, narrative ideals and devi-

ations, it is imperative to me that this exercise is not situated in an academic vacuum.

In the future, I aim to teach film through film, exploring the possibilities, limitations and challenges the audio-visual possesses in pedagogy. I hope to bridge the gulf between theory and praxis, between seas of words and worlds of seeing, working on feminist media technologies and texts—both through the creative and the academic. It is my dream to establish screenwriting and filmmaking labs and schools, affording access to story-tellers whose voices have been subordinated, often along the intersections of class, race, caste, gender expression, and sexual orientation. I want to explore the ethics of aesthetics, through blank spaces— simple subtitles change audience viewing and mediation, and silently (violently) determine the intended audience. Poetry is about enunciation, and renunciation. I seek to pursue a double major in Film Aesthetics and Women Studies at Oxford to find the joy in exploring silences, and to triumph in the silences that joy affords.

## ANNEXURE II

I would like to begin by talking about my years of schooling.

The first thing I was struck by was the importance given to questions, discussions and conversation. No question was ever dismissed as being trivial or insignificant. Rather, we were encouraged to come up with more of them, think about them deeply and converse with one another. In the process, I learnt three things at a very young age. One, I had a voice and mind of my own, and was capable of thinking constructively about any subject. Two, it was supremely important to listen carefully with an open mind. Lastly, every discussion needn't end with a definite conclusion - oftentimes the questions we were left with were greater sources of learning.

A particularly significant period was my year as a Class 11 student. As a part of our curriculum, we had to work with an NGO in Kanchipuram, and later that year, worked in the ABC and DEF in Maharashtra, and GHI and JKL in Rajasthan. It was the first time I engaged with deeply complex issues like education, sanitation, water and food distribution, women's rights and land ownership, and it was a very humbling experience. I remember being frustrated because it took me weeks just to appreciate the many layers to the problems, much less find a way that I could meaningfully contribute. I came into intimate contact with a world starkly different from mine. These interactions have made me look critically at how I live my own life, the choices I make and my place in the world around me.

These two aspects of my education grew into aspects integral to my personality. I consider myself to be openminded. Second and relatedly, I have diverse interests and influences, and I celebrate this diversity. Lastly, I engage deeply with things that I come across.

I study western classical music and have played the piano since the age of five. In 2011, I completed the Grade 8 from Trinity College, London with a distinction, and I'm pursuing the ATCL, a Performance Diploma awarded by the same institute. Music has been a significant influence in shaping my work ethic, ideals, and emotional and intellectual growth, and is something I want to continue to pursue.

From a young age, reading has been a source of great pleasure, of new ideas and perspectives, and has helped me be more articulate. I enjoy reading fiction - most recently, I have been particularly taken by Elena Ferrante, Adichie, Zadie Smith, Perumal Murugan, and Virginia Wolf. Aside from this, a significant portion of my reading is academic.

This brings me to something I am passionate about - theoretical physics and mathematics. During my study, I've had the good fortune to travel, interact and, more recently, collaborate with professors and graduate students from some of the best institutes across the world and this has greatly augmented my understanding and love for the subjects. Over time, I have become interested in three topics - quantum field theory (QFT), general relativity, and string theory. Last summer, I was an ABC Fellow at the XYZ Centre for Theoretical Sciences with Dr. DEF. We worked on understanding recently proposed  $N=3$  superconformal field theories by mapping them to a class of integrable systems. While this project ultimately turned out to be only partially successful, it was an extremely rich learning experience, particularly in learning how research is done. Having completed a majority of the credit requirements for my MSc. early, I returned to XYZ for my thesis. Here, I am working with Dr. DEF and Dr. GHI (postdoctoral researcher) on formalising the Worldline approach to QFT, and using it to address issues in standard QFT. Apart from potentially being a fresh source of perspectives and techniques for QFT, it's been extremely rewarding because it has involved learning a lot of string theory and revisiting older ideas in a newer light.

I am also working with Prof. JKL on the relationship between certain soft theorems (specifically, the sub-leading double soft theorem) and asymptotic symmetries. Doing so successfully, would bring to a close one leg of the pioneering program initiated by Prof. MNO, et. al. in 2014, and I've been particularly excited by this. It's been thrilling to be a part of a large group of researchers across the world piecing together our current understanding of these theorems over the past three years.

I would like to pursue a DPhil. in Theoretical Physics - I want to do research, specifically in the field of QFT and strings. Between the Rudolf Peierls Centre and the Mathematical Institute, Oxford has a strong and diverse string theory group, and would be the ideal environment for me to pursue my research and

mature as a physicist. Given the opportunity, I would like to work in Prof. ABC's group (on holography and transport phenomena) or with Prof. DEF (on string phenomenology) for my doctoral studies.

Alongside my research, I want to work in education. I enjoy teaching, and have been fortunate to have ample opportunities to do so - I've taken numerous lectures in college, helped teach a course, and have taught mathematics and physics at school. Through school and college, I have been surrounded by people who take education seriously and actively work towards addressing the many questions it raises, and I've seen myself grow interested in the same. I'm excited to see what form this interest takes in the future.

In conclusion, I would like to say that over time I have discovered for myself that I am happiest and at my most productive when I'm learning, or when I'm using what I've learnt in a meaningful and helpful way. If there is one overarching aim or wish that I have for myself, it is that I continue to do so.