

THE RHODES SCHOLARSHIPS FOR THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Frequently Asked Questions: Guidelines for Fellowship Advisors Regarding the Personal Statement Requirement for the Rhodes Scholarship Application

Q&A with the American Secretary of the Rhodes Trust:

- 1. Q: Does the Rhodes personal statement policy mean that fellowship advisors should not work with or advise applicants for the Rhodes Scholarship? Does offering advice to students violate the policy prohibiting editing or reviewing personal statements?**

A: Absolutely not. The Rhodes Trust values the process of advising applicants for the Rhodes Scholarship and seeks only to change the role of the personal statement in that advising process. The Trust asks that the personal statements submitted be unreviewed and unedited by anyone but the candidate. We recognize the important role fellowship advisors can play in helping students develop self-awareness about their professional and academic goals. We want fellowship advisors to encourage appropriate candidates to apply and talk with students about possible degree programs, the fit between student goals and Oxford, and about the criteria of the Rhodes Scholarship vis-à-vis the student. Fellowship advisors can assist students in preparing or collecting other required elements of the application. We also recognize that what the student learns about him- or herself in the advising conversations will influence what appears in his or her personal statement, even if the fellowship advisor does not review or edit the statement.

- 2. Q: Does the Rhodes personal statement policy affect what it means for a university to endorse an applicant?**

A: No. Universities are endorsing *students* for the award; they are not endorsing applications, essays, etc. Whether or not an institution stands behind the potential of an individual student is wholly unrelated to the final product of an individual application component. Indeed, endorsement letters can provide some of the most telling information in a student's application. Institutions can help the committee understand whether a particular campus activity or leadership experience is truly outstanding or rather commonplace for top students there. And they can help us assess transcripts with comments about the difficulty of courses taken and the relative significance of the grades attained. Given widespread grade inflation, this can be extremely helpful. When an institution reveals context for a candidate ("this is the strongest candidate we have seen in the past 15 years") the district committees take note. We reply on the endorsement letters for a candid assessment of the applicant and how they fit within the context of the university and other students. Finally, when colleges or universities endorse more than one candidate in a district, the selection committee would be grateful for some comparative assessment of the varying strengths of the candidates against our various criteria. We know this isn't always feasible, but when it is, it can be very helpful. The committee might reach different relative assessments of course, but they do appreciate the candor.

- 3. Q: Can advisors talk with students in general terms about how to write personal statements, while still not reviewing or editing the Rhodes statement? Some people are interested in talking about things like clichéd opening paragraphs, or encouraging students to write a more distinctive personal (but not confessional) statement so that students avoid some of the worst formulaic elements you described. Is that general advice permissible?**

A: Yes, as long as there is no review of their drafts.

4. Q: You have asked an advisor to confirm that he or she and the institution have not edited or reviewed the personal statement. Is the fellowship advisor also responsible for affirming that the student has not received help or support outside of the assistance we provide? There is some concern that we are responsible for “investigating” the students. I had understood that you were using the student statement to assure student compliance, but some advisors are concerned about whether this oversight is also a requirement of the institutional endorsement.

A: No, we certainly do not expect the institution to “investigate” a student’s compliance with this policy. We do though hope that the institution will help communicate our policy.

5. Q: Is it okay for applicants to consult the institution’s library of past winning essays?

A: In the absence of editing by fellowship advisors, some applicants may be tempted to rely on these or online versions as a template. We hope you will strongly discourage them from doing so.

6. Q: Can applicants ask for advice from past successful scholarship winners?

A: They may ask for general advice but they may not receive editing help. Nor may the written personal statement be reviewed by past successful winners (or anyone else).

7. Q: Many applicants apply to more than one scholarship program. Can they use another essay or personal statement for their Rhodes personal statement?

A: No. While applicants may get ideas from other essays or personal statements they have written, they must write a separate and distinct personal statement for the Rhodes Scholarships. To ask a student to forget or unlearn that which they have written elsewhere is unrealistic. However, the student may not cut and paste from one statement to another.

8. Q: Won’t the Rhodes personal statement policy disadvantage applicants from less prestigious institutions or underrepresented backgrounds?

A: No. Rhodes selectors are not looking for uniformity. The winners each year vary tremendously among themselves. Selectors value applicants who demonstrate future leadership potential, risk-taking, creativity and verve. These individuals hail from varied institutions and backgrounds.

9. Q: Won’t the Rhodes personal statement policy compromise an important development experience for students who work with a fellowship advisor on their personal goals?

A: Those chosen for interviews must pass muster with a smart, caring and accomplished panel of selectors. Applicants who have trouble expressing themselves in their written personal statements without help seldom fare well in this intensive interview process. We welcome advisors and students to have discussions about personal goals and Oxford ambitions before students embark on the written personal statement.

10. Q: Don’t all good academic writers get external advice on their papers or other written work? Isn’t that part of the academic process?

A: The Rhodes selection process is not a pedagogical exercise, and the personal statement is not sought for this purpose. The personal statement is valuable only to the extent that it is an authentic reflection of the individual’s independent writing capacity. It is an evaluative tool more akin to an essay exam than a journal article.

11. Q: Won’t this encourage and reward cheaters?

A: Institutions or students who submit work that isn’t an honest reflection of the applicant will damage their credibility and undermine their chance (or that of their applicants) to receive a Scholarship. We disqualify applicants when we discover inaccurate or materially exaggerated claims; we will do the same if we learn of violations of our personal statement rules.