

Reframing the Rhodes Scholarship Personal Statement

For many decades, a cornerstone of the Rhodes Scholarship application has been the personal statement – whose format has remained largely unchanged. We are now reframing that statement, and this notice outlines why we are doing this, how we arrived at the new prompts and what those prompts are intended to elicit.

Over the past 18 months, a sub-committee of the Scholarship Committee of the Rhodes Trustees has spent time examining the Trust's archives of personal statements going back to the 1930s and from all corners of the world. They concluded that, over time, personal statements have become increasingly formulaic – and that, particularly over the past 10-15 years, a genre of pathos has emerged with a growing number of personal statements focused on “overcoming” obstacles or trauma, or on a heroic narrative of problem-solving. This is in marked contrast to the decades that went before, where candidates tended to be more humble, talking about what they hoped to learn from studying at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar.

The Rhodes selection criteria are powerful and enduring, having been drawn from the founder's Will. We wish to re-focus the personal statement on the Rhodes Scholar qualities which are drawn from those criteria. We are therefore introducing three new prompts for the statement, whilst still allowing candidates a free-text box of 750 words. An evolution rather than a revolution, the prompts aim to rebalance away from a singular focus on the “heroic self” by asking applicants to speak in the three voices of “self/others/world”. This is intentionally in sync with the leadership development framework that informs the Character, Service, and Leadership program for Rhodes Scholars-in-Residence, which asks Scholars to reflect and engage across three interrelated spheres of “self, others, and world”.

The new prompts are:

1. *Which Rhodes Scholar quality do you display most strongly, and how are other contexts and people helping you to develop the others?*
2. *What would you like to learn from the Rhodes and wider community in Oxford?*
3. *From your place in the world, what is humanity's greatest need?*

We want to be transparent with all of our key stakeholders, including applicants, selectors, advisors and our global Rhodes alumni community, about the intention behind these new prompts.

For applicants, we will provide explicit and expanded guidance in the Information for Candidates, as follows:

1. **“Self”:** *Which Rhodes Scholar quality do you display most strongly, and how are other contexts and people helping you to develop the others?*
This is asking applicants to reflect on the Rhodes selection criteria¹, the unique Rhodes qualities we are looking for. We don't expect candidates to be the ‘finished product’ - we want to hear how you intend to evolve.
2. **“Others”:** *What would you like to learn from the Rhodes and wider community in Oxford?*
This is asking you to reflect on the relationship between self and community, and to explore what you want to learn from the various communities you will join and encounter in Oxford, and how you hope to grow through that experience.
3. **“World”:** *From your place in the world, what is humanity's greatest need?*
This is asking you to look at the world from the place you are now, your specific context, and to reflect on what is missing in society, whilst considering the complexity and nuance of the world's challenges. We are seeking in Rhodes Scholars people who aspire to make a difference and contribute in some way to “fighting the world's fight.” Here we want to know your thoughts on what is most needed in the world.

¹ “Energy to use one's talents to the full”; “Truth, courage, devotion to duty, sympathy for and protection of the weak, kindness, unselfishness and fellowship”; “Moral force of character and instincts to lead, and to take an interest in one's fellow human beings”. [Note that the fourth selection criterion of “Literary and scholastic attainments” are evidenced in the transcript, academic statement of study and academic reference letters.]

To accompany this guidance, we have produced a short video for applicants featuring the Warden and Prof. Elleke Boehmer (a South African Rhodes Scholar, Rhodes Trustee and Oxford Professor of World Literature) in conversation about the personal statement (this will be part of the Admissions Playlist on our website):

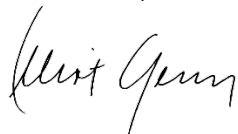
<https://vimeo.com/angelsharp/review/685487067/ad5e48f223>

We would also like to briefly explain our thinking behind the changes we are making to the Academic Statement of Study in its second year. The Scholarship Committee has reviewed the feedback from our latest annual selectors survey, whereby the majority of respondents said the academic statement was very useful in gauging why candidates wish to study at Oxford – but also that many statements were meandering. We are therefore shortening it to 350 words and being more transparent with applicants about the intention behind it: why we are asking for it and more precise guidance on what should be covered. We hope that this will engender less overlap with the personal statement, whilst still being informative for selectors and subsequently for those who win, our Registrar.

One final note: we anticipate reviewing the effect of these new prompts over the next few years and may tweak or change them periodically. We believe a dynamic approach to the Personal Statement may be helpful in avoiding a tendency toward dominant genres or formulas in the future.

Thank you again for all the ways you support candidates for Rhodes and other opportunities. If you have any questions regarding our new guidance on personal statements, you can contact us at selection@rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk.

Best wishes,



Elliot Gerson

American Secretary
The Rhodes Trust