Common Mistakes on UC Application Personal Statements.

When responding to UC Freshman prompt #1 many use far too many words describing “their world” and fail to adequately show how that world affected them and very importantly, what they did about it. The response is often out of balance with the description receiving inordinate attention to the detriment of the other crucial parts of the prompt. “My world” should not be slighted, but it should be described concisely so that its salient features will be clear to the reader. The writer has to be connected to “My world”. If not, the description of the world is detached and meaningless. If, for example, a caring home is the world discussed, the important thing is to make clear how that environment affected the applicant and what was done about it. Saying, “my caring family made me aware of the need to help others,” but then failing to show what the applicant did about it would be a seriously deficient response. Further, one should show what was done in response using concrete terms and not just make claims or describe actions using vague statements. Showing and not telling is vital as is balance.

In #1 and #2 applicants often provide too many unnecessary details as they tell their stories, details that show little about themselves; the applicant is the subject of these personal statements, not the family, home town, school, or a specific activity. Determine what it is that you want the application readers to know about you and then write about what you have done so that the value of your actions will be clear. Again, don’t tell what things mean, reveal yourself by your clear descriptions of your actions and let the reader infer the traits, characteristics, accomplishments you hope to demonstrate. Each word is precious; obtain the maximum value from it—don’t waste words by failing to reveal you.

Freshman applicants to the Colleges of Chemistry, Engineering, or Environmental Design at Berkeley are required to indicate a choice of academic major. (Engineering offers an undeclared option, but it is highly competitive and should be chosen with care.) Applicants to these colleges should indicate in their personal statements why they are interested in the intended major and present evidence of their preparation for the field. In doing so, however, applicants should focus on their interests and preparation and not describe the field, tell why the field is important or challenging, or describe the department, for example, the renown of the faculty. Those reading the applications know the field/departments and are not trying to learn about them from the applicants; the readers want to learn about the applicant’s interests and preparation from demonstrated academic, work, or extra-curricular experiences. As with everything else in the personal statements keep the focus on you and use words which will allow the readers to know you as a person.

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The above is my personal opinion. Always consult and follow the directions for application essays/personal statements from the schools to which you are applying. Good website: <http://www.californiacolleges.edu/admissions/university-of-california-uc/personalstatements.asp>

Also see my handout, “What is good and not so good in a personal statement.” Email me for a copy.

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