

crooked letter 2.5

Statement of Surface

In Which the Author Throws a Minor Temper Tantrum and Indulges Her Cynical Side Because She Must Jump Through Hoops

When one applies to grad school one is expected to write a statement of purpose. (*One* must use more formal language, *you* know). In no more than a few pages- sometimes as little 5,000 characters, which is less than two single-spaced pages by the way- you are to explain why you are worthy of consideration, why you are applying to their program, what you hope to get out of the revered institution and which *pressing* intellectual concern you hope to explore. Yes, they said “pressing.”

You are making a sales pitch, though the people in the liberal arts tend to deny this. Let the wannabe MBA’s pitch their way into grad school. We persuade. We soft sell our skills and side step the less noble reasons that send us seeking refuge in the halls of academe. It is a major application *faux pas* to mention that the economy has been in the tank pretty much all of our adult lives, workers’ rights have been decimated, most jobs suckⁱ and getting paid to think for the next four years sounds nifty.

No one in his or her right mind enjoys writing (or reading) a statement of purpose. Even the best of writers detest this particular task. The people who have to read these things hated writing them. And there is no way in hell you can get out of it. They had to do it, so you do to. Statements of purpose are almost as bad as cover letters, though you grovel more when applying for a paying job or trying to get your book published.

With a slightly clunky transition I will make my own sales pitch while attempting to explain why I am putting myself in this particular hell.ⁱⁱ

Am I worthy of the institution’s consideration? Who ever wants answer a question about her or his comparative worth? You can’t write a too truthful evaluation of your skills yet you have to be careful not to lay it on too thick. The truth changes. In the midst of a full-blown depression, I can’t do much of anything or at least I think I can’t. Optimists always over-rate their abilities. The truth lies somewhere between self-hate and vainglory. How much truth do they really want? Which truth do they want?ⁱⁱⁱ

It has been almost ten years since I graduated from college. At the time, I could decipher fairly “thick” theory. Sadly, I have lost much of my intellectual tone, and the idea of reading Derrida is about as appealing as running a marathon at noon in the middle of summer in the swamps of Gainesville, FL. I am sure I could pick it up again, but a burning desire to read theory is not why I want to go to grad school.

Despite this, I believe that I am a better thinker. I have applied my finely honed mind to a variety of situations and subjects. In the past ten years, I’ve learned all about nonprofit management, fundraising, self-employment (often referred to being a free agent), downsizing, the “temp” industry, workers’ (lack of) rights, corporate think, health (alternative and otherwise),

depression, marketing, organizational structure, facilitation, event management, basic accounting, contemporary religious experience, the self help movement, how to pitch a nonfiction book and any number of other things. I am an information vacuum. I read everything I can find on my current obsession and become a mini-expert. On the down side, it means that I am not interested in studying just one thing for years on end.

I am a much better writer than in my college days though my punctuation is even more unorthodox, and I have forgotten more about grammar than I'd like to admit. My spelling always has been atrocious, and I regularly switch "where" for "were" and "hear" for "here." I have written in business, academic and nonprofit settings. I have written plays, essays, songs, poetry, assorted creative pieces, fundraising letters, press releases, marketing materials and articles. I have done some ghost writing for people I respected and some I detested. I even wrote a book proposal for a nonfiction project called "Movers and Slackers," which I never sent to agents because I was more of a slacker than a mover at that time.

My *curriculum vitae* contains the standard hodge-podge of wage slavery you'd expect to see on the resume of a thirty something artist who came of age as the NEA's budget was slashed and every industry (including academia) discovered the benefits of jettisoning full-time, permanent employees in favor of temps, OPS positions, free agents and adjuncts.

The work ethic instilled by my father and my need to prove myself meant I worked very hard. I can multitask with the best of them. And I learned a lot. I learned that I never, ever want to be anyone's Administrative Assistant again; that middle aged white men can't do anything without women and people of color wiping their asses; that it is in business's best interest to have a smart, bored people instead of stupid, happy people copying and collating; and that nonprofits get away with treating their employees like shit because the employees believe that their work matters.

I was a damn good worker up until the point that my intellectual understanding of work combined with all my hands-on experience destroyed my work ethic and ate a hole in my heart. While many of my anarchist friends think I'm better off without it; I mourn the loss of my enthusiasm and innocence. On top of all my crappy jobs (there have been a few decent ones), I've tried my hand at self-employment several times with varying degrees of success. I also have stage managed/directed/written plays, performed in countless shows and produced a number of events. Sometimes I earned a little money doing this work.

I think I am a very good. . . candidate. I'm smart, funny, caring, a good friend and a great conversationalist. I make interesting, engaging and affordable art. I throw a good party. I make excellent lasagna. More to the point, I love learning. I enjoy research and writing. I like teaching. I appreciate the fine line between a well-constructed argument and bullshit, which is a pre-requisite for academia.

Why do I want to go to grad school? Besides hating work as we know it, I have a few redeeming reasons. I want to teach. Hell, I already teach, and I am damn good at it. Because of the aforementioned intellectual vacuuming skill, I can teach almost anything to beginners. I have taught classes on performance at the University of Florida. I have taught workshops on

fundraising, performance and marketing in public libraries, bookshops and at conferences. I teach medical students how to perform the pelvic exam. (You know you are a good teacher when you are able to calm down freaked out students who are going to touch a real live vagina with a shiny metal implement that looks like torture device).

But I need to be credentialed to *officially* teach at colleges and universities. I'd like a semi-regular gig to support my artistic habits, though I've given up hope of benefits in these days of adjunct professors. I must admit that I resent this particular necessity a wee bit. I relish the idea of teaching at the college level, so I'm willing to suck it up.

I want access. I have been producing successful independent performance on next to nothing for the past five years. I have built up a following, and I occasionally make a little money from it. But it is a struggle. I want direct channels to university resources. I am tired of devising crafty stratagems to get the much guarded, way under-utilized resources for which my taxes help pay.^{iv}

Why the particular revered institutions to which I am applying, NYU and Northwestern. Performance Studies is *sexy*. The great thing about the metaphor of performance being applied, perhaps over applied, to the great big world is that I would not only get to study theater and experimental performance, I could study politics, psychology, sociology and/or religion. I could study political protest, the practice of Jewish ritual by Messianic Christians, the current fashion of circus, burlesque & vaudeville in avant-garde theater and/or the role played by temps, free agents and adjuncts in the workplace. I am not interested in studying just theater. I am an intellectual omnivore.

None of these things are particularly pressing, but they all are engaging. Of course there is a good chance I will study many of those things without going to grad school.

Even if I do get into some august institution, I doubt I'll end up firmly entrenched in Academia. I don't want to write research papers for other academics, and I am interested in a field of study which big business doesn't consider a return on their investment. Those two things alone are probably enough to guarantee little chance of getting a tenured job.

I enjoy writing, thinking and teaching, but I hate jumping through other people's hoops. I am an artist and a maverick thinker, a freelance intellectual, if you will. I am proud of that but little of what I love is lucrative. The main reason I want to go grad school is because I tired of working so damn hard to get to do what I do best. I am not sure if that would be considered a very noble reason. But it is an honest one.

There are many advantages to becoming an academic. I am grateful for the time I spent at college. I flourished as an undergraduate. But I dislike the way academia reinforces class differences. I grew up in a college town. Neither of my parents have college degrees. But when people meet me they assume my parents must be professors, because we all know that blue-collar class workers aren't as smart or well spoken as people with degrees. I hate that. How do I sell myself to an institution that I think is problematic?^v

I am ambivalent, though I am willing to admit that some of my ambivalence and sarcasm arise from my fear of change. I've gotten comfy in my hometown and, honestly, am scared of the big city after having my life crash and burn in the last one. And it is too dang cold in the north (I have never lived through a real winter).

All of this is probably too honest. Whatever I end up sending to them, by necessity, cannot be this revealing. I will comply with the expected norms. I will jump through their hoops. I will send them a statement of surface. Even this essay, however, isn't my statement of purpose. How can I sum up my "purpose" for applying to grad school in five pages? I obscure some of my own truths by emphasizing my ambivalence and my cynicism. The reasons and desires prompting me are ambiguous, changing and not all rational. The issue becomes more confused as I write, not less. At best I can create a leaky container to hold my thoughts. If I were braver, I might send this piece. I would love to study with people willing to sit with uncomfortable, muddy, in process ideas; people who understand how vital it is intellectual inquiry; people who thought this sarcastic, defiant, working class Southern girl had something important to offer despite her ambivalences.

I will not send this essay to them. I no longer believe that my sincerity, passion and commitment are enough to win my way in this world, much less entrance into a prestigious program. I have been rejected too many times for revealing too much. What makes my art work doesn't make my life work. Perhaps it is wisdom that I now willing to "play the game." I need them to open the gates for me; they don't have to love me. But for some reason, I grieve for what I have lost, for the number of times my heart broke before I understood.

ⁱ One should note the use of the colloquial "suck." The author is revealing her bias toward clear, concise American style, slang even, versus the ponderous, obfuscating style used by way-too-many academic writers over-influenced by French theorists and German philosophy.

Tangentially, my search for the expression "why use a fifty-cent word when a ten-cent word will do," which I attributed to Mark Twain, found countless variations using different denominations and being attributed to many different authors including Twain, Ernest Hemmingway, Amisted Mauphin, Charlie Ball and an unidentified nun. I especially liked the Chinese Proverb, "Why use an ox-slaughtering knife to kill chickens?" Though it was pointed out that this quote does not quite work.

I wish that the following quote applied to me, but since I do not get paid to write, I only can enjoy Mark Twain's wit:

"I never write "metropolis" for seven cents, because I can get the same money for "city." I never write "policeman," because I can get the same price for "cop." ... I never write "valetudinarian" at all, for not even hunger and wretchedness can humble me to the point where I will do a word like that for seven cents; I wouldn't do it for fifteen." Mark Twain, speech, Sept. 18, 1906, to Associated Press, New York City. "Spelling and Pictures," Mark Twain's Speeches, ed. A.B. Paine (1923).

ⁱⁱ This particular crooked letter is an attempt to vent my spleen about the hoops I must jump through. But since I believe in a certain economy of writing energy, I might as well use the rest of this piece as a warm up draft for the “real” Statement of Purpose.

ⁱⁱⁱ By asking these questions, I have shown that I am hopeless influenced by postmodern theory and the cynicism of Generation X. Perhaps I have proved that “academia is the place I ought to be.”

^{iv} Never end a sentence with a preposition. In spoken English, we end sentences with prepositions all the time, but it is a mayor “no no” in written English. But there are exceptions. I had a professor who said to follow the “no preposition at the end of a sentence rule” as long as you didn’t create incredibly awkward sentences. Grace overruled grammar in such cases.

It also reminds me of a joke that people in my family *love*. My family is made up of incredibly smart Southern iconoclasts who pride themselves on being self-taught, disdain institutional learning and believe that most college students are educated beyond their intelligence.

So the joke: A Southerner visits Harvard and stops a person to ask for directions. “Where’s the library at,” she asks. The Harvard student answers, “At Harvard, we do not end sentences with a preposition.” The Southerner replies, “Where’s the library at, asshole!”

^v At least I didn’t use the dreaded “problematize.”