“Write This Way to the J-School: An Interview with Robert Schwoch”

a University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center Podcast

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Podcast: Writing This Way to the J-School: An Interview with Robert Schwoch

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Section 1: Introductions

Nancy
I’m Nancy Linh Karls from the Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, welcoming you to this Writing Center podcast! This podcast series tackles issues of writing in and out of the university.

Every semester, 250 to 300 UW Madison students apply to the School of Journalism, which means that every semester the School of Journalism reads 250 to 300 personal statements. This week, we sent Mike Shapiro, a TA and one of our veteran Writing Center instructors, to find out more—Mike, welcome the Pod!

Mike
I’m excited to be here, Nancy.

Nancy
Every semester in the Writing Center we see maybe a thousand personal statements written by students who are applying to grad school, law school, med school, to the Business School, to the Nursing School, and on and on, and there are no clear rules laying out what a personal statement should look like. Each school and each department seems to have its own set of expectations when it reads these personal statements. So, did you get a sense what the School of Journalism was looking for?

Mike
You know, I think I did. Last month I went to Vilas Hall to talk to Robert Schwoch, who sits on the admissions committee at the J-School. I’ll let him introduce himself:

Bob
Well, I’m Robert Schwoch. I’m the undergraduate advisor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications. I coordinate the admissions process, I serve on the admissions committee, and the advisors sort of coordinate the admissions process on behalf of the chair. We do sort of a lot of the nuts and bolts of the gathering of the applications and the sending out of acceptances, and I’m one of the people on the committee who reads the applications every term. So, yeah, I’ve seen a lot of them.

Section 2: Who Are the Readers?
Mike
How many applications do you get each term, and who reads them?

Bob
We get usually between 250 and 300 applications for 100 spots. There’s six of us on the committee: 4 professors and the undergraduate advisor—that’s me—and the student services coordinator, who also helps with advising. So it’s 2 advisors and 4 professors. What we do is we divide up into groups of 2, so there’s 3 groups of 2 people on the committee, and we each read a third of the applications. So every application is read, at first, by two people, and the way that goes is if both those people recommend Yes for admission then you’re in the yes pile; if both those people recommend No for admission you get a rejection. If they split, essentially it goes to a second set of readers and they have to both say Yes for the student to get in. So you need 2 out of 2 or 3 out of 4 is basically what you need to get in— to get recommended to get in, I should say, because at the end we usually wind up having recommended a few more students than we can admit and we have to winnow at the end.

SECTION 3: WHAT ROLE DOES THE PERSONAL STATEMENT PLAY IN THE APPLICATION?

Mike
Those readers are going to be looking at not just the personal statement that we’re interested in here, but also a transcript, a resume, and then a combination of writing sample and letter of recommendation. What role does the personal statement play in that pile?

Bob
It’s the most important thing in the application because, first of all, criteria-wise, writing skill is what we look at first, grades are second, and third would be of the three big criteria any prior experience, extra-curricular or pre-professional, you might have in the journalism or strategic communication fields. But the writing skill is first, though, and the personal statement is the one thing you are writing original for us and so we scrutinize it very carefully it’s only one page single-spaced and we do that on purpose because journalism and strategic communications are about taking big gobs of information and boiling them down into short, easy to understand bites for other people and so we’re making you do with that personal statement what you’re expected to do in these professions.

We purposely don’t put any real specific guidelines so we’re making it as broad as we can to see what kinds of choices the students make. That writing sample is usually the first thing I will read when I pick up a file. I’ll read the personal statement and if the personal statement is bad I won’t even read the rest of the application, sometimes, because I just know that that’s going to be a No.

What I’ll do is actually—I don’t know if I’ll spend 10 minutes with it but I’ll refer back to it—it’ll be on the side of—when I have it at my desk it will be on the side at all times and I’ll keep looking back at it—I want to see proof of what the person’s saying in the statement and other places in the application I want to see that that’s being echoed. If they say they have had a love of reporting, if they say they’ve always wanted to be a reporter, I want to see that in their resume, I want to see capable writing in the writing sample, and I want to
see that they’ve taken the sorts of courses that will prepare them for what they’re saying they want to do in the statement. So the statement—I’m sure I spend a good 5 minutes reading it and reading it very carefully, but I will probably spend a lot of time in the rest of the 15 or 20 minutes I spend with that application going back to it.

SECTION 4: WHAT DOES A GOOD PERSONAL STATEMENT LOOK LIKE?

Mike
All right, good, so it sounds like you are looking at the personal statement as evidence of how well the student can write and also as sort of a key to the larger application, to give a sort of narrative to the applicant’s transcript.

Bob
I think it sort of depends on how the student came to this point. I sort of see two kinds of application statements: one is the ‘I was born to this, and I was the kid who ran around the dinner table when I was 5 with a pretend microphone and interviewed all my parents’ friends’; or the epiphany statement, where something happened recently—I was charged with doing X for such and such an organization, or I had this opportunity in an internship, and I realized ‘Wow, maybe this is the career for me’ and I checked it out more. So it depends on how much of a life story you’re drawing on for this decision to apply. And there’s a lot of leeway in there to be either journalistic and straightforward or to be really creative. I always say that the creative statement is sort of the high risk, high reward—when it works it works big, and in every admissions process there are just a handful of students who really write a creative, interesting essay and it by itself almost gets them into the J-School. But a lot of students who try to do something like the life story, or the personal statement that looks like something else, that looks like an obituary, or that looks like a news story—we get a lot of that, a lot of students will write a news story about themselves—things like that, they usually fall flat because they usually don’t give us enough information. They don’t give us what we need.

Mike
And what is it, then, that you need? What kind of evidence are you reading for?

Bob
One thing I tell the students, overarching, about our application project: when I went to the J-School 20, 25 years ago we had an entrance exam—we didn’t do a portfolio admissions process. It was called the JUT, it was a big fearsome 100-question test, and your score on that multiplied by your grades got you in or out, and we just cut it off at however many people. What I think the J-School found over time is that we were getting a lot of students who were qualified to be in the School of Journalism, but they weren’t suited for it. They didn’t look like journalists, they didn’t walk and talk like journalists, they didn’t enjoy it. And so the J-School a few years ago decided to go to this more holistic application process where you show us not only are you smart enough but it’s just going to be something that really fits you. And that’s what I tell students to keep in mind the entire application: show us why you’re a journalist, why you’re a PR professional, why you’re an advertising professional. What about you—what about your background, what about your experience, what about your personality—just screams these fields? And that’s the safest
way to go about the statement—that’s the safest—just a ‘why this’ sort of statement.

Mike
So you’re reading a couple of hundred of these statements each process. How many of them do you eventually accept?

Bob
We accept about 40%, maybe even a little less, per term. Over time, because you can reapply, we accept about 60% over time, so 60% of the students at this University who want to be journalism majors eventually become journalism majors. But, be that as it may, in any given process we’re going to rejecting more than half the people, so you want to really be showing what’s unique about you and really distinguish you. You don’t want to be part of the crowd in our admission process, because we’re rejecting the crowd. You want to be setting yourself apart from the crowd.

I tell the students to, at every point along the way, ask themselves not only are they fulfilling the general sort of theme they’ve chosen, but how many other students could say exactly what they’re saying at every step of the way? And if you’re writing a sentence where you think half the other applicants could say the exact same thing, don’t say that, or say it in such a way that ties to you uniquely—something in your experience, some detail about you or in your life. Tie it to that so you’re saying something in a way, at least, that no other person in the pool could say it.

Mike
If I’m a student, I’m one of—I know—250 or 300 applicants, but how do I know what the other students are writing? What are the basic clichés of the personal statement?

Bob
‘I’ve always wanted to be a journalist.’ We want to know that if that’s the case, but it’s one thing to say ‘I’ve always wanted to be a journalist’; it’s another thing to say ‘When I was in 5th grade, they put me in charge of the little mimeographed class newspaper. And, you know, not everybody’s going to have that exact same experience. Then talk about that, and then talk about something later in such a way that it could only have happened to you. Details is really what makes it. You don’t want to be general. You can have general themes, you can have a general outline in your head, but you want to flesh it out with specific details from your life and your background, and that’s what really succeeds.

Mike
What happens if I’m a student and I realize that I really respect journalism—I’ve read a lot of journalism, have maybe taken J201 but have never done any actual work as a journalist. Is that a barrier? Is that a problem?

Bob
I tell the students we’re not looking to certify journalists; we’re here to train them—we don’t expect anybody to be a journalist when they get here. It’s great if they have some prior experience: high school newspaper, or it can be, on the strategic communications side, it can be anything as basic as being the PR person for your sorority, or have you done
anything publicity-wise for a student organization. But even if you don’t have that, we want to see evidence that you’re the sort of person personality-wise and background-wise and interest-wise that would fit well into these professions. Are you outgoing? Are you inquisitive? Are you the sort of person who likes to know stuff and likes to know it first? Are you the kind of person who likes to be the one to tell other people things? Are you a communicator? And there’s a lot of ways you can show us that other than experience in the journalism and strategic communications fields.

Mike
So, thinking about other ways of standing out from the crowd of a couple hundred applicants, what if I know exactly what I want to do—if I have a specific job in mind or a specific area in mind? Maybe not water polo correspondent for BBC America or something, but maybe a broad area that I think makes me more specific than other applicants. Does that matter to you what I say at 19?

Bob
At age 19, the people on the committee, we know how hit or miss it is to predict what you’re going to be doing at age 19. I would have told you ‘I’m going to be a sports journalist’—and I was, for 5 years, and then I wasn’t any more because I was burned out of it—I’m in a completely different field of journalism right now. So I think we like specific interests that are strong, but you want to not cross the line into certainty, and you want to show a certain amount of open-mindedness about what you might do. And it’s good to show that you recognize that our training here is broad enough that you can apply it to different things if your A-1 thing doesn’t work out.

I’m always a little bit suspicious of the students whose aspirations are too specific if they’re really high. Like: ‘I want to work for X huge agency in New York.’ You know, number 1 that’s probably not going to happen, and number 2 it just shows to me a certain sort of closed-mindedness. I think it’s great to say that ‘That’s my ambition,’ but to show a little breadth and a little more recognition. To me it’s a mark of maturity that you recognize that you may go down different paths and that other things might interest you too.

Mike
Are there certain underpopulated fields within the School of Journalism that might look a little bit better in a personal statement, or is that something that a student should be thinking about?

Bob
I personally just love it when—and this maybe just a personal bias, though this is definitely an underrepresented field in our graduates—I love it when students have public interest in sort of advocacy-type ambitions, where they want to go sell a cause instead of sell a Hummer. It’s the field that I work in—I’m a consultant in non-profit and political communications, a PR consultant—and I sell causes, and I sell political candidates, and political campaigns, and I’ve never felt like a flack. I’ve been an advocate for people with HIV and AIDS; I’m doing some environmental work, things like that—I love to see that sort of thing. Now you want to be careful not to be too maudlin about that though either; you know, you get the application where sometimes the student seems so public-
interested it doesn’t seem real. So that’s one thing and certainly that’s a field that has unlimited opportunity: non-profit communication and advocacy-type communication. As far as other underrepresented fields, I wish we were seeing more reporting students who were interested in science and health reporting. We don’t see a lot of that and there’s a lot of opportunity there. It’s great for double-majors, and it’s great for anybody who might have started with a science major or a pre-med and wasn’t up to that technically, but still wants to maintain an interest in it.

Mike
Are there common or mistakes that students make in their application personal statements that we haven’t hit on yet?

Bob
The deadly thing is a misspelling in sentence 1, and we see it so much it just shocks me, and I know we’re going to see it again. And so that’s the number 1 thing, and we’ve touched on it, and we’ve touched on being too general. I think that’s pretty much—those are pretty much the biggest things. You want to avoid major errors in spelling and usage and you want to avoid being too general.

Mike
So there you go, Nancy—a strong personal statement for the J-School is, first, free of mechanical errors, and, second, a strong personal statement is specific, and, third, it explains why an applicant is interested in journalism or strategic communication. Creativity counts a little, as does extra-curricular and pre-professional experience or a specific sense of what you want to do with the degree, but the main role of the personal statement is to prove that you’re a good writer with a clear motive for applying to the School.

Nancy
So, Mike, I have to ask this: what can applicants do to make sure that they are avoiding cliché and writing the best personal statement possible?

Mike
Why, come to the Writing Center, of course! You know, Robert told me that the personal statement is the one part of the application that advisors in the J-School won’t look at. But hundreds of personal statements come through the Writing Center every semester, so our instructors have a lot of experience working with them.

Nancy
And the way to do that is currently-enrolled UW-Madison students can call us at 263-1992 to schedule an appointment, or they can drop in at any one of our eight locations around campus. Go to www.wisc.edu/writing and click on “Locations” for more details.

I’m Nancy Linh Karls—

Mike
and I’m Mike Shapiro—

Nancy
from the Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin Madison, wishing you happy writing.