Summarize Your Life in 150 Words (or Less)

Career Development

My son is applying to college.

If your child recently applied to a US university, that simple statement probably made your hair stand on end. The application process for higher education in the United States is daunting, dramatic, and dismal.

When I applied to college years ago — using an old typewriter that would constantly jam and apply two letters on the same space — the application forms were simple and direct. The only section that required meaningful thought was the “personal statement,” an open white block with room enough to include a short paragraph about my immature worldview.

I barely filled the space allotted. As a teenager, there wasn’t much I could say about life. And that was as it should be.

But today, university applications are very different. Even the “common application,” an online unified form that is supposed to make the process easier, is a demanding ordeal. The real difference, however, is the array of special statements: essays and observation required by the schools, each one a bit different. Applicants still have a personal statement, but each school is permitted to add its own special questions and essay topics for its particular application.

Here are just a few examples:

- Describe a life-changing ordeal that you faced and how it affected you (200 words).
- Provide a transcript of your Nobel Prize acceptance speech (250 words).
- You have just discovered the grand unifying theory of physics. Describe it in layperson’s

terms (150 words).

These are paraphrased examples, but I am not exaggerating. Of course, there are some exceptionally creative essay topics. The one I liked the best was this: “Assume that evolution took a different path and vegetables are now the dominant life form on Earth. Which species of vegetable are you and why (200 words)?”

I may have miscopied that last one, but you get the idea. Modern college applications are esoteric and exacerbating. Has every high school senior today faced a “life-changing ordeal” or considered the relationship between quantum and Newtonian physics? Was my childhood just exceptionally boring?

The most challenging parts of the application essays and statements, however, are the word limits. Most are very short, often with a permitted maximum of a few hundred words. Apparently university admissions officers want applicants to write about the most odd and confusing topics, but they don’t want to spend much time reading the answers.

And I think I know why. Of course, one possible reason is because normal human beings can only read so much high school drivel before losing their minds. But the real reason, I believe, is that universities want to see if a prospective student can write something, anything, in a concise way.

Most of us have not mastered the art of brevity. And it is not something with which you are born, or even taught. The ability to speak and write in a clear, cogent, and concise manner requires diligence, careful thought, and attention. It is difficult.

Recall the famous quote adapted from the French mathematician, Blaise Pascal: “I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have time.”

Efficient communication is hard work. It takes deliberate concentration to ensure that each paragraph, sentence, and word serves a useful purpose. And if you are a university admissions officer — looking for the most eager, effective, and hardest working student — you would be smart to consider how well each applicant writes when brevity is required. Most students find it easier to write a 1,000-word essay than a 200-word paragraph.

But it’s not just students. Lawyers face the same challenge. There is a reason why appellate courts around the world limit the number of pages in submitted briefs. Busy executives ask for short notes and “one page memos” because they know if we are given the leash and license to write more, we will.

So my recommendation is that we think of our everyday business communication the way our kids think about college applications: Can I get my point across and sound intelligent in as few words as possible?

If we cannot communicate with brevity, we won’t be accepted.

Bill Mordan

General Counsel and Company Secretary

Shire PLC