Journal of English for Academic Purposes 21 (2016) 48–59

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of English for Academic Purposes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap

'Singing your tune': Genre structure and writer identity in personal statements for doctoral applications☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 30 March 2015
Received in revised form 3 November 2015
Accepted 13 November 2015
Available online 27 November 2015

Keywords:
Personal statement
Genre analysis
PhD admission
Institutional context
Writer self-representation
Writer identity

ABSTRACT

Personal Statements are considered as an academic promotional genre that students will usually have to compose as part of their application for graduate study. Yet, relatively little research has explored this type of text across institutional contexts. The present study looks into the personal statement and also explores the perspectives of writers who composed these texts in the context of PhD admissions. The text data were drawn from 21 PhD students at one UK- and one US-based university with the aim to explore rhetorical patterns of structure of the student personal statements following genre analysis. Student interviews were used to complement the results of text analysis to better understand how they present and position themselves in their texts. The findings reveal that the rhetorical moves and the discoursal construction of writer identity are associated with their sense of writer positioning, sensitivity to target audience, and the context for this act of writing. The findings have implications not only for writing pedagogy but also for future research to investigate the different and often implicit features of the personal statement across different disciplines, programmes, and institutional contexts.

1. Introduction

The Personal Statement has been referred to as a type of academic promotional genre in admissions (Brown, 2005). It serves as a part of the application for admission to higher education institutions in which applicants are often expected to convey personal information such as their motivation about the course and relevant experience that make them suitable to study at the target institution. Most postgraduate university applications require applicants to submit personal statements along with other application documents. For example, for doctoral applications submitted to US-based universities, students are usually required to submit their personal statement, application form, a resume, letters of recommendation, transcripts of their undergraduate degree(s), an official copy of their standardised test scores for the GRE (Graduate Record Examination) and, if they are international applicants (with the exception of those who hold an undergraduate degree from a university where English is the primary language of instruction), they will also need to submit their IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) results. For doctoral applications submitted to UK-based universities, students are often asked to submit their application form, a personal statement that is often incorporated as part of the application form, research proposal, references, transcripts of each academic degree(s), and IELTS or TOEFL scores.

☆ The handling of the editorial process for this paper was completed by Professor Hamp-Lyons.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2015.11.001
1475-1585/

Although some of the books and websites have provided useful tips and advice on writing the personal statement, authentic and discipline-specific statements are relatively difficult to obtain as applicants do not have an open access to graduate student application documents (Barton & Brown, 2004). Indeed, the personal statement has been considered as an example of 'occluded genres' that are "typically hidden, 'out of sight' or 'occluded' from the public gaze by a veil of confidentiality" (Swales, 1996, p. 46). Few studies on the personal statement have adopted a genre-based move-step analysis and revealed various rhetorical features in personal statements across different programmes of study (e.g., Barton, Ariail, & Smith, 2004; Bekins, Huckin, & Kijak, 2004; Ding, 2007; Samraj & Monk, 2008). Although the existing studies have provided valuable insights into disciplinary epistemological assumptions, few studies, if any, appear to have focused on the conventions associated with the personal statement across institutional contexts. Also, compared with the undergraduate study via the Common Application in the US and the UCAS system in the UK, and its filtering processes, there is no nation-wide system of applications and admissions for postgraduate studies. This present study hence looks into the successful personal statements in the context of PhD admissions to education programmes in one UK- and one US-based universities. To better understand the intentions and meanings students bring to the act of writing, the perspectives of student writers who composed these statements are also investigated to complement the results of text analysis.

2. Discoursal construction of writer identity in the personal statement

The personal statement, like many other academic promotional genres such as prize applications, thesis acknowledgements, and bio statements, is concerned with what Hyland (2012) called 'self-aggrandisement'. To take thesis acknowledgements for example, it is argued that "they not only offer an opportunity to give credit to institutions and individuals who have contributed to their thesis in some way ['thanking move'], but are also a means of establishing a claim to a scholarly identity" (Hyland, 2012, p. 72). In this sense, the kind of reflective and promotional genres are not only practiced as merely a means of revealing personal information and presenting ideas, but also of strategically creating meanings, and constructing certain writer identities in the way it can be seen as credible and valid to those whose judgements we value (Hyland, 2011).

Given the purpose of the personal statement in admissions, it can be argued that applicants may strive to present and position themselves in the way that the admissions committee would desire. As such, the personal statement can be seen as a means of self-representation and self-identification. For instance, Brown (2004) revealed that "successful applicants [to a doctoral psychology programme in the US] tend to project their future research endeavours and demonstrating their commitments to scientific epistemology" (p. 242). In other words, the successful applicants dedicated more space to emphasise their identity as a research scientist than the rejected candidates. Ding (2007) also found from academics at two US-based medical schools that successful personal statements usually "go beyond a basic desire to help people" as accounts such as 'I enjoy helping people' may be considered as a kind of cliché (p. 372). Instead, the academics preferred to read about applicant's intellectual capacity for achievement and commitment to medicine/dentistry as a physician/dentist. Being compassionate may therefore be expected and medical applicants should also demonstrate academic as well as professional identities. The personal statement genre is also related to other promotional genres. For instance, in his work on the prize application genre, Hyland (2012) revealed that applicants tend to construct their identities as a competent academic and disciplinary insider through moves such as the accounts of disciplinary values and demonstration of research expertise. Here the personal statement for university applications and prize applications can be seen as 'colonies' of promotional genres (Bhatia, 2004) in that they share a broad communicative purpose: a promotional intent. Bhatia (2004) further stated that although genres may share some general communicative purposes, "most of them will be different in a number of other respects, such as their disciplinary and professional affiliations, contexts of use and exploitations, participant relationships, audience constraints and so on" (p. 57). As such, it can be inferred that variations can be enacted within the colony of promotional genres in accordance with situated contexts where the genre is practised and generated.

In the context of postgraduate university applications, the personal statements are usually short in length (around 750 words) and so applicants have to carefully consider what content to include as well as how to best present themselves. As Bekins et al. (2004, p. 56) put it:

> [It is] the promotion of oneself through discourse in structured and selective content, reflective of the common ground between the writer and the discourse community's epistemology, ideology, as well as kairos (rhetorical timing).

This view signifies the importance of portraying their positive relevant selves in text (Bhatia, 1993) as admissions tutors may wish to see particular identities that fit with the epistemological orientation within their specific academic discourse community (Chiu, 2015). A writer's way of conveying himself/herself in writing is in part associated with what Ivanič (1998) termed as 'discoursal self' in that it concerns "the immediate social context in which the writing takes place, particularly the way in which writers' representations of self are shaped, nurtured or constrained by their anticipation of known or imagined reader(s)" (p. 215). In other words, the discourse characteristics of a particular piece of writing may shape writer positioning in terms of the way they wish to sound. For instance, writers may be happily willing to 'own' an aspect of identity called 'aspiring selves' which are temporarily constructed in writing to fulfil a particular communicative purpose even though it is not a writer's genuine self-reflection and has not yet been embodied in them at the time of writing (Ivanič, 1998; see also Handel, 1987 – 'prospective self'). This speaks to the unstable and inconsistent nature of writer identity, which is a continuous (re)constructing process. This is especially the case when the power of readers overshadows that of the writers, as in the case of admissions where 'rhetorical paradox' (Paley, 1996) and 'inherent imbalance of knowledge' (Brown, 2004) occur as