

Dear U.S. Institutional Representative for the Rhodes Scholarships:

The Warden of Rhodes House, Oxford, joins me to inform you of modest changes in United States Rhodes Scholarships application rules which may however force a significant change in some university and applicant practices. The changes, effective for this year's competition, are made to implement more effectively the intent of our longstanding requirement that the personal essay be the personal work of the applicant.

For many years, we have required U.S. applicants to attest, with their signature, that their required essays are their "own work." But it has become apparent that this attestation is not taken as we have intended. Many essays are now edited extensively and repeatedly by advisors, fellowship offices, university instructors, family and others. We are no longer confident that the essays reflect the writing ability and style of the applicants, nor, even more important, that they reflect accurately applicants' true personal goals, values and aspirations. Many essays have become formulaic and predictable, mirroring what we presume is a general, albeit mistaken picture of what a "good" Rhodes essay should look like. There is no such model.

The essay is however a critical element in our review. In an age of grade inflation and resume burnishing, the essay – and the unassisted and candid letters we directly solicit from referees – are very important ingredients in our effort to make a fair assessment against our criteria of selection. Moreover, non-formulaic, non-standard essays, clearly in an applicant's own words, often come across as fresh and compelling to Selection Committees. We cannot make sound decisions regarding whom to interview without reliance on the authenticity of the essay and letters of recommendation.

Accordingly, effective for the U. S. Rhodes Scholarship competition in 2014 for Oxford entry in 2015, we are modifying our procedures in the following way:

1) We will ask all applicants to add the following statement at the conclusion of their essay and before their signature:

"I attest that this essay is my own work and is wholly truthful. Neither it nor any earlier draft has been edited by anyone other than me, nor has anyone else reviewed it to provide me with suggestions to improve it. I understand that any such editing or review would disqualify my application."

No application will be considered if the applicant does not make such a certification. And, as now, this attestation will not count in the essay word limit.

2) We will ask that your institutional endorsement include something explicitly to this effect:

"I am knowledgeable regarding the institutional practices of [name of institution] in connection with applications for the Rhodes Scholarship. To the best of my knowledge and belief, [name of institution] has provided no editorial review of the applicant's [or applicant's name] essay."

No application will be considered if the Institutional Endorsement does not include this certification.

We know that many colleges and universities ask for applicants' essays as part of their endorsement review. If yours does, please understand that it is our expectation that your institution will provide no individual counsel to students regarding how those essays might be improved.

We believe that efforts made by institutions to identify outstanding candidates, to encourage them to consider opportunities such as those afforded by the Rhodes Scholarships (and by many other fellowships as well), to explain the rules, to direct students to available factual information, and to fortify students' self-confidence and broaden their horizons and ambitions, are of inestimable value. We also greatly appreciate your efforts to explain to some of your faculty that the letters we solicit are different from and require more care than many others they might be asked to write for students. And we do not dispute that arranging for a mock interview might be a valuable experience for a student for many reasons beyond success in a Rhodes interview. Finally, your efforts to distill and communicate the strengths of your candidates in your endorsements are often invaluable, especially when you are able to do so in a manner that we find especially credible, not exaggerated, or when you are unafraid to tell us how strong the student is relative to others in your institution that year or from previous years. Endorsements of some institutions make it appear that all those endorsed in a district, or even across the country, are equally strong against our criteria, which make them substantially less valuable. We may not necessarily agree with your relative assessments, and we don't require that you provide such, but we do often find them helpful.

In the final analysis, it is our judgment that few if any Rhodes applicants win the Scholarship because of the extent of assistance they receive in their applications.

This in no way diminishes however the great appreciation we have for the critical roles you play. We simply ask by this amplification of our existing policy that we have stronger assurances that personal essays are the work of the applicants alone and without benefit of any assistance.

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We would also like to alert you to concerns our selectors have increasingly expressed relating to transcripts and grade distributions. We applaud those institutions that have set policies in recent years to combat grade inflation, e.g., by encouraging faculty to distribute A grades to no more than a moderate percentage of a class. When transcripts declare and reflect such policies, we believe it works to the advantage of outstanding students at those institutions. As you might imagine, most of the transcripts we see are now almost indistinguishable in a quantitative sense. We are thus considering asking institutions for grade distribution information, but knowing how small we are, do not think it likely that many institutions could provide this information unless many other organizations make similar requests. That day may come however. In the meantime, know that if your institution does set and follow strong grade guidelines, we would like to know about them, if not on your transcripts perhaps in your endorsement letters.

Thank you very much for your attention to these matters, and as always good luck to your candidates.

Sincerely,



Elliot F. Gerson
American Secretary of the Rhodes Trust



Charles Conn
Warden of Rhodes House, CEO of the Rhodes Trust