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“Ensure That You Stand Out from the Crowd”: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Personal Statements according to Applicants’ School Type

STEVEN JONES

Many nations make use of a “personal statement” (or equivalent) in their higher education admissions system. This article examines how statements differ according to applicants’ educational background. Among the indicators used are fluency of expression, quantity and quality of workplace experience, and extracurricular activity. Findings point to major variation among statements composed by equal-attainment applicants: a broader range of social and cultural capital is drawn on by privately educated young people. Ramifications stretch beyond admissions policy in the United Kingdom, where this study was located, not least because of claims that nonacademic indicators of potential, such as the personal statement, bring greater fairness to university admissions processes. No support for this position is found.

Introduction

A key objective for all nations’ higher education admissions agencies is to maintain the highest possible academic standards while ensuring that no applicant is disadvantaged by his or her socioeconomic background. This article reports on a case study from the United Kingdom, where attention is increasingly being focused on nonacademic indicators, such as the personal statement. A key government white paper has acknowledged “good evidence that, for some students, exam grades alone are not the best predictor of potential to succeed at university” (Department of Business, Innovation, and Skills 2011, 58), and the United Kingdom’s minister of state for universities and science, David Willetts, has urged admissions tutors to identify applicants “with the greatest academic potential, even if that’s been hidden by poor quality schooling” (Willetts 2011).¹ Two premises underpin this logic: first, that some students receive more favorable pre-18 educational opportunities

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¹ In the United Kingdom, a white paper is an authoritative report that summarizes consultation ahead of new laws being passed.

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than others and that prior attainment might therefore not be the truest measure of ability; second, that undergraduates from less advantaged educational backgrounds, once at university, outperform peers from more advantaged backgrounds who achieved the same grades. The first premise is indisputable: school type is a major determinant of examination success in the UK system, as shown by, among others, David Powis, David James, and Eamonn Ferguson (2007) in relation to tariff scores.² The second premise is disputed by some (e.g., Parks 2011) but supported by the findings of several studies (cf. Smith and Naylor 2005; Ogg et al. 2009; Hoare and Johnston 2011). If these premises hold, uncontextualized academic attainment is an insufficient criterion against which to judge students' potential. Furthermore, the introduction of higher fees at UK universities will widen the participation gap by social background further if, as commentators such as Claire Callender and Jonathan Jackson (2005) and Kristin Voigt (2007) suggest, the prospect of increased debt disproportionately deters young people of low socioeconomic status from applying.³

The use of nonacademic indicators in the admissions process has long been advocated—for example, both Steven Schwartz (2004) and Alan Milburn (2012) recommended that universities assess applicants “holistically.” However, such indicators are rarely subjected to close scholarly research. This study focuses on one of the most commonly used nonacademic indicators, the “free response” statement, in which applicants are given autonomy to describe themselves and how well suited they are to the universities or programs for which they are applying. In the United Kingdom, this is known as a “personal statement”; elsewhere, terms such as “admissions essay,” “application essay,” “statement of purpose,” and “autobiographical letter” are used.⁴ Previous research into the personal statement has generally assessed the degree to which it is an accurate predictor of future performance (GlenMaye and Oakes 2002; Brown 2004). Typical research questions have been “What makes a good personal statement?” and “Does a good personal statement make a good student?” This article, by contrast, asks two new questions: “Do personal statements differ according to the educational background of the applicant?” and “Do personal statements increase or decrease fairness in the admissions process?”

The data set is a corpus of 309 personal statements, all submitted to a

² Tariff scores are numeric representations of post-16 qualifications, including the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A-level), which is offered by educational institutions in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Up to five A-levels are taken over 2 years, usually when the student is between age 16 and 18. A-levels are regarded by UK universities as the standard qualification for applicants.

³ In 2012, the maximum fee that UK universities could charge was £9,000 (US\$14,514), up from a maximum of £3,375 (US\$5,443) in 2011.

⁴ Not every country's admissions agencies demand a free response submission, but they are a requirement in the United Kingdom and commonplace in the United States. See Jones (forthcoming) for a cross-national perspective.

UK Russell Group university by applicants of very similar academic attainment, and each tagged according to the applicant's school type.⁵ Linguistic analysis is undertaken first, focusing on differences in spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation. The analysis then becomes more content driven, as personal statements are examined in terms of work-related activity and extracurricular activity. Pierre Bourdieu's "thinking tools" (2000) of field, habitus, and capital are used throughout. The arena of practice (field) is the admissions process, applicants' dispositions and tastes (habitus) are revealed through the personal statement, and the assets staked (capital) include hobbies, writing fluency, and workplace experience. In terms of linguistic competence and style, Bourdieu drew a contrast between "the language of the pupils of the elite schools" (2000, 76) and that found in William Labov's (1972) study of Harlem adolescents. The latter, Bourdieu claimed, although "inventive and colourful," was "totally devoid of value on the educational markets" (2000, 76). In terms of content, the symbolic effects of different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1997) are noted to help explain why higher education applicants construct their personal statement (and therefore themselves) in different ways. Following Anna Zimdars's (2010) suggestion that selectors may subconsciously recruit in their own image, particular attention is paid to evidence of applicants' "dispositions to be, and above all to become, 'one of us'" (Bourdieu 2000, 100).

Within research on higher education access and widening participation activity, Bourdieu's work is regularly drawn on (Reay et al. 2005; Byrom 2010). It is particularly salient for this investigation because it exposes the means by which social class structures are reinforced and reproduced.⁶ Unlike earlier investigations, this case study focuses not on young people's inclinations to enter higher education but on the symbolic capital exchanged as part of the application process itself. Consequences, therefore, stretch far beyond UK educational policy. Balancing attainment with potential is a challenge for admissions systems around the globe, and debates continue about how potential is best assessed and recognized.⁷ With tensions between academic and nonacademic indicators rising, and the burden of higher education funding increasingly shifted from the state to the individual participant, this article demonstrates how one key nonacademic indicator, assumed by many to enhance fairness, may actually have the opposite effect.⁸

⁵ The Russell Group is a collection of 24 leading, research-driven UK higher education institutions, akin to the Ivy League grouping in the United States.

⁶ The methods used here recall Bourdieu's (1996) study of prizewinners in competitive examinations for French students.

⁷ See sociologist Mitchell Stevens (2007) for a discussion of selective institutions of higher education in the United States.

⁸ Collins Byrd, assistant dean of admissions, University of Iowa College of Law, describes the personal statement as "the only place where an applicant can tell us what she really thinks we need to know about her, and coming to us in an unfiltered, straightforward way" (2007). In contrast, according to Geoff Parks, director of admissions at Cambridge University colleges, "with the profusion of companies

This article begins with a discussion of the different ways in which applicants' aptitude is recognized in higher education admissions processes. I then summarize previous research into the role and usefulness of personal statements and explain the data collection and analysis methods used here. Finally, key findings are presented and evaluated.

Fairness and Merit in the University Admissions Process

Issues relating to fairness and merit have long been an area of controversy in the United Kingdom. In 2003, Bristol University acted on internal research showing that students from less advantaged backgrounds performed better at university than those with identical A-level results from more advantaged backgrounds, by making slightly lower entry offers to promising applicants who were attending lower-performing schools (see Leathwood 2004).⁹ A furor followed, in which representatives of the United Kingdom's leading private schools called for a boycott of Bristol University, and the *Daily Mail*'s Melanie Phillips accused universities of "rigging the system against the middle classes" (2003). Pupils would now need to attend a "sink" school to get priority for a university place, she argued.¹⁰ The policy was "the very antithesis of meritocracy."

Meritocracy, however, was precisely the term used by David Willetts, the minister of state for universities and science, in April 2011 when arguing that "what universities have to be able to do is to look beyond the headline A-level grades to what that individual's potential might be. Universities have to be meritocratic" (Hope 2011). The issue of meritocracy is not one addressed directly here; rather, the focus is on the nonacademic ways of assessing potential to which Willetts refers. Details of these indicators have never been clearly set out, but when interviewed by the *Daily Telegraph* in 2010, Willetts said, "British universities have always looked beyond A-level grades to other things such as applicants' CVs, personal statements and their potential to benefit from a particular course. As long as it is done in a very transparent way, these sorts of schemes have the potential to identify talented young people who can really benefit from higher education" (Paton 2010). The three indicators listed by Willetts—the applicant's CV (curriculum vitae), the personal statement, the potential to benefit from a particular course—each require closer scrutiny. First, the CV is something of a red herring. In the United Kingdom, university applicants do not submit a personal CV, as such; rather, they complete a number of mandatory fields in their application form

and websites offering to help applicants' personal statements for a fee, no admissions tutor believes [the personal statement] to be the sole work of the applicant any more" (Shepherd 2009).

⁹ Bristol University is a member of the Russell Group. In the United Kingdom, the admissions process begins before A-levels are completed. Universities make offers to individual applicants (to achieve a minimum set of grades, usually across three A-levels), and entry depends on the applicant meeting the conditions of their offer.

¹⁰ "Sink" is British journalistic slang for schools in deprived areas that are poorly resourced.

relating to the schools and colleges they attended, their academic qualifications, and their relevant work experience. No opportunity is given for applicants to develop this information, and most fields are character limited (the job description field, for example, is capped at 35 characters, barely enough for applicants to state the title of any post). The third of Willetts's indicators, the "potential to benefit from a particular course," is similarly restricted. Again, no opportunity is currently provided for applicants to explain why they have chosen to apply for an individual program or why they might be particularly well suited to it, other than through the personal statement.

It is this reliance on the personal statement as an indicator of potential, and as a possible means to level the admissions playing field, that requires critical attention. If the personal statement is a legitimate way to sift high-potential applicants from similarly qualified peers, and especially if it cuts through more rigid attainment indicators such as A-level grades, it is a very appropriate tool in the widening-participation-conscious admission tutor's repertoire. However, because symbolic capital is not evenly distributed (Bourdieu 2000), the danger is that some applicants become further advantaged by the admissions process itself.¹¹

Previous Investigations of the Personal Statement

Despite up to half a million personal statements being written each year in the United Kingdom alone, the genre remains largely overlooked in scholarly discourse (GlenMaye and Oakes 2002; Brown 2004). When the personal statement is examined, the focus is usually restricted to the selection of medical students or social work students (James and Chilvers 2001; Hawkins 2004; Lumb and Vail 2004). More recently, attention has been given to the "diversity essay," an indicator used by some US colleges and universities that requires applicants to outline the personal qualities that they bring to a program (Kirkland and Hansen 2011).¹² Studies in related fields have also examined the usefulness of emotional intelligence measures (Carr 2009) and intellectual aptitude tests (McManus et al. 2005) in the admissions process.¹³

When personal statements have been examined, evidence of their helpfulness in the admissions process has not always emerged. For example,

¹¹ The Sutton Trust notes that "despite the growth in [UK] student numbers, the likelihood of a young person from a low income or non-privileged home studying at a leading university has hardly changed in the last fifteen years" (2010, 3). See also Harris (2010) and Boliver (2011).

¹² Kirkland and Hansen (2011) explore submissions to the University of Michigan. Essays on diversity can form part of the Common Application, which is used for undergraduate admissions by most leading US universities and colleges. Students are offered a selection of "prompts" (McGinty 2012) and can interpret "diversity" as they choose, through geographical location or political affiliation, for example, as well as through class or race. See also Rochetti (2004), reporting on "affirmative action" admissions policy at the University of Rio de Janeiro.

¹³ The motivation for many previous studies of the personal statement has been to ensure that a particular admissions process is sufficiently transparent for universities to avoid litigation.

Eamonn Ferguson et al. (2000) took 176 UK medical students, coded their personal statements into “information categories,” tracked the students over 1 year, and then rated them on 21 measures of academic attainment (observations, exams, essays, etc.) and a five-factor model of personality. Their conclusion was that “neither the personal statement information categories nor the amount of information in personal statements were found to be predictive of future performance” (321). Similar findings were reported by William Pelech et al. (1999), GlenMaye and Oakes (2002), and Norman (2004).¹⁴ Norman found the use of the “autobiographical letter” to be “highly dubious,” comparing the randomness of selecting students in this way with a “professional crap shoot” (81).

Although the ways in which the personal statement may be related to the educational background of the applicant have largely been overlooked in scholarly research, they have not escaped the attention of journalists and media commentators. Under the headline “How Universities Close the Door on the Working Class,” the *Observer*’s Barbara Ellen wrote, “Certain applicants (middle class; in good, focused, mostly private, schools; with clued-up parents) are much more likely to be able to ‘speak uni.’ By which I mean ‘decode’ the foreign language of the university admissions process. Meanwhile, less supported candidates are staggering around in what amounts to a game of educational blind man’s bluff, unused to the terminology, struggling with forms, writing personal statements unaided” (Ellen 2010). Similar sentiments were expressed by Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), the agency responsible for processing admissions in the United Kingdom, which noted that some groups were “particularly vulnerable to poor quality IAG [information, advice, and guidance], for instance those in the widening participation cohort” (2012, 26). Indeed, Diane Reay, Miriam David, and Stephen Ball report that what little information working class applicants receive about university is “largely un-influential or, at times, actively unhelpful” (2005, 39).

This article examines how such differences in input are reflected in personal statement composition. The extent to which applicants’ parents are “clued up” cannot be objectively assessed, but comparisons can be made between the ways in which applicants from different backgrounds “decode” the requirements of the process, or in Bourdieu’s terms, are equipped and predisposed to “play the game” (1997, 2000).

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

This research draws on applications made to one department within one UK university for 2010 entry. The host university is a member of the Russell

¹⁴ Like Ferguson et al. (2000), GlenMaye and Oakes (2002) found that “the personal statement was not significantly related to academic success, as measured by GPA at the end of the first year of the program” (70).

Group, and the host department is home to about 10 single honors undergraduate programs and various combinations of those subjects. All disciplines come under a humanities umbrella, and most lean toward social sciences rather than arts.

In total, 5,276 applications for 2010 entry were received by the department in question. For the purposes of this research, all overseas applicants were excluded, as were all applications from mature students (students age 22 and over). Although the characteristics of personal statements produced by these two applicant types would be interesting to explore, the aim of this research is specifically to focus on home students (those whose country of domicile is coded as Great Britain) of traditional participation age.

An important consideration was to control for academic attainment. One would not expect the personal statements produced by low-achieving applicants to be as strong as those produced by higher-achieving applicants. The corpus is therefore composed exclusively of personal statements submitted by students who subsequently achieved A-level grades of BBB (excluding general studies).¹⁵ Final grades were preferred over predicted grades because of the inexactness associated with the latter (Delap 1994; Dhillon 2005; UCAS 2012).

In total, 327 applications for 2010 entry met the above criteria. Each was tagged according to the school type of the applicant: comprehensive school (88), sixth form college (83), grammar school (45), and private school (93).¹⁶ The remaining 18 applications were disregarded either because the school type was unknown or because the institution was a tertiary college, special school, or agricultural college. The corpus created from the personal statements of the 309 applicants contained a total of 196,244 words.¹⁷

Because of the sensitive nature of the text, and because informed consent cannot be retrospectively elicited from applicants, three key measures were taken to ensure anonymity. First, details of the host university and department are not made public; second, applicants' names were deleted at source and UCAS application numbers used thereafter in their place; third, when text from a personal statement is cited, information is omitted or modified to maintain anonymity (including details relating to work experience providers, subjects taken at A-level, school attended, etc.). Note that corpora of poten-

¹⁵ The decision to use BBB is arbitrary. However, selecting a trio of identical grades avoids the need to control for higher achievement in a "preferred" subject (e.g., ABB applicants holding their A in Economics may be considered more academically suitable for an economics degree than ABB applicants holding a B in the subject).

¹⁶ Terminology differs between countries. In the United Kingdom, "comprehensives" are non-selective secondary schools, "sixth form colleges" are specifically for students age 16 or over, "grammar schools" traditionally require pupils to pass an entrance exam at age 11, and "private schools" are fee-paying educational institutions.

¹⁷ This sample size compares favorably with similar investigations of the personal statement. Kirkland and Hansen (2011), for example, examined 176 "free responses"; GlenMaye and Oakes (2002) and Brown (2004) examined 119 and 45, respectively.

tially sensitive material (children's language, doctor-patient interactions, students' essays) are often created for linguistic and sociocultural analysis, and the database used here has been developed as per guidelines outlined in relevant publications (e.g., Childs et al. 2011).

Analyzing the Corpus of Personal Statements

The personal statement is your opportunity to tell universities and colleges about your suitability for the course(s) that you hope to study. You need to demonstrate your enthusiasm and commitment, and above all, ensure that you stand out from the crowd. (UCAS website)

Each applicant is allowed 4,000 characters in which to create a personal statement. The UCAS website (<http://www.ucas.ac.uk>) offers several pages of advice, including a list of dos and don'ts, a how-to video, and a mind map. Snippets of advice are provided from a series of admissions tutors, such as "a representative from Ulster Business School told us: 'The presentation of the personal statement is of critical importance to demonstrate use of English language and grammar at a standard suitable for entry to higher education.'" A number of unaffiliated student websites also offer guidance, and many provide sample personal statements for applicants to consider. In recent years, several how-to books have also appeared on the UK market (Stannard 2008; Telfer 2008; Stewart 2009), offering further help to applicants.¹⁸

In the absence of any standard procedure for investigating personal statements, this study borrows other researchers' criteria when possible and introduces new indicators when necessary. Among the approaches drawn on are GlenMaye and Oakes (2002) and Brown (2004). The extent to which personal statements (especially those composed by applicants of arts and humanities subjects) can be assessed by formal criteria is limited. However, the five broad criteria used in the first of these two studies, which are in turn based on an earlier study by Pelech et al. (1999), structure the analysis presented here. These indicators are writing, work-related activity, commitment, goals, and awareness.

Within this structure, Bourdieu's approach is used to help characterize the composition and content of the personal statements. For example, the level of fluency with which applicants express themselves is construed in terms of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997), as are the extracurricular activities and implicit tastes associated with applicants from different school types. Social capital (Bourdieu 1997; Dekker and Uslaner 2001) takes the form of family networks and personal connections that may help applicants to access work experience (or prevent them from doing so). Most of the analysis below deals with substantive rather than stylistic elements of the personal statements.

¹⁸ Brown notes that the advice offered to applicants tends to be generic (2004, 243).

TABLE 1
PERSONAL STATEMENT DESCRIPTIVES—STATEMENT LENGTH, SENTENCE LENGTH, WORD LENGTH

	Comprehensive School	Sixth Form College	Grammar School	Private School
Sample size	88	83	45	93
Total word count	55,365	51,978	28,951	59,950
Word count per personal statement	629.1	626.2	643.4	644.6
Total sentence count	2,413	2,191	1,145	2,495
Words per sentence	22.94	23.72	25.28	24.03
Character count (not including spaces)	272,191	253,624	142,937	295,864
Characters per word	4.916	4.879	4.937	4.935
Character count (including spaces)	328,028	305,977	171,937	356,249
Characters per personal statement	3,728	3,686	3,821	3,830

However, I begin with a surface indicator, fluency of writing, and from there move to more detailed content analysis.

Writing

This may be your only written work that the course tutor sees before making a decision: make sure it is organised and literate. Get the grammar, spelling and punctuation right. (UCAS website)

The language analysis presented here borrows techniques from the discipline of corpus-based linguistics, in which texts are searched for recurring patterns of use. Basic text searching software was used, accompanied by manual analysis when necessary. Focus is on Standard English, and fluency of expression is gauged by the avoidance of clear mistakes. Prescriptive “rules” of grammar (such as those about splitting infinitives, ending sentences with a preposition, etc.) are not applied, even though some admissions tutors may not respond favorably to applicants flouting such conventions. The analysis aims to be as nonjudgmental as possible, identifying unambiguous, meaning-impairing errors only.

Before presenting a detailed textual analysis, it is informative to look briefly at the macropatterns found in the data. Table 1 records the total word count, sentence count, and character count for each of the four subcorpora. Also shown are the average number of characters per word, words per sentence, and characters per personal statement. Although differences are not always great, a clear trend emerges: the personal statements of private and grammar school applicants are longer than those for comprehensive school and sixth form college applicants; they also contain longer sentences and use longer words.¹⁹

The analysis now turns to the nature of the writing used by individual

¹⁹ Although UCAS warns against “sounding over-formal” and suggests that sentence length be kept to 12–20 words, applicants may believe that longer words and sentences symbolize a wider and more sophisticated vocabulary.

TABLE 2
GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION ERRORS PER 1,000 WORDS, BY SCHOOL TYPE

	Comprehensive School	Sixth Form College	Grammar School	Private School
Apostrophe misuse	.54	.38	.28	.10
Typing and spelling mistakes	1.46	1.65	1.21	.75
Overpunctuation	.38	.46	.21	.17
Ungrammaticality	.14	.42	.14	.05
Sentence boundary errors	.52	.65	.55	.20
Total errors per 1,000 words	3.04	3.56	2.39	1.27

applicants. All personal statements were coded for errors by me and, independently, by a second coder. The examples cited feature erroneous use of English, and a natural first response may be to wonder whether the applicant deserves a place at a top university. To focus exclusively on carelessness within individual personal statements, however, would be to overlook the broader distribution of relevant indicators, which, as will be shown, points clearly toward a correlation with school type. Remember that all of the applicants surveyed are alike in terms of academic attainment. It is therefore difficult to escape the suggestion that those from some school types are receiving higher quality input than others: greater emphasis is being placed on the importance of writing clearly, and practical guidance on expression, spelling, punctuation, and style is more readily available. Table 2 shows the distribution of five key language errors according to school type. A definition of each error type (and the criteria used to diagnose it) is provided below, together with examples from the data.

The first language error examined was apostrophe misuse, and three subtypes were counted: superfluous apostrophes in plurals (“I am re-sitting two *modular’s*”), apostrophe omission in possessives (“the *countries* oldest working Catholic convent”), and failure to understand standard apostrophe rules for it’s/its (“the economy . . . is in *it’s* worst state for many years”). When haziness arose, either because of context or in terms of how the rule should be applied, the apostrophe use was not classed as incorrect.²⁰ Apostrophes after numbers (“in the *1800’s* and ever since”) were also overlooked.

Apostrophe errors arose almost three times more often in the personal statements of comprehensive school and sixth form college applicants than they did in those submitted by grammar and private school applicants. It is not the case that this distribution was exaggerated by a small number of applicants who clearly fail to understand how an apostrophe should be used and therefore make repeated errors. No individual personal statement contained more than three errors, and whereas 93.6 percent of private school

²⁰ For example, in some sentences, it was unclear whether the possession was singular or plural (“I helped ease the *accountants’* general workload”), and, in others, the possessor was a proper noun ending with a sibilant sound (“in *Socrates’* view”).

applicants' personal statements were free of apostrophe errors, the corresponding figure for comprehensive school applicants was only 76.2 percent.

Typing and spelling mistakes were examined next, and for the purpose of this analysis, both American English and British English variants were deemed acceptable. Missing spaces between words were overlooked because some could be the result of electronic formatting problems. Included in this error count were inadvertently repeated words ("an opportunity to learn directly from *the the* experts in this area"), subject-verb disagreement ("*we* came second, out of 12, in the competition and *was* commended by [company name]"), inappropriate capitalization ("the University of my *Choice*"), and singular/plural mismatches ("The Financial Times *is* one of my favorite *newspaper*"). This is in addition to standard spelling/typing errors of the kind exemplified below (COMP = comprehensive school; SFC = sixth form college; GRAM = grammar school; IND = private school):

1. "I have the *deisre*, work rate, motivation and personality to become a *successsful* university student" (COMP).
2. "During my time at College I have had the *oppurtunity* to participate in a Dragon's Den competition that was held by [company name] within all of the business classes at college, this involved designing a marketing strategy for a *poduct* as well as looking at the methods of production and possible methods we could take in order to reduce costs to be able to *competively* operate as a business" (SFC).
3. "Alongside the skills I have already *aquired* at AS level" (GRAM).
4. "[School name] is renowned for its sporting *competiveness*" (IND).

The lowest proportion of typing and spelling errors was found in the subcorpus of private school applicants. These errors tended to be common spelling errors (e.g., "seperate" and "acheivement") rather than typing slips. It should be noted that, as examples 1 and 2 demonstrate, a tendency does arise for typing and spelling errors to cluster. Indeed, one applicant's personal statement alone accounts for 15 of the 83 errors in the sixth form college subcorpus. However, the chance of a personal statement received from a private school applicant being entirely free of typing/spelling errors remains almost double that of one from a sixth form college applicant.

The third indicator examined involves overpunctuation, most typically the midclause insertion of a superfluous semicolon or comma. Examples include:

5. "In addition to; helping me contemplate my life choices" (COMP).
6. "My interest in politics has developed as I enjoyed, looking at the different systems of the UK and the USA" (SFC).

The distribution of overpunctuation errors follows a recognizable pattern.²¹ Although overall frequencies remain small, comprehensive school and sixth form college applicants were found to produce about twice as many errors as their grammar and private school counterparts.

The fourth indicator, ungrammaticality, is a more problematic one. Most modern (descriptive) grammars of English, unlike their traditional (prescriptive) counterparts, simply regard grammar as a system of patterns that enable communication within a given language, and value judgments about correctness are carefully avoided (e.g., Biber et al. 1999). For a context to be labeled ungrammatical in this study, therefore, the conventions of Standard English must be defied to the degree that meaning is obscured, as in examples 7 and 8.

7. "I am particularly looking forward to studying effective marketing will be a topic area that I will particularly enjoy as I find businesses attempts to reach their target audiences interesting" (COMP).
8. "Throughout the course, I've found many of the questions that used to float around in my head were finding" (SFC).

The final indicator involved sentence boundary mistakes, in which sentences do not end in the appropriate place. This can happen for two reasons: first, because a single sentence should be split into two; second, because a pair of adjacent sentences should not have been separated. Example 9 is typical of the former, "run-on" (or splice) sentences in which two independent clauses are connected by only a comma. Example 10 is typical of the latter, "sentence fragments" in which the second sentence contains no main verb and should not stand independently of the first.

9. "I spend my leisure time doing a wide range of sport, I regularly play football, and swim" (SFC).
10. "I dedicated my afternoons off to assisting at the local nursing home. Which was a very touching experience and opened my eyes to yet more members of society being swept under the carpet" (COMP).

This concludes the taxonomy of quantifiable indicators. Although the list is far from exhaustive, and includes only errors that are receptive to quantification, it does provide a strong indication of the school type backgrounds from which applicants are more likely to make avoidable language-based

²¹ Note that the problem of underpunctuation, such as the absence of a comma after an opening conjunction or linking phrase, is not assessed, other than when it contributes to a run-on sentence.

errors.²² The analysis now moves from how applicants write about themselves to the more substantive issue of what they actually say.

Work-Related Activity

The UK higher education admissions system is unusual in the emphasis it places on work-related activity, with applicants advised by UCAS to “include details of jobs, placements, work experience or voluntary work, particularly if it’s relevant to your chosen course(s)” (UCAS website). This section assesses the quantity and the quality of the work-related activity that applicants from different educational backgrounds draw on and looks at how it is described and conceptualized in the personal statement.

Quantity of Work-Related Activity

Even a cursory glance through the corpus of personal statements reveals a disparity in the breadth of opportunities to which applicants from different school types have access. Example 11 mentions six instances of work experience in a single paragraph, and many applicants (from private schools in particular) are able to reel off a long list of high-prestige placements undertaken with a range of sought-after employers. For comprehensive school and sixth form college applicants, however, fewer activities are cited, and often, as in example 12, they take the form of an organized school trip.

11. “As an 18 year old, I have had a variety of short periods of experience in the workings of businesses in today’s financial world. I first became aware of the workings of businesses when, to supplement my savings, I worked for [company name], a designer in London, as a model. . . . I have also worked on the trading floor of a London brokers firm, [company name]. . . . My other work experience thus far includes work with my local BBC radio station, events planning with a corporate 5 star country hotel, and working in the marketing team of a leading City law firm. I have since had a variety of jobs, most recently managing a small gastro pub” (IND).
12. “In Year 11 we were taken on a school trip to Cadbury World to analyse the aspects of the business. During the day we were given a presentation by the workers at Cadbury World who explained how they advertise, produce and promote their new and existing products. I felt this was particularly valuable to my understanding of the business world” (COMP).

One explanation for the broader range of work-related activity reported

²² Nonquantifiable errors include instances of both overformality (“Hence in light of the aforementioned points all advocate my academic and enthusiasm for this course”) and underformality (“Hopefully, I’ll end up with an A, because to be honest I am somewhat of a perfectionist”).

by private school applicants is intimated by examples 13 and 14, both of which evidence the “family mode of [advantage] reproduction” (Bourdieu 1996, 278). Although applicants of all educational backgrounds cite their relatives as an inspiration to enter higher education, those from private schools and, to a lesser extent, grammar schools make explicit the connection between their family contacts and their experience in the workplace.²³

13. “My desire to study business and management was primarily borne whilst visiting my Uncle in America, observing his aircraft brokerage and marketing company, [company name]” (IND).
14. “My father is an entrepreneur who has created and sold a number of successive businesses and I have therefore experienced the multi-faceted world of business first hand. . . . Watching and learning from my father has made me aware of the qualities required by an entrepreneur. . . . I have particularly enjoyed developing my understanding of the global financial crisis. I have achieved this through spending time with my father and his business contacts to try to appreciate how this impacts on everyday commercial issues” (GRAM).

On this topic, Richard Hatcher and Tricia Le Gallais found that students attending schools of high and middle socioeconomic status were able to “utilise family contacts to access work placements in professional workplaces” (2008, 74). Huddleston and Mann (2011) also showed that students at private schools benefited from both the reputation of their school and the networking tentacles of its alumni. They report one teacher at a private school saying, “it’s such a good network through the old boys’ association, and the parents” (slide 15). Indeed, such advantages were explicitly acknowledged by John Hayes, then the UK minister for further education, skills, and lifelong learning, during the second reading of the Further and Higher Education (Access) Bill: “We know that social networks and familial understanding are the basis on which those who are already advantaged cement their advantage. It is not aspiration or ambition but wherewithal that limits working class people from achieving what they might” (Hansard, House of Commons, col. 558, March 4, 2011).

Placing an exact figure on the number of individual work-related activities is difficult because applicants report everything from full-time jobs (“I now currently work as a cleaner Mon–Fri and have done for 7 months”) to internal, school-based initiatives (“In the final GCSE year there was an opportunity for a group of us to manage the school lockers”). However, counts were undertaken (again, by me and, independently, by a second coder), and the division between the two previously identified groupings (private and

²³ Bourdieu notes that strategies to benefit family businesses are “nearly inseparable” from strategies to benefit the family (1996, 278).

grammar schools vs. comprehensives and sixth form colleges) obtained once more. Approximately 3.63 activities per personal statement were mentioned by the former group, compared to 2.97 by the latter. This gap may not seem large; however, as the next section shows, it masks important differences in the nature of these activities.

Quality of Work-Related Activity

When it comes to work-related activity, in addition to having greater social capital, students from higher socioeconomic status schools are “much more likely to undertake responsible tasks and work shadowing, to be treated as a colleague and to receive mentoring in a professional context” (Hatcher and Le Gallais 2008, 74). This finding is reflected regularly in applicants’ personal statements. Those from a private or grammar school background report placements that involve meaningful employer engagement, while many applicants from comprehensive schools and sixth form colleges have only part-time jobs, often in the service industries, to draw on.

15. “My extensive involvement and success in assisting my father in his international telecommunications company shows my ability to handle situations in the real world. Next summer I have been offered a work experience placement to shadow the Pakistani Ambassador to the United Nations, in New York” (IND).
16. “Outside college, I have a part time job as a waitress at a local pub. . . . My job has taught me the meaning of working hard to earn money. It took a lot of strength and perseverance to keep up a demanding job, for little reward. I think these are integral qualities to have” (SFC).

It could be argued that the quantity and, indeed, quality of work experience is not of primary importance in the selection process. A candidate with a plethora of high-status placements is not automatically chosen over a similarly qualified candidate with fewer, lower-status jobs to report; rather, selection is based on how connections are made to the intended course of study. The problem here is that having a wide range of high-quality experiences on which to draw makes connections to the academic requirements of higher education easier to establish. Conversely, as example 17 demonstrates, those applicants with low-prestige work-related activity often project a sense of embarrassment in their personal statement.

17. “I also have a part time job as a drinks waitress working at the [sports stadium]. Even though it’s my job I look forward to my shifts” (SFC).

In example 17, the presupposition encoded by “even though” demands that the reader interpret “my job” negatively. The approach the applicant takes

FIG. 1.—Distribution of work-related activity, coded as “job” or “experience,” by school type

is to emphasize her own alacrity: despite the uninspiring nature of the “shift,” she still looks forward to it. However, many comprehensive school and sixth form college applicants understandably struggle to make meaningful connections between their low-status sources of income and the often high-status degree programs for which they are applying.

Indeed, when all of the work-related activities were subcoded as either a “job” (low-skill, low-prestige, and usually paid) or an “experience” (higher skill, higher prestige, and usually unpaid), the distribution was revealing (fig. 1). While sixth form college applicants were able to report 2.35 “experiences” for every “job” (and comprehensive school applicants, 2.66), grammar school applicants reported 3.85, and private school applicants 5.42.

Figure 1’s differing ratios show that although the total amount of work-related activity reported by applicants is not greatly different, the nature of the activity is. Furthermore, the unpaid “experiences” on which applicants from sixth form colleges and comprehensive schools draw are much more likely to be facilitated (and therefore limited) by their place of education than to emerge through family ties and social capital.

Summary of Work-Related Activity

This section has shown that applicants from private schools are likely to have the widest range of work experience to draw on and that their experiences tend to be in more professionalized sectors. This echoes the findings of the Education and Employers Taskforce, which drew on a YouGov survey

of young adults relating to the work experience received by 987 young people (Mann et al. 2011). Results were segmented according to school type (in their case, comprehensive, grammar, or private), and, in total, 27 percent of the survey's respondents who undertook a work experience placement between age 14 and 19 believed that it helped them to get into university (including 8 percent who felt that it helped them a lot). The report noted that "influence might be twofold: [work experience] can help young people make better informed decisions about university progression . . . and provide material for use in UCAS personal statements and interviews demonstrating commitment to occupational areas linked to the course of study" (6).

When responses were broken down according to educational background, however, the picture that emerged was very different. For those who attended private schools, 42 percent reported that work experience helped them to secure a place at university (including 13 percent who felt it helped them a lot). For those at grammar school, the figure fell to 28 percent (and 11 percent), and, for those at comprehensive school, only 25 percent felt that work experience was of benefit (including only 6 percent who said that it helped them a lot). This distribution, consistent with the personal statement analysis reported here, suggests that private school applicants not only monopolize the most valued forms of work-related activity but are also most adept (or best coached) at exploiting this activity in the admissions process.

Commitment, Goals, and Awareness

The final three criteria for assessing personal statements—commitment, goals, and awareness—are covered together in this section. Extracurricular activities are discussed in relation to school type, as are applicants' stated ambitions for the future. In both cases, the symbolic effects of capital are noted.

Extracurricular Activity and "School Type Capital"

Almost all personal statements contain some description of extracurricular activities, and, once again, differences arise in the nature of these activities and the way in which they are expressed. For private school applicants, examples of what might be termed "school type capital," as well as social and cultural capital, are regularly found.

18. "[School name] provided me with many opportunities outside class: I joined the Combined Cadet Force and, after completing the Cadre programme, became a Platoon Commander with 30 cadets under my supervision" (IND).
19. "Since arriving at [school name] I have played 1st team Rugby and Tennis. I was pleased to receive my Senior Tennis Colours two years early. This is my second year for Rugby at first XV level. Last summer

the team went on tour to Hong Kong and Australia which I enjoyed very much" (IND).

Examples 18 and 19 exemplify how the name of an applicant's school can itself be considered an asset, and over 40 percent of private school applicants "drop" it into their personal statement (many on more than one occasion). Among grammar school applicants, this proportion falls to 15 percent, and for comprehensive school and sixth form college applicants, it is almost zero. Indeed, applicants from the latter two school types often describe their hobbies in very different ways, as examples 20 and 21 demonstrate.

20. "My main interests include spending time with friends, watching films, going to the gym, reading up on the latest fashion and attending gigs. I attend a lot of gigs and the experience and thrill of the atmosphere puts me on a complete high" (COMP).
21. "I love to listen to music; sometimes I just go on walks and listen to my iPod which gives me time to think and reflect on my day. I am truly enjoying studying at college and I have made some great friends along the way who have made me the person I am today. Without them I don't think I would have achieved as much" (SFC).

Elements of colloquialism (e.g., "a complete high" and "truly enjoying") are present in examples 20 and 21, but what is perhaps more noticeable is the deployment of different forms of cultural (or subcultural) capital (Lareau 1987). "Reading up on the latest fashion" may well be a regular pastime of the comprehensive school applicant cited above, and an honest response to the UCAS prompt, but word count is being squandered on information that has little value in the admissions process or the education market (Bourdieu 2000) more broadly.

Ambitions and Economic Capital

Many of the indicators discussed so far mirror applicants' socioeconomic status. For example, private school applicants' personal statements reflect wider travel, more professionalized work experience, and more cultured extracurricular activity. However, it is also noticeable that some applicants draw direct attention to aspects of their own financial resources, as examples 22 and 23 show.

22. "I witnessed first hand the effect that poverty has on children; through this I have been moved to sponsor a young girl in Romania" (IND).
23. "During my gap year I plan to do a ski season in Meribel in order to gain a better understanding of French language" (GRAM).

Encoded in each of these claims is a suggestion of economic capital that marks the applicant out from other students. For instance, the response of the applicant in example 22 to witnessing child poverty is undoubtedly charitable, but it also underlines the advantages that a higher socioeconomic status bestows.

Whereas the activities listed by applicants from comprehensive schools and sixth form colleges often include television programs (“outside school, I enjoy watching programmes like *The Apprentice*”), those cited by grammar and private schools applicants are more likely to reflect their economic capital (“I did a Cordon Bleu cookery course at the Tante Marie School, in London”). Note also that forms of the verb “to read” occur only 1.73 times per 1,000 words in the personal statements of sixth form college applicants, compared to 2.42 times among private school applicants.²⁴

Finally, examples 24–27 provide a flavor of how school type influences the way in which applicants see their future. A contrast often arises between those personal statements in which applicants speak confidently and ambitiously about their plans and those that are overly honest in the way they self-appraise a lack of clear goals.²⁵

24. “It is my intention to continue my studies to masters level and perhaps also a doctorate” (GRAM).
25. “I wish to fulfill my goal of being at the forefront of the financial world” (IND).
26. “My ambitions in the future are to have financial security and be able to live a comfortable lifestyle without worry. My greatest goal in life is to be as happy as I possibly can be” (COMP).
27. “I have no firm ideas of what I really want to do in the future” (SFC).

Although many applicants from comprehensive schools and sixth form colleges succeed in expressing their ambitions with clarity and poise, others risk sounding naive, as in example 26, or unfocused, as in example 27. Highly aspirational declarations, however, are largely the preserve of private school applicants.

Summary of Commitment, Goals, and Awareness

Robert Brown (2004, 242) talks about the personal statement as “an indicator of disciplinary socialization,” and this section has shown that applicants from private and grammar schools describe their personal attributes in ways that more explicitly demonstrate their suitability for higher education.

²⁴ For comprehensive school applicants, “read,” “reads,” or “reading” appears 2.18 times per 1,000 words; for grammar school pupils, the figure is 2.21.

²⁵ Counterevidence includes a sixth form college applicant: “My dream is to become a City broker, whilst eventually setting up my own hedge fund.”

FIG. 2.—Final destination for applicants sampled, by school type

Comprehensive school and sixth form college applicants follow directions more literally and tend toward unsubstantiated, overpersonalized claims of the kind in example 28.

28. “I have a passion for the subject and I am confident that my hunger and drive will ensure that I achieve my ambition. I am certain it is in Accounting where my heart truly belongs” (SFC).

A further tendency arises for comprehensive school and sixth form college applicants to close their personal statement as though it were a letter (“I look forward to you reading my application”; “I would like to humbly request a place on the course”). Also common are unsupported claims (“I can guarantee I’ll be an excellent Sociology student”; “I feel I’m charismatic”) and inappropriate wordplay (“I want to succeed in business and I mean business”). This can result in appeals to “where my heart truly belongs,” as in example 28, rather than to where an accumulation of relevant social, cultural, and economic capital naturally leads.

Indeed, a look at the final higher education destination, when known, of this study’s 309 applicants shows that those from private schools fared best, being about twice as likely to enter a Russell Group university as those from other school types.²⁶ Although figure 2 represents a very small sample, and

²⁶ Some of the 309 applicants either withdrew from UCAS or were rejected by all of their chosen universities. For private school applicants, the proportion for whom destinations are unknown is 25.8 percent; for grammar school applicants, 33.3 percent; for comprehensive school applicants, 11.4 percent;

the picture may well be complicated by some applicants actively choosing to attend a lower-prestige institution, the distribution of destinations is comparable with the findings of other recent surveys (Boliver 2013).²⁷

Conclusion

In the United Kingdom, students from private schools are likeliest to achieve high grades and likeliest to apply to top universities. This was recently demonstrated by Chris Cook (2012) in relation to another UK Russell Group institution, Oxford University. Cook began by noting that the probability of young people achieving “very strong GCSEs” ranges from 3.4 percent (for a student from the poorest tenth of schools) to 23.4 percent (for all private school children).²⁸ The probability of these very-strong-GCSE students applying to Oxford, then, ranges from 14.1 to 24.6 percent for the same groups. Most significant for this study, however, is the probability of a very-strong-GCSE applicant being admitted to Oxford, which ranges from 15.1 to 50.8 percent.²⁹ In relation to the final disparity, this analysis of personal statements offers a partial explanation: private school applicants are likeliest to receive the best advice (Reay et al. 2005) and to benefit from the symbolic effects of the most appropriate forms of capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1997, 2000).

Crucially, the personal statements examined in this research were composed by students of comparable educational attainment. The differences noted do not result from some applicants being more academically able than others; rather, disparate levels of social, cultural, and economic capital are at play. Some applicants appear to have access to a network of individuals (friends, family members, teachers, careers advisors, etc.) who can provide high-quality input to the personal statement, as well as contribute to the wide range of experiences that the personal statement draws on. This raises what Kirkland and Hansen (2011) call the Coaching Question and lends credence to Schwartz’s observation that “some staff and parents advise to the extent that the personal statement cannot be seen as the applicant’s own work” (2004, 26).³⁰

Indeed, although Brown notes that applicants “may feel themselves to be composing in a rhetorical void in which they must write in an unfamiliar

for sixth form college applicants, 16.9 percent. One reason for this variation may be that applicants from more advantaged school types are more likely to retake A-levels in order to enter universities that are more prestigious. This could make the true destination picture more polarized than fig. 2 allows.

²⁷ Applicants may choose to attend a lower-prestige institution because it offers a particular program, for example, or to remain close to home.

²⁸ The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is a pre-A-level qualification taken by students ages 14–16 in secondary education in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Very strong GCSEs are defined as those “good enough to support an application to an elite university” (Cook 2012).

²⁹ Similar distributions for UK Russell Group universities collectively are noted by Boliver (2013).

³⁰ “It is widely accepted that middle- and upper-class parents resort to anything they think will get their child an edge, including essay coaching or even writing their child’s essay themselves” (Kirkland and Hansen 2011, 118).

genre for an audience that they do not know nor will likely ever meet" (2004, 243), the void to which he refers seems to engulf only comprehensive school and sixth form college applicants. Guidance from the United Kingdom's admissions agency is informative, valuable, and friendly. However, not every applicant is equally equipped to "stand out from the crowd."

This inequity is particularly striking when work-related activity is explored. Hatcher and Le Gallais note that "work experience in schools, as it operates at present, tends to reflect and reproduce existing patterns of social class inequality" (2008, 77), and the personal statements examined here suggest that this reproduction of inequality extends to higher education.³¹ Indeed, one of the most arresting findings of this research is how applicants from different school types are able to draw on experiences so diverse in terms of prestige and academic relevance. As one teacher at a private school in Huddleston and Mann's study notes of her own pupils, "these kids are in the sweet shop, they've got it all, they can pick and choose" (2011, slide 24). For applicants restricted to paid, low-skill jobs, however, establishing links with an academic discipline is much more challenging.

Indeed, what this analysis of personal statements has repeatedly shown is that applicants from different educational backgrounds are not equally prepared and predisposed to play the admissions game. Bourdieu notes that "what new entrants must bring into the game is not only the habitus that is tacitly or explicitly demanded there, but a habitus that is practically compatible, or sufficiently close, and above all malleable and capable of being converted into the required habitus" (2000, 100). However, evidence points to great variation in habitus compatibility. This reflects the differing levels and quality of input received and the differing experiences on which applicants draw. It may also contribute to the different higher education destinations reached by those applicants investigated here (see fig. 2). The game may not be "rigged," but it is a "handicap race" in which some applicants are more advantaged than others (Bourdieu 2000).

Solutions are difficult to pinpoint because all nonacademic indicators of potential (including entrance exams and interviews) tend to favor those applicants already benefiting from advantages of school type.³² However, the United Kingdom is unusual in requiring such a lengthy "free response" statement, and a possible way forward may be to restrict applicants to citing one

³¹ See Jones (forthcoming) for a discussion of college admissions consultancy companies in the United States.

³² "People believe in their ability to divine things from interview, irrespective of any amount of research evidence to the contrary. It's known as the illusion of validity" (Steven Schwartz, quoted in Woodward 2004).

work-related activity and one extracurricular activity only.³³ In the United States, the Common Application has always included an essay (McGinty 2012); however, prompts invite applicants to consider how they have learned from personal failures rather than to catalog personal successes and are often framed in terms of potential contribution to a university or program rather than capacity for individual gain.³⁴ Much less emphasis is placed on work experience. This approach may be more equitable than the free response because it renders accumulated forms of economic and social capital less directly exchangeable. Jones (forthcoming) also notes that US applicants are reassured that a lack of opportunity will not count against them (Harvard) and that their extracurricular activity will be placed in its true context (Princeton). Other nations' admissions agencies go further still. For example, places in some oversubscribed university programs in the Netherlands and Greece are allocated via a ballot rather than through nonacademic indicators. Quotas operate in Brazil and Germany, while in Ireland university places are offered at reduced points to applicants from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Jones, forthcoming).

The reasons that equal attainment applicants from different school types do not enter top UK universities in similar proportions are complex and various. However, this study finds that nonacademic indicators, such as the personal statement, may disfavor young people from certain educational backgrounds. Barbara Ellen notes that "there can be no justifying a system where only informed, supported candidates prosper" (2010), and Vikki Boliver argues that "what is needed is a policy that promotes not only equality of opportunity to apply but also equality of treatment in admissions" (2013, 359). An appropriate first step toward a fairer system may be for admissions agencies to do away with the personal statement entirely.

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³³ Schwartz recommended "structuring the personal statement . . . through the insertion of course-specific prompts" (2004, 45) and even provided an "example feedback letter" for unsuccessful applicants in which they could see how their personal statement was graded against set criteria (app. 7). Although these suggestions were not taken up, the UCAS admissions process review did recommend "allowing an optional section of the personal statement to be tailored to each choice" (2012, 5).

³⁴ For example, "describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community" (McGinty 2012, 65).

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