Why me? A preteen standard, the question ‘why me?’ seems to have accumulated connotations of an uncomfortable sort of self indulgence of late. Contemporarily reserved for emos and the sympathetic stars of world vision ads ‘why me?’ hasn’t always been a dirty word. Back in the day when Kings and Queens did more than decorate bank notes, when class and status were determined by a cruel combination of birth right and blood, the question of ‘why me?’ was kind of a no brainer. Now I don’t advocate the just ‘cause hereditary determinism of the middle ages - I don’t like the way they answered the question - I like the fact that they asked it. Because what you’re all about to embark on, applying for a scholarship, is an exercise in asking and more importantly answering ‘why me?’.

Essentially there is going to be some, if not a lot, of objective criteria you’ll need to meet just to ensure you’re eligibility for a scholarship. This could be anything from your ATAR to your address. Its normally numerical and though, not necessarily immutable, certainly self evident. For a lot of you the HSC may seem like a long arduous process of convincing yourselves that character and intelligence, wit, imagination, passion and diligence can be measured. That the summation of a student is a number on a page. Not to get all existential on you but any mark, however much a reflection of your effort or intelligence, means nothing in the abstract. You are not your ATAR. Having a nice set of numbers is important to your eligibility but not the absolute measure of a successful application. Like most seemingly important questions the answer to the now omnipresent precept ‘why me?’ isn’t ever a number.

For nerds like me the idea that what they are really looking for is a person not a pupil is probably more confronting than it is comforting. When we construct for ourselves identities which are so much built on over achievement straight As are not simply a feature of our academic record but a defining factor in who we are. In this state we risk answering ‘why me?’ with an impressive GPA and long list a numbers that all start with nine. By all means list you’re achievements, write them out in stanzas like a sonnet to your own academic success. Make striking art from those straight As, let them know the poetry of placing in all you’re subjects but remember that this is all beauty without meaning. Evidence that you can do it, not that you will and more importantly not that you want to. The personal statement is an opportunity for substance. For not only expressing what you have achieved, both academically and outside the classroom, but why you’ll keep achieving and why you want to achieve, specifically here at the University of Sydney.

For me the answer to these question as well as of course ‘why me?’ was bound up in a genuine and somewhat obsessive love of learning. In an attempt to avert a sort of cheesiness that is so often cynically interpreted as insincerity my application was distinctly and deliberate written in my own voice; my own private protest against the necessity of formality and the mutual exclusivity of pop culture references and six syllable words. This didn’t mean disrespecting the context of the writing. I didn’t drop any F bombs and I kept my sarcastic quips firmly aimed at my own self depreciated target. But it did mean challenging the preconceptions of the structure and style of the
document. In this way, I answered ‘why me?’ not just in the meaning of my words, but in their structure, in the syntagmic relationship between them, in their connotations, their grammar, their surprise. I used form to express meaning. I used lists and references that in their very nature evoked my essential message – that I’m unreservedly nerdy. That I’m a loser who obsesses over language, who sneakily slips rhyme and meter into everything that I write. Who has an eye for detail is easily distracted by the complex and the conceptual.

This doesn’t have to be your angle, your approach, in fact it really shouldn’t be. The intention of my own example isn’t to tease you with the good idea you now can’t have, it’s to demonstrate that writing a successful application isn’t about an angle, isn’t about anything formulaic, objective or absolute. It’s about proving a personal truth. It’s about backing up all the beauty of academic achievement, that effervescent extra circular record, with some kind of substance, some kind of meaning: a real reason for ‘why me’. Which, I know, amidst the swell of assignments and essay, in the rough sea of final exams doesn’t exactly seem like a property. With the words of Shakespeare and Lenin riding the crests of papery waves that crash all around, finding your own voice may require a little dredging and a lot of time. But answer the call, the question, because ‘why me?’ might just be worth it.

So, having sufficed my quota for the inspirational, or more probably the confusing, I’d like to leave you all with some more practical advice. If your answer to ‘why me?’ is convincing enough to warrant a scholarship prepare yourself for the paperwork. Especially if like me you happen to be completely without internet access in a small southern Egyptian village when the forms are due back. If you’re not gallivanting around greater Europe on money made from pulling beers between exams, go to open days and information nights and O week, spend time on campus before essay and assignments set in and even when they do, don’t abandon campus life.

Most of you are probably chronically over involved at school, don’t be overwhelmed by the scope of things you can join, or even more the apparent insignificance of your membership. Don’t feel less than those around you. With this attitude of course everyone else is going to look immeasurably cooler than you, they are all going to sound smarter and funnier and every single other person is going to look like they know exactly where they are going. But talk to that girl sitting next to you in philosophy, just because she’s wearing leopard print pants doesn’t mean she’s not shy. I know crazy pattern leg wear and an aversion to attention seems kind of incongruous and the only logical reasoning for her ignoring you should be that she thinks your some denim wearing fascist – but she’ll be sweet and scared just like you. And when you’ve made friends, and joined clubs and developed a somewhat unhealthy habit of imbibing on campus, don’t rest on your laurels, but enjoy university to its full extent, socialize and philosophize and work hard at life as well as learning and all the while keep in mind what makes you worth it; ask yourself ‘why me?’