

Helping Students Write College Application Essays

It is late October, lunch time, and I am sitting in my room whose windows show the first signs of autumn outside. At the desk next to me sits a young woman from Taiwan who came to the United States specifically to get the best education she could. She is a senior. She wants to go to Columbia. She has asked me, even though I am not nor have been her teacher, to look at her college essay. I immediately notice that my colleague Elaine's comments are on there in her immaculate purple script (compared to my scrawl). I have spent most of my lunches this week meeting with kids to look at their essays. Because the essays are often personal reflections on their journey through the last four years, I find these sessions very informative and often inspiring: the essays show they changed and learned.

This young woman, Helena, wants me to say Elaine's comments are off the mark; she wants me to say, "Oh, Helena this is just perfect as it is. Really! Here, let me give you a stamp so you can mail it now!" And when I say the same things as Elaine, when I tell her that she should hack out about 75% of it and start over using her concluding paragraph, she looks crushed. She wants me to do her work for her, to give her words, images, a heavy ring of keys that will open up not only the essay but the future she is trying to enter. I don't do that. Honestly, there are a few kids, however, kids whose story I know intimately, who deserve to get to whatever next step they want to reach; I won't write their essay for them. My role in this process is to help them see their real subject and let her write the essay.

Strategies and Tips to Write Better College Essays

- * Read the topic many times to get clear what it is asking.
- * Underline any word in the application that seems essential to the topic: verbs: "reflect," "describe," "examine"; nouns: "person who most influenced you," "an experience that changed you." If you cannot write on the application, make a copy of it so you can.
- * Look for those words in the application that the college is likely to use in their scoring rubric: In a one-page essay, please reflect on one person who has had a strong influence on your

development." Each of the underlined words signals a different aspect of the "story" they are asking you to write.

One young woman I worked with examined the role her voice coach played in her life. The essay said what she did, but did not examine the precise ways she had "influenced" her "development." Not only this: she did not have a sense of her topic: to speak of how someone develops your voice is, frankly, not so interesting or important.

What are they really asking? Do they really want to hear about how your her got more tone and strength to it---or are they interested in her intellectual, emotional, moral growth? Face it, a question like this is asking: what kind of person are, you and are you the kind of person we want at our university? What will you have to offer us? Schools get applications from thousands of kids with remarkable talents and grades; they prefer, in the balance, to give the nod to kids they think have character and will help create a great culture at their school. Penn State, for example, receives approximately 16,000 applications annually, 80% of whom are qualified for admission based on their numbers alone. However, only 25-30% can be admitted. The difference, according to one admissions officer, is *often* their essay because this is a variable "over which they have control." In other words, amidst all the statistics about their performance, the essay provides a chance for the student to really show who they are.

Another admissions officer I interviewed said, "There are three things you don't ever want to watch being made: one is sausage, one is legislation, and the other is college admissions because the process is sometimes so random given the number of kids that come across our desk. I read 1000 applications, each one of which has to have an essay, and I move give each application about 10 minutes in the first read-through. Anything that kid can do to connect with me as their reader, to make them stand out in that essay, which in many cases is the most important piece of the puzzle, helps me." "When we read them, though the scale is 1-10, we mostly calibrate it to a 2, 5, and 8: two means the essay negatively affects the student's application; 5 means it does nothing to advance their application; 8 means it moves it forward toward acceptance, though other factors are, of course, considered." And this: "Given the assumption that all kids have spell-checkers on their word-processors, we are now merciless when it comes to spelling errors: we are looking to take 25% of all the applications we receive; so even a spelling error can tip the

balance against the student in such a competitive environment." Finally, colleges feel insulted and are annoyed by silly essays such as the person who writes an essay about "The Little Engine that Could," in response to the topic "Write about a fictional character that had an influence on your thinking or beliefs."

Your essay should have the following components outlined there:

- * **Originality:** What can you write about that others cannot? Even if you are going to write about a topic that invites predictable subjects---"Please write about the book that has had the biggest influence on you."---you must find a way to write differently about it. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a wonderful book; in fact so many kids think so that any university with such a topic is likely to receive hundreds of essays about Atticus's philosophy of "walking around in another person's shoes for a while." Turn it inside out: write about an unusual character like Dill or the judge. Better still, write about a different book, one that others are unlikely to have read: this will show you are a reader, that you are a thinker, that you don't walk the common path.

- * **Correctness:** your essay must be perfect. Errors are moral and intellectual checkmarks against you in this situation. Each one says you are not conscientious and take no pride in your work.

They want to know several things about you from your essay according to the articles I read:

- * what your goals are
- * how you prepared yourself for the future while in high school
- * how you interact with other people in an increasingly diverse and crowded society
- * what you will have to offer their school and its community as a person and a scholar
- * that you will succeed and survive at their school (particularly important if you would be coming there from far away, another region and climate: they don't want people leaving because they're too far from home or

because it's too cold when they could give the spot to someone who won't have those troubles)

* how will you contribute to the school's diversity and enrich its community

* do you have any links to the college (e.g., relatives who were alumni)?

* extracurricular activities: this includes not only clubs or athletics but non-school related activities like political or church groups, Boy Scouts, or jobs.

* is there an area in which you are, relative to your age, a "master"? This is good to show because it suggests commitment to learning and excelling; shows a passion for something which can be transferred into other areas to insure success and distinction at their school

* the entrepreneurial spirit to the extent that it reveals a strong character who takes on projects and achieves something they set out to do (e.g., the student whose love of photography in high school leads him to start his own photography business while still in school, the money of which helped to pay for the college he will attend).

* "Pluck" according to one admissions officer: the gumption to write about something in a way that makes it stand out but not for the sake of standing out. The classic example in recent years is the essay in which a young man lists all the things he has done, exaggerating each one to the extreme--detailing that he has raised a million dollars to help the poor and jumped over tall buildings---but admitting in the end that the one thing he had yet to do was go to college, which he was hoping they would let him do. Such spirit sells you so long as it seems intelligent and a reflection of your character not just a joke.

* You write the story that is yours to write. Not everyone can write, as one student did in their opening line, "I was born in the Alaskan bush on the kitchen table."

Once I accepted the job of reading eighth grade writing tests for the state exam. About 80 of us came every day for four days to a large, dull-colored room at a suburban high school. It was summer. I knew no one. We could not

talk. I could not listen to a Walkman. We could not have drinks on the table with us because, they argued, we might spill them and the tests were legal documents. I read papers for four days, scoring them on a rubric of 0-6. It was hell on earth: each paper was the same as the last one but with different handwriting. And every once in a while, suddenly, I would pick up a paper and it would make me laugh, would make me think, would help me settle into the world a bit more. It was those I remembered at day's end. I can only imagine that college admissions people feel the same way every fall when they get snowed in by the blizzard of papers students send off at midnight.

Helpful Resources

Essays that Worked , by Boykin Curry & Brian Kasbar

100 Successful College Application Essays, ed. by Christopher J. Georges and Gigi E. Georges.

Students will find innumerable sites on the Internet with sample essays to help them. Some essays are for sale through these services. Teachers should warn their students against using any essay they find on-line. College admissions officers keep lists of these essays and immediately dismiss a student's application if they even suspect the student did not write it. Students may, however, find some of these sites useful as springboards for their own essays. Also, some universities provide helpful information about writing essays for their specific university; be sure to consult the university's website before writing you essay.