



What's Your Hook?
First Choice College Placement's Guide to
Writing a Winning Essay

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Chapter 1: The Feared College Admissions Essay: What is it, and Why is it Important?

There are few things that cause more stress for a high school senior than preparing to apply to college. Whether it is taking the SAT or ACT or writing the college admission essay; it all causes fear. But why is it so feared? The essay need not be dreaded; if viewed correctly, it can be a great first step along the path to self-discovery. In fact, the college search process and ultimately your college experience are great tools in learning about your unique talents and skills and how you will use those talents out in the "real world." It is a valuable tool in self-evaluation because it forces you to look back over your accomplishments and your high school experience and seriously think about what makes you different.

The essay is your chance to show the college that there is a good match between you and the university. Colleges want to see that you have a good understanding of who you are and what is going on in the world around you. They also want to see that you have a good understanding of how you fit in with that world around you. You may wonder how they expect you to do all that in 250 to 500 words. Relax, we all know that it is impossible to summarize all your hopes and dreams and everything that you are in a 250 to 500-word essay. Instead, your goal is to create a movie trailer, of sorts - an essay that lets people know enough about you to want to see the whole movie.

Most people will tell you that the personal statement is an opportunity to put a face on your application and bring it to life. At all colleges it is an opportunity for you to share your passions and what motivates you. It is your opportunity to differentiate yourself from other applicants and as admissions officers say, "shine your admission's

hook.ö That is, a chance for you to give them a reason to fish you out of the thousands of applications they have received. Thus, the essay is a critical tool for the colleges to evaluate you as a person.

The essay is evaluated on two basic criteria - the form and the content. All parts of the essay are critical at highly competitive schools. At the less competitive schools they are first looking at the essay to demonstrate your writing ability, and then they are evaluating the content. While they are reading, they are asking themselves, öCan this student compose a basic five paragraph essay, with an introduction, body, and conclusion? Do they give adequate examples to support their thesis? Does it flow logically and gracefully?ö At any school it is important that your essay is grammatically sound. So we urge you to have at least one or more people read your essay for you. While the content is not as important at the less competitive schools as it is at highly selective schools, it is still important because it is one of your only chances to plead your case as to why you are a good match for the school.

For this reason, the essay is the most difficult part of the application and takes the most time to complete. Since it takes so long to complete, you must be certain to leave yourself adequate time to prepare your essay. We recommend that you start it over the summer between junior and senior year of high school, if not earlier. The best writers are those who go through several revisions. If you start the essay the night before it is due then it will not represent your best work. By starting your essay well in advance it leaves you the opportunity to have other people review the essay. Not too many of your high school English teachers will be willing to look over your essay if you finish at 5 minutes before midnight the day the essay is due.

Another admissions officer explained the importance of the essay by saying that at the time the student is completing the application, the essay is the only thing left under the student's control. She has already taken the tests, and already earned her grades, so how much care she takes in preparing the essay shows a lot about how badly she would like to attend the university. That is why it is extremely important for you to dedicate the appropriate amount of time to each essay. Many admissions officers have cited one of their biggest pet peeves as reading a great essay and then getting to the end and reading in the concluding paragraph, "And that is why I really want to go to [insert the college's biggest competitor here]." An admissions officer at Cooper Union in New York City told me that whenever he reads that he feels like calling the student and saying, "So, you really want to go to Cornell? Here is the number of an admissions officer there, give him a call." This is a particularly egregious error since it shows the college that they are not your first choice, as well as reflecting poorly on you because you did not double check your application in order to eliminate careless mistakes.

Yale University receives approximately 20,000 applications, yet they only accept 1,900 students. It would be physically impossible for the admission committee to discuss all of the applicants at length; so many of the candidates must be eliminated by the readers, before they even make it to committee. At most colleges, applications are read by two readers. Usually there is one reader who recruits from the region where the applicant attends school (this gives the reader the advantage of knowing background information about the school, such as the strengths of the school and how it rates relative to other schools in the area) and a second random reader. They rate the applicants on objective data, such as SAT scores and GPA. However, at highly competitive schools

most applicants have similar numbers so it is the subjective information that distinguishes the application. The subjective information comes from the letters of recommendation, the interview, and the essay. The essay is what you have the most control over and the area where you can take the most time to be certain you are portraying yourself in the best possible light.

There is no doubt that the essay or personal statement is extremely important, but what is the question and how should you answer it? Some colleges have a specific question that they will ask you, but many have a vague personal statement where you can choose to tell them anything that you want. If the college has a specific question, make certain that you answer the question. One of the most common mistakes admissions officers see is the student failing to answer the essay question or answering incorrectly by trying to make an essay for another school fit their question. However, if it is a vague personal statement, or a topic of your choice, then you can tell them anything. In fact, one former Harvard admissions officer told me that their topic was intentionally vague, and that what the student chose to write about told them almost as much as what was actually said in the essay. Harvard now uses the common application, but that still leaves the topic very broad. The Common Application (an application accepted by 300 different universities that you can access at www.commonapp.org) typically has 5 or 6 essay topics with the last one being, ðor, a topic of your choice.ö The other topics typically deal with your influences such as an important person, event, or book.

While Harvard and many other schools only use the Common Application, they often have a supplement where they will ask you specific questions. They do this for a few reasons. First, writing is extremely important in college (especially at liberal arts

institutions) so they want to see as many writing samples as possible. Second, they ask a specific question so they know that you are answering it just for them. While the common application is great for students because it allows them to easily submit applications to a number of colleges, it doesn't allow the universities to gauge the student's interest as well. Colleges want to know that the students are interested in them and not just using them as a safety school or applying to them because they are in a popular city. When you answer the supplemental questions make sure you answer them just for that school and do not try to take another essay and shoehorn it to fit the new topic. That way schools will know you care about them and are knowledgeable about their university. In addition, most schools will ask a short question, "Why us?" While it may seem an innocent, easy question and you may be tempted to answer it quickly or in a breezy manner, do not do so. At the most competitive colleges any writing sample is critical. You must keep in mind that many of these readers reject 9 or more students for every one that they accept. These schools aren't looking for reasons to accept you, quite the contrary; they are looking for reasons to reject you. Even these two sentences can keep you out of your dream school. **Do not write**, "I stayed overnight with a friend at Any U and I had a great time. We went to some great parties and the students seemed cool." You want to be sure to mention academics and show that you have given it careful thought. The supplemental essays are not the only additional pieces of writing that are being evaluated on the common application. There is also the 150 word short answer where they ask you to describe one of your activities. In the past, the question would read, "What is your most meaningful activity and why?" We recommend that you still approach it that way. They should already know your most meaningful activity, since the

common application asks you to list your activities in the order of importance to you. So, the first tip would be to stay consistent. Since your response is only 150 words long, do not waste any words. Do not feel compelled to restate the obvious or give them information they have already gleaned from other parts of the application. Instead of saying, "I love baseball because it is fun." Try saying, "Baseball is a tradition in my family. My grandfather brought my father to his first game when he was just 4 and in turn my father brought me when I was very young. When I play, I feel connected to my family and imagine what my father and grandfather must have felt like when they were young. Furthermore, since I am part of a team I have learned the importance of not letting others down. I have also been able to see all my hard works pay off in improving my batting average. I am able to make measured progress towards a goal. This is a lesson that carries over to my academics. I set a goal and I am able to measure my progress as I move towards it. Baseball is my most meaningful activity because it has taught me valuable life lessons and helps me to feel more connected with my family."

In fact, one of the ways that you will know if you need to start over or not is to have someone who knows you read the essay. If they read it and feel like it accurately portrays your personality, then it is a good essay. Even better, have someone who doesn't know you very well read the essay. If she reads it and gets a good sense of what you are like as a person and thinks to herself, "this is someone that I would like to be friends with," then it is definitely a good essay.

Chapter 1 Key Concepts

- **The essay is your chance to bring your application to life.**
- **Use the essay to "shine your admissions hook" and present your unique talent.**
- **If they ask a specific question, make certain that you answer the question.**

- **Do not wait until the last minute, and make sure that you have someone else edit the essay for you.**
- **All the pieces of writing on your application are critical. Spend the appropriate amount of time on each.**

Chapter 2: Do They Really Read These Things? How Colleges Use the Essay in the Admissions Process

“This above all, to thine own self be true.” You probably recognize this quote from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. It is famous advice from Polonius to Laertes and it is also the same advice, given by my grandfather to my mother, aunts, uncle, siblings, and me when we went off to college. This is not bad advice to consider when you are writing your college essay either. The best essay is one that is true to yourself, and shows your passions, not what you think the college wants to hear. Each year admissions officers at the University of Virginia are inundated with essays about how Thomas Jefferson (the founder of UVA, among other things) was the most influential historical figure to the author of the essay.

. How is the essay used by the highly selective universities and how is it used by less selective universities? It basically boils down to the fact that at competitive schools they are looking for reasons to reject you whereas at the less competitive schools they are looking for reasons to accept. At both kinds of schools your essay can be the x-factor that helps you gain admittance.

Highly competitive schools rate students academically (are they capable of handling the work at the university and what will they add to the intellectual environment on campus) and personally (how will this person fit in with our student body and do they have the potential to significantly contribute to campus life). The only way the school can learn about you as a person is through these subjective criteria. So, in a way, you are auditioning to see if you will fit in with their campus. It is always important when you are crafting your essay to remember who will be reading it. Many of the admissions

officers actually attended the school where they are working, so they see themselves as a gatekeeper of sorts, and while they are reading they are asking themselves, "Is this someone I would have wanted to be friends with?" This is one of the reasons why it is best not to take a preachy tone with your admissions essay. The admissions officer does not want to feel like he is being talked down to by someone who is younger than him, and who in his opinion probably hasn't experienced much of the world. Who wants to be friends with someone who will talk down to them? We will cover tone when we get to writing the essay itself, but it is usually good to take an upbeat tone, and not just describe what happened, but more importantly tell what you learned and how you grew from the experience.

In addition to keeping in mind that the readers are gatekeepers of sorts, you should also keep in mind when they will be reading these essays. Most essays will be read in December, January, and early February. The average admissions officer will read 1,000 applications in that time. They are usually reading 20 applications a day with the average file getting 30 minutes time. At this time of year many of the admissions officers will arrive at work when it is dark and leave to go home when it is dark. What if you are the 20th application on that cold, dark day? You will need to do something to make your application stand out. Also, you might want to think twice before trying out some forms of humor, as most of the admissions officers will have lost their sense of humor after many hours of reading essays.

In the essay, students have the opportunity to differentiate themselves from other applicants, and ideally win themselves an ally in the admissions process. Although all schools read applications differently (At some schools the applications are assigned for

reading chronologically; that is as they come in they are given to the admissions officer on call. At some schools, it is completely random who is selected to give an application its first read), at most highly competitive schools applications are read at least once by the person in charge of the student's region. It is important to somehow create a contact with this person. Perhaps the best advice I ever heard at a college information session was from an admissions officer who advised students to find out who would be reading their application and somehow create a link with that person.

The essay is a chance to form some kind of a bond or link with an admissions officer who has the power to shepherd you through the application process. If you would like to find out the admissions officer who is in charge of your region you just need to call the school and ask them who is responsible for reading applications from your high school. Or, better yet, when you are touring the school, ask at the front desk and get a card for that person. If possible, drop in to say hi to that person. Also, when they come out recruiting to your area, make certain that you attend local college fairs where they will be in attendance. You can also get this information by calling the college admission office. While you want to try and stay on the admissions officer's mind and create that link, you do not want to become an annoyance. Ultimately creating this link is important because the admissions officer has a large say in determining your fate with the university.

Many competitive colleges have a process that they call bopping, or dinging, or some other similar term. What this refers to is the time after all the admissions officers have handed in the list of the students that they would like to accept. They are counted up, then the dean of admissions says, "We can only accept 1,900 students, and if we take everyone that we want we will get 2,200 students. I need all of you to bop 10 applicants

(by bopping he means, change them from being accepted to being rejected).ö This is where creating that link can really help you. If an admissions officer really likes a student, if they might be a little weaker academically than some others, he may go through the process and say to another admissions officer, öI will give up these students if I can keep Mr. Great Essay.ö Thus, the essay may be more important than the other selection criteria, as it has this powerful emotional component.

So we know at the most competitive schools everything is important, the grammar as well as the content. How is it used at the less competitive schools? We know that their main goal is to find some reason to accept you, so, they will look down your file, first at the transcript to see if they should accept you, if you still have a chance but they are not yet sure you belong at their school, they will look at your test scores to see if you have potential that you have not yet realized, if they still do not have a solid case to either accept or reject you they will then look to the essay. So it is important that you give them a reason to accept you. Conversely, if it is a school where you should be admitted, do not give them a reason to reject you. That is, if it is your ösafety schoolö do not come across as arrogant or in any way let the college know that you view them as a safety school. I have seen too many students rejected from schools where they should have been accepted because they did not put the care in to the application and let the school know that they really did not want to go there. So, the school made it easy for them and did not accept them.

While at less competitive schools the content is not as important as the form of the essay you can use this as an opportunity to explain a less than stellar marking period or other potential problems ó for example, if you had lower grades one marking period

because you missed a significant amount of school due to the fact you had mono, or, maybe you had a tough time because a close relative died or your parents got divorced. It is important not to sound whiny or like you are making excuses. Instead, you just want to take responsibility for what happened, and show what you learned from the situation and how you grew. Remember, the essay should be about your personal growth. Even if you are talking about death, ultimately the essay is not about death but about you and how you were able to overcome adverse circumstances and were able to grow from the experience.

While throughout the chapter we talk about competitive schools and less competitive schools we really failed to talk about one important group: state schools, especially large state schools. At state schools, especially the larger one, the admissions process tends to be more formulaic. That is they tend to look more heavily at your SAT, GPA, and class rank (if available) to make their decision. Some schools, such as the University of California system, publish the formula they use to determine if a student can be admitted. So, even at the more highly competitive state schools the essay tends to not be as important as the other factors. This is due to the fact that they have a very high volume of applications and smaller admission staffs than most private schools. It simply would not be possible to read all of the essays and discuss the applications at length.

Chapter 2 Key Concepts

- **At competitive colleges they rate you personally and academically. The essay is one of the few ways they have to evaluate you personally.**
- **Competitive colleges are looking for reasons to reject you and less competitive colleges are looking for reasons to accept you.**
- **The best essays are those that allow your passions to shine through and can only be written by you. Don't write what you think they want to hear.**
- **Know who will be reading your application and in some way try to create a link for that person.**

Chapter 3: What Should You Write About?

On our visits to colleges one of our favorite questions to ask the admissions officers is, "What was your favorite essay from last year?" The answers can be as varied as the personalities of the various admissions officers, however one thing is constant: the essays were well written and revealed the writer's personality. One excellent example was provided by an admissions officer from Trinity College who told us that the best essay she had read the previous year was from a girl who had eleven brothers and sisters. The student's essay was about a typical night at her family's dinner table. The essay was well written and it had all the admissions officers in stitches. More importantly, you got a sense of where the student was coming from and what sort of a personality she had. While we generally do not advise you to attempt to write a funny essay unless you are thought of as funny (this isn't the time to audition for Conan O'Brien.), a sense of humor in an essay can work. On a recent visit to Connecticut College one of the admissions officers told us his favorite essay from the previous year was written by a student who attended high school in Manhattan but lived in the Bronx. Her essay was all about her subway ride to school and home. Again, the essay was very well written. This essay showed that the student made keen observations of her surroundings and had a great understanding of the world around her and how she fits in with that world. You do not need an earth-shattering topic in order to write a good essay. It just has to be well written.

More often than hearing what you should write about, you will hear about what not to write about. Various students have told us different topics they were told to avoid. One said she was told never to write about the three "D's": divorce, death, and drugs.

Often you hear people say that you should never write about community service. Other overdone essay topics are how I won the big game, how my travel has changed my opinion of the world, and how the summer program I attended changed my life. With that being said, keep in mind that you can still write about these topics, you just have to do it in a different way. On a recent tour of Wesleyan University the admissions officer told us that his favorite essay from the year before was from a student who was talking about her community service (community service makes nearly every top 10 list of topics not to write about). He said that this student wrote about it in a different way. She wrote about her volunteer work with an organization that works with children who are born addicted to drugs. She wrote about how she was working with this one child and she was having a great deal of difficulty making any connection with the child. Finally after several weeks of meeting with the child she was able to get a smile and start to make a connection. A few weeks later she found out that the child's mother was going to be released from rehab and the child was going to be sent back to live with her mother. This made our student angry. She felt upset because after all of her hard work, the girl was going to be sent right back to the same situation. Then she stopped and thought, "If I am getting this angry am I doing this work to benefit the girl, or am I doing it for my own benefit?" This was a different way of approaching the trite topic of community service. It also showed tremendous maturity on the part of the author and she revealed that she had a great understanding of her place in the world around her. That just goes to prove that you can't always believe what you hear from people and that there really are no topics to avoid if you write about it well and can make it fresh.

In fact bringing a boring topic to life shows the reader that you are a great writer. Most admissions officers will admit that some of their favorite essays have been about rather mundane topics. One admissions officer told me about an essay she read about ketchup stains that was a beautiful and moving metaphor for life. Just write about who you are and stay true to yourself.

While many people will warn you not to write about your summer experience and how it changed your life, sometimes it can be a good idea to write about this. Admissions officers like to see that you are willing to challenge yourself and expose yourself to new ideas and circumstances and if this happened through a summer program, maybe you should write about it. It is important for them to see that you are willing to go outside of your comfort zone.

Another piece of advice we feel compelled to share is do not be afraid to take risks. One admissions officer told me that he wished more students would take risks with their essays. This means to avoid the safe topic and don't just pick your essay because you think it is what they want to hear. You have to pick a topic that is important to you because that is the only way your passion will shine through. When the admissions officers are reading they are looking for your passion and to learn, "what makes you tick." They want an active community and the best way to achieve that is to select students who have been active in high school and who have a passion. Admissions officers want to see that students are doing the most with what they have been given.

While you do want to take risks, make certain that you are taking calculated risks. You may not want to write about politics or religion, as you have to keep in mind that the person who ends up reading your application might have the exact opposite view of you.

Politics and religion are emotionally charged topics and it is hard to change another person's opinion when his mind is set. Talking to a reader for an Ivy League university I heard a great example of an essay that should not have been submitted to the school given the political climate of the country at the time. After the events of September 11, 2001 a student submitted an essay that the United States got what it deserved. Even if this is what the student believed, he should have known that this would offend nearly anyone who read the essay and not help his case with the admissions committee.

So there are really no topics that you should completely avoid nor are there topics that can guarantee your seat in an Ivy League university. The key is to pick a topic that allows you to reveal your personality and the true you. Pick something that you are passionate about and it will be easier for you to write about. Also, you may want to pick a dull or ordinary topic and bring it to life for the reader. Remember that the essay is your last chance to do something to impress the admissions officers and earn a seat in next year's freshman class. Any topic can be fine as long as you write it well.

Chapter 3 Key Concepts:

- **There are no topics to avoid as long as you write the essay well.**
- **Use examples to show what you are trying to say, rather than to just tell the reader.**
- **Do not take a preachy or condescending tone.**
- **Take risks. Don't write what you think they want to hear, instead write about your passion.**

Chapter 4: When to Include Supplemental Information

The scariest thing during the college application process is completing the application, and then looking at the pile of papers, and thinking to yourself, “Is that it? My whole life boiled down to these sheets of paper?” It is a pretty frightening thought. Sometimes when you finish with all they have asked for on the application, you may think to yourself that there is still so much more they need to know. Our answer is simple; tell them. In this chapter we will tackle the issue of sending supplemental information. We will discuss when you should include extra information, and when you should tell your parents that the college doesn’t need to see a copy of every newspaper article where your name may have appeared.

First, let us tackle the idea of sending along a scrapbook to the admissions office of all your press clippings. Unless they are articles that you have written, I would advise you not to do it. While it always feels good to see your name in print, it does not necessarily testify to a specific talent that the college is looking for. I would warn you to think twice before you send a scrapbook of articles.

With any rule there is always an exception, and the exception to the above statement is if you are very involved with your high school newspaper or you have written articles for a local paper. If the articles are your work, then you should submit them. Especially if you have won some awards or you talk about wanting to pursue your interest in journalism when you reach college. In this case the articles help to demonstrate your talent. The admissions officers can read them and see if they feel that you possess a real talent. They will most likely pass them along to the editor of the

student newspaper to find out if you are the type of student that they need on the staff of the paper.

If you are applying as an art major, music major, or theater major usually the decision becomes more talent based and a portfolio or audition will be required. Even if you are not applying as an art or music major, but either has been an important part of your high school experience, then you may want to submit a CD or portfolio. However, before doing so make sure that you have an art teacher or a music teacher look over your portfolio or listen to your audition CD before you submit it. You want to be certain that your work is of a high quality and demonstrates actual talent. These materials can help to validate your admissions hook. Since the admissions officers are most likely not art or music experts, they will usually forward your submission to a member of their faculty for evaluation. They will ask the faculty if the student has talent and if it is someone that they want on the campus. If you submit work that does not appear to be good or validate a talent, you will hurt yourself. This shows them that not only are you not talented, but also that you do not know what talent or good work looks or sounds like. Back to our original question, "Should you submit a supplemental portfolio or CD?" and the answer is yes after you have had a teacher or other knowledgeable professional evaluate it. This submission will help in validating your talent or your admissions hook. That is, it will help show what is special about you that warrants the admissions office fishing you out of their pool of thousands of applications.

Your talent may be in creative writing or another form of writing. If so, you may want to send a portfolio of some of your best work. Again, the admissions office will use this to help evaluate and validate your admissions hook. So, the same rule applies for this

type of supplemental material as it does for an art portfolio - have a teacher look at your work before you submit it to make certain that it will help you. For example, you may want to submit a portfolio of poetry, a collection of short stories, or expository writing that you may be proud of such as a research paper or other school assignment that represents your best work.

Another instance where you may want to submit a supplemental essay is if you have had some major obstacle to overcome. Sometimes the essay topic or other space limitations do not permit you to disclose this information using the main essay, so you may consider revealing this information in a supplementary essay or even composing a letter to the admissions office that will accompany your application. Examples of obstacles that you may feel compelled to divulge are an illness, family emergencies such as a death or divorce, and a learning disability. Some would argue that this information is more powerful if it is disclosed by someone other than you, as it may seem like you are whining or making excuses. While I agree it would be more powerful coming from another source you cannot always count on a teacher or guidance counselor to talk about that in their recommendation. If you honestly believe that the event was detrimental to your performance and you do not know if your counselor or teachers are fully aware of the circumstances, you may want to disclose the information yourself. However, remember not to sound whiny or like you are making excuses as that will probably hurt you more than help. Also, keep in mind do not just tell what happened but show what you learned from the situation and how you grew.

If you have a learning disability the only place that you can reveal that to a college is in the essay. It is completely up to you whether or not you want to make the

colleges aware of your disability. By law, colleges can only consider that fact if you self-disclose the information to them. However, you do not want to say, "I have a learning disability and that is why I have terrible grades." That would make you a big risk to accept, since they might be afraid that you would not be able to handle the workload on their campus. Instead of just stating you have a learning disability and making it seem like you are using that as an excuse, you will want to show how you have learned to make accommodations and that since you have done that your grades have steadily improved. Since colleges are not allowed to consider your disability in making an admissions decision, you have to seriously think about whether or not you want to divulge this information to them. You are under no obligation to do so. If you will need special accommodations you can disclose the information to the disability resource center after you have been accepted. If you want to check on the quality and availability of support services, you can disclose your disability to the director of the disability resource center on a campus visit and ask her not to divulge the information to the admissions office. In deciding whether or not to self-disclose a learning disability, you will want to ask yourself the important question, "Will it help me in the admissions process?" If it will not help you, do not disclose the information. If you were not diagnosed with a disability until your junior year of high school, and your grades up until then were average, but now they are stellar, I would disclose the information. This explains to them a weakness in your transcript and shows that with accommodations you are capable of handling the work in college.

Finally, some students get very anxious and perform poorly on standardized tests. In this case, students have a few options. First, they can choose to apply to one of the

growing number of colleges that no longer require the SAT or ACT. Second, they can submit a supplementary essay detailing their history of anxiety and poor performance on standardized tests despite performing extremely well in the classroom. One of my former students was so anxious about taking the SAT and other standardized tests that she could not sleep for weeks before the test and her doctor prescribed her medication to help her sleep. If this sounds like you, you may consider submitting an additional essay. Remember, you do not want to sound like you are making excuses. Instead, focus on the positives such as how well you have performed in your classes and your perseverance and passion.

Chapter 4 Key Concepts:

- **Do not send scrapbooks of articles where your name is mentioned.**
- **Do send articles that you have written, especially if journalism is your passion and you hope to pursue that interest in college.**
- **Submit supplemental art or photography portfolios and audition CD's after you have had a teacher evaluate the work to determine that it will help you and validates your talent.**
- **Self-disclose a learning disability if it helps to explain a poor performance in your early years and you have since learned how to make accommodations for your learning difference and you can self-advocate. Remember, you do not need to disclose your learning disability in order to get accommodations on the college campus. You can disclose after you have been accepted.**
- **Only use a supplemental essay to explain an illness or other adverse circumstance if you do not think it will be explained anywhere else in your application. Be careful not to sound like you are making excuses.**



Writing the College Admissions Essay

Chapter 5: Brainstorming the Essay

So now you have an idea of what the colleges are looking for, and what they hope for from you. Now, your job is to make that happen. When you sit down to approach the admissions essay, the first thing you should know about yourself in the writing process is that you are an interesting person. Although you may feel that you have lived a pretty typical life (no discovering new mathematical theorems, no treks across Antarctica) you have lived a life that is different from everyone else's. What you see, interpret and experience is unlike what anyone else has. That alone is a starting point for your college admissions essay. Your job is to find which people, experiences or beliefs are important to you and have made you into the person you are now, and convey those sentiments in one short essay. Here are some things to consider before you begin brainstorming:

- ★ **Tell the reader about *you*.** You may be writing about an activity or a person in your life that is important, but ultimately your essay is about you; it is not about your Aunt Gertrude or the swim team. The admissions officer wants to know how these people, events or places affect *you*, and what you have learned from them. You want to write your essay to allow a total stranger to read the essay and be able to get a good sense of whom you are.
- ★ **Stick with who you are.** Don't try out a new image in your essay. Admissions officers read hundreds of essays each year, and will be able to tell if you are trying to sound some way that you really are not. If your natural voice and style of writing is funny, and you have submitted successfully funny essays before, then it may be okay to go the comedic route. Otherwise, don't try for a tone or a voice that you don't normally exhibit in your writing. Also, don't try to be overly melodramatic. If there has been an experience in your life that affected you in a

- big or important way, tell it like it is. Don't feel that you have to create unnecessary drama to try and impress the admissions readers.
- ★ **Give the reader a reason.** You may have nice or sad or inspiring experiences to write about, but the most important thing the reader is going to want to see is what you have *learned*, how you have *grown*, or where you find *your place* in the world. You need to draw intelligent and honest conclusions about your experiences, not just write about how they happened.
 - ★ **Don't tell them what you *think* they want to hear.** You really don't know what each admissions officer wants to hear. They want to hear about you, yes, but whether they'd rather hear about your passion for collecting stamps versus winning the big game you'd never know. Your safest bet is to write about what you are passionate about. As we've mentioned before, every admissions officer has a different opinion on what they feel has been their favorite essay or topic. What they all share in common is that each favorite essay is sincere. So stick with what your gut tells you to write about, not what you think would sound good to an admissions officer.
 - ★ **Be knowledgeable, but not a know-it-all.** You may have specific opinions about volatile topics like religion and politics. You may know lots of things about both. Your best bet, however, would be to keep these opinions to yourself. No college admissions officer wants to feel like he is being lectured by a high school student about the situation overseas. If you are interested in pursuing these areas of study in college, think of another way to express your enthusiasm for debate other than preaching in your essay.
 - ★ **Know your audience.** You are writing for people who have billions of essays to read. A professional will be reading your essay. It will be someone who has read a large number of essays before, and probably has seen every trick in the book, every heartfelt story or campy gimmick. They just expect that you be honest about your experiences and try to convey them as genuinely as possible. That is what will resonate most. You do, however, want to do so without using the plethora of clichés about feelings and experiences. As we mentioned previously, there is no topic that you cannot write about. It is just *how* you write about a certain topic.

For example, we have had students come in saying they heard that they shouldn't write about death. This is entirely untrue. If you have lost an important person in your life and learned and experienced something so difficult that it has largely affected you, by all means write about it. But you want to convey your sentiments in a way that is different than the overused lines that many admissions officers see in many essays. For example, these are some of the ways students often try to explain their feelings:

- I have learned that I have and can make a huge difference in someone's life
- Writing (or some other activity) is my passion
- Football (or other activity) has taught me some valuable lessons both on and off the field
- I want to help make people's lives better by choosing a career in medicine (or other area)
- I have learned that it is what is inside a person that counts
- I am a hardworking and dedicated person who has learned these values through being the captain of my team

There are many more, but these are a few that come readily to mind. If you really feel that you can make a difference in someone's life that's fine, but you must find a different way to get that sentiment across. Being a member of the track team may really have taught you some valuable lessons that you have also applied to your studies, but we need to see this is true without you stating that as a fact. If you tell an effective story or show us an example how this is true, it will prove to be a great essay that gets this feeling across without you having to say it in such an explicit, and often boring, way.

Putting the Pen to paper

At this point in your high school career you have probably done some brainstorming. In this case however, you're not forced to brainstorm about

nanotechnology or the life cycle of the fruit fly. You get to brainstorm about you. You get to sit around and think about yourself and how interesting and wonderful you are. You should begin to think about any experiences you have had that made a significant impact on the person you are now. Some of those experiences will come readily to mind, as they have been large and obvious. Other experiences, the ones you sometimes have to dig for, have an equal impact on who you are but make their mark in a more subtle way. You don't need to think only about the big things, but think of a regular day in your life and your regular routine. Sometimes an element about how you choose to live each day is more telling than some huge, life-altering event. Recall all your accomplishments and proud moments, but don't forget about any mistakes or bad choices you've made, as they are just as important as all your good choices. Admissions officers will see your mistakes in a positive light as long as you have learned from them. In fact, it is probably better to write about a mistake you've made and how it helped you to become a better person, rather than trying to tell them you've been perfect all along by bombarding them with a laundry list of accomplishments.

You have many options when you begin brainstorming. You can create a list of ideas, a web diagram, a chart, flashcards, or any other means of getting your ideas down. You can start by filling in the following information. It is a list of the basic things you may want to include in your essay. You do not have to write about any of the following, the questions are simply meant to help you drum up ideas or get started. Answer the following questions:

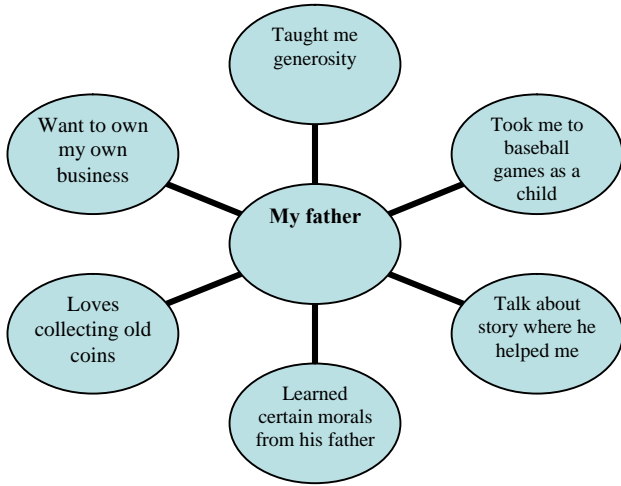
1. What are your five best qualities?
2. Ask three people what they consider to be your five best qualities.
3. List the five most influential people in your life. Why are they important?
4. What is your favorite sport/hobby/activity?

5. How would you feel if you had to give up this activity? Why?
6. Do you have a favorite quotation? (Be careful with this one: if it's a well-known quote, I wouldn't use it unless you have an original take on it).
7. Have you made any wrong choices in your life that you have learned from?
8. What was your most embarrassing moment? What did you learn from that?
9. Think of 5 instances in your life that have stood out most. What were you feeling at the time?
10. Has there been a single incident that has caused you to reevaluate your opinions or your attitude on a subject?
11. Do you have a favorite book or movie that has impacted your life in some way?
12. List three weird habits or quirky things about yourself. What do they say about you?
13. If your life were a movie, what type of protagonist would you be?
14. What is something about you that many people do not know?
15. Think of your personal characteristics: what is one that distinguishes you from other people?
16. List five things you would include if you were writing your own autobiography.

17. List 5 things you are knowledgeable about.
18. List 5 people that you respect, alive or dead. Why?
19. List two huge failures, and two huge successes.
20. Ask three friends to list three things each that they think of when they think of you.
21. If you had a motto about life, what would it be?
22. Describe yourself to a stranger.
23. What is your one sentence philosophy on life?
24. List ten things you enjoy, and ten things you don't.

After you've answered these questions try to link similar ideas and experiences. Find patterns and connections between your interests and instances from your life. Does your generous nature have anything to do with your volunteer work with Habitat for Humanity, or your interest in architecture, or both? Does your collection of postcards from all over the world signal a possible interest in anthropology? Once you find connections, brainstorm how you can attach these ideas into one essay.

Exercise: Take at least two answers to the questions above and brainstorm them. Create either an outline or a web of ideas, and link together words, stories, phrases, events or people that could be related. Don't think too hard here. Brainstorm anything that comes to mind. Good ideas usually spring from bad ideas or random thoughts. Here is one example of how to brainstorm your essay idea:



Chapter 6: Writing the Essay: Telling a Story

Choosing a topic

After you have brainstormed enough ideas, one or two should surface as the most complete or interesting. If you are thinking of a topic, and you can't think of enough supporting evidence to fill a few paragraphs about your topic, then it is not the topic you should use. Also, keep in mind what the essay actually is. It is the face you are putting on your application package. Your recommendations give your application a personality, but you cannot control what your teacher writes about you. Not all schools interview, so this may be your only opportunity to let admissions know what kind of person you really are. You should choose a topic that: 1) allows you to create an "emotional arc," 2) tells admissions something different than what they can already find in your transcript, and 3) you can write in depth about, since depth of a topic is more important than breadth. As we mentioned, there is no topic you shouldn't write about, it is how you present your topic. If you do choose an overused topic, it then becomes necessary for you to put an original spin on it. By choosing an overused topic or quotation and finding an original perspective, it tells the admissions board that you are unique and insightful. It is important for you to take this popular experience and draw original conclusions.

Creating Your Emotional Arc

You are telling a story. It should have a beginning, middle and end. It should draw the reader in at the start, and come full circle at the finish. You are giving schools a slice of your life, but it needs to be a "complete" piece of work that gives the reader a good idea of who you are. That is what we mean by "emotional arc." All too often students make the mistake by either 1) trying to give an overview of their life by listing a series of events from the time they were three years old, or 2) starting a story but not finishing it by not forming any conclusions, or 3) not bringing the essay full circle. Even though it may only be a 250-word essay, it needs to be a complete piece of writing.

Once you have narrowed down your brainstorming ideas to one or a few topics, there are some tips you want to keep in mind as you begin your essay.

Start writing. The best advice I've heard to begin an essay is to just begin. If you have to begin by writing the lyrics to your favorite song or the Gettysburg Address, do that. Get your fingers typing or your pen writing. These are not the days when people etch their essays into stone tablets; you are allowed to erase, start over, and rewrite. Don't feel like your first draft has to be perfect. Start in the middle if you have to. Just let yourself begin.

Create mystery. You want to begin your essay with an unknown. If you tell the reader in the first sentence, "I am a hardworking individual because I am the captain of the swim team," chances are he is going to be bored. You've given away the punch line. Make the reader wonder where you are taking him. Admissions officers have thousands of essays to read and are human too, and will probably skim the rest of your essay if the first few lines tell them what they will be reading over and over again through your whole essay. If you are bored reading your essay, then someone else will be too.

Be stingy. You have a very short opportunity to try to get your personality across. Make every word count. Make sure that every sentence and word you write is completely necessary. This will help you to prevent repeating yourself. If you have to say the same thing three times, you know you have to go back and say it once effectively.

Introduce. Explode into your essay with a fantastic introduction. If your essay is the hundredth to be read that day, you don't want to be responsible for putting the admissions officer to sleep. You can open your essay with: a quotation, a short anecdote, a description of a scene, an interesting (but true) fact, or a description of your feelings, a dialogue, a personal introspection, a question, a statement. You want the reader to see the first line and want to read more. Although you want to get the audience's attention, you do not want to be gimmicky or campy. Campy or gimmicky introductions are attention getting just for the sake of being shocking rather than sincere. Shock value doesn't tend

to work; something heartfelt, quirky, or sincere works better. Here are some opening lines. Which do you think are good opening lines? Which do you think are boring?

As captain of the football team for two years, I have learned the value of hard work.

Each time I step out onto the field, my hair stands on end from the roar of the crowd.

People tell me I am optimistic because nothing bothers me, and I am never in a bad mood.

He stands in the corner of a small room, glowing with victory, waiting for attention. His silence resonates.

Sound like you. What really makes an essay great is the voice that resonates from start to finish. Nobody else could have your voice, so don't try to sound like someone else. If you usually use words like "pernicious" and "malcontent" in your everyday conversation that's fine; if you don't, then stick to the vocabulary you usually use. Admissions officers will be able to tell if you have gone through your essay and used the Thesaurus function in Word to replace all your words with "bigger and better" ones. Do challenge yourself to sound as intelligent and concise as possible, but don't write the essay and then go back replacing everything. Just because a word has more syllables doesn't mean it is more effective.

Show, don't just tell. Anybody can *tell* you they are having a bad day. But when you *see* a friend red in the face and slamming his locker door, you know he is mad without even having to ask. This is what you want to make sure to do in your essay. The reader will believe your experiences and sentiments if you show the details of the experience. Often, students will continue to "tell" by repeating the sentiment they want to get across in the essay, which makes it boring and redundant. They are afraid they aren't getting the point across, so they say it five times. "Showing" what you want to say once is more effective

than telling it five times. If you find this difficult, try to make sure you use details that cater to all five senses in your essay. Here are some examples:

Tell: I was very angry when my brother punched me.

Show: I could feel my face grow a deep, warm red. My fingernails dug into the palms of my hands and my fists shook.

Tell: I learned that it is good to be kind to everyone, no matter if they are your friends or not.

Show: Next time I see a freshman looking lost or out of place, I will help her and show her where to go.

Be honest. If you choose a topic in which you have genuine enthusiasm, your excitement will show through. Admissions officers want to see that you have a real interest in something. Don't feel like you have to pretend to enjoy something if you do not. Admissions officers can tell the difference between a student with a genuine concern for what they are writing about, and one who is faking it because it sounds good. Don't pretend that you love your Physics class if you don't. If you choose to write on a topic that you enjoy, half the work is done already, as your enthusiasm will naturally shine through.

Be your own cheerleader. You often hear that the college admissions essay is your opportunity to sell yourself. Admissions officers do want to hear about the great things you have realized and accomplished. They want to hear that you have learned valuable lessons and learned to appreciate valuable people. However,

Modesty is always endearing. You should never pretend to be perfect in a college essay. No admissions officer is going to reject you because you've made a mistake in your life. It is wonderful to see an essay where a student used to think a certain way but has learned since then. You should highlight your accomplishments, but you never want to go as far as calling yourself a hero or a life-saver (unless of course you wear a cape or

have actually saved someone's life). If you are telling a story about something great you did for someone else, you can add a level of modesty to the story by talking about what you learned from helping another person. There is always a lesson for you when doing something good for others.

Be creative, but not cutesy or gimmicky. I have heard several stories of unique attempts at submitting the application. But keep in mind; your essay should be memorable because it is well written, not because it was printed on pink paper or smells like flowers. Gimmicks like this can backfire just as easily as they can work, so they aren't worth the risk. Be creative by being original and articulate, not cutesy and gimmicky.

Take risks. Admissions officers have read hundreds of the same, boring essay. It is a relief when they come to an essay that is different or stands out among the rest. Admissions officers want to see that you are willing to be bold. Being bold doesn't mean writing about a controversial subject to shock the reader, or feeling that you need to have had some totally unique hobby like ice fishing in Siberia. Writing about some quirky element of your personality that you have spent years trying to hide for fear that someone might call you weird is actually a great start for your essay. Collecting old coins might seem weird to your football buddies, but you may find value in the history and nostalgia of it. Tell this in your essay; the reader will find it unique and genuine. Being bold by sharing something personal is way more effective than sending your essay in by bird or balloon or whatever. However, you must evaluate what type of school you are applying to in order to determine how much of a risk you are willing to take.

Be specific. Too many students feel that the essay is supposed to be an overview of their entire lifetime. Should you attempt to roll all of your hopes, dreams, ambitions and accomplishments into one essay? The answer to that is a resounding "No!" What many students don't realize is that the specifics speak more about a person rather than a gaping

overview that tries to summarize a lifetime. Focus on one event, story, or incident and from that, draw broader conclusions about what these details say about you as a whole.

Let the details get you remembered. You don't have to be ornate, but you do have to be original. You have any number of opportunities in your essay to make sure the admissions officers remember you. After reading hundreds of names and stories, chances are, the reader will more likely remember the essay about the girl who watches cartoons with her baby brother, rather than a long, drawn-out story. Or an essay that simply states, "My family is very important to me." Above, after you have chosen a topic to expand on, you now should try to think of details to go along with that topic. Here are some details we liked from a variety of college essays:

1. I loved cycling to church in the traditional *Ao Dai* dress, amongst a uniform movement of flowing dresses and cyclist.
2. Each year I run the whole course, but I've been a participant since I was squirming in my stroller.
3. He and my dad would try to outdo each other with their antics, like who could create the better reindeer arrangement in the front yard.

Exercise: Take an idea from your essay or brainstorming. Write the original idea, and then write three details associated with each idea that makes the information specific to you.

Create the "That's Me!" moment. You know you have succeeded when you hand your essay to a friend or family member to read and they find you in the essay. They should read it and say, that sounds just like you! There are elements to your personality that make you who you are, and these are the ones that should come through in your essay. If you are unsure of the things that make you sound like you, ask your friends and family. Have a friend read the essay and if she finds an element that is very "you" then you are on the right track

Chapter 7: General Writing Rules to Consider

Although most schools are not going to red-pen your essay to death, they do want to see that you are a competent writer. This means there should be no spelling or grammar mistakes. Finding silly tactical mistakes can ruin the overall effect you are trying for in your essay. You may be thinking, one little mistake is not going to ruin a great essay. Even small mistakes like confusing *their* and *there* or *it's* and *its* will make you look careless. And don't count on spell-check for these things. If you are not confident in your grammar skills, give your essay to a teacher or parent who is competent in this area.

These are the mistakes that appear most often in a college admissions essay:

The Active Voice. The active voice is a stronger, more assertive way to explain what you have experienced. It gives the writer responsibility for what she has accomplished or learned. Use this whenever possible. Here is the difference between the passive voice and the active voice:

Passive: The book was read by Jaime.

Active: Jaime read the book.

Passive: At the children's Christmas party, there was much celebration of the season by the children and teachers.

Active: At the children's Christmas party, both the children and teachers celebrated the season.

By keeping with the active voice you don't keep the reader waiting to see who has completed the action. Your essay should be clear, concise and confident, and using the active voice is a good way to make sure of that. If you are still unsure of how to use the active voice, try these examples below. They are all written in the passive voice, and it is your job to rewrite the sentence using the active voice.

1. My dreams of becoming a doctor can be realized by first completing the pre-med program at your school.
2. The students are failed by the teacher whenever they use the passive voice.
3. There is one more test to be taken for finals.
4. All the research from the group project was done by Alison.
5. The purpose of the class should be made obvious in the first five minutes.

Contractions. You can safely assume that you should not be using contractions in your paper, as you want to write in your regular tone but do want to keep an element of formality to your paper. Contractions are fine to use if you are quoting a line of dialogue.

Here are the most commonly used or misspelled contractions:

its: (with no apostrophe) used as a possessive, or shows ownership:

Its wheels are broken.

Its claws are sharp.

it's: (with the apostrophe) serves as the contraction for *it is*:

It's raining today.

It's normal to feel nervous for a test.

their: is a possessive, indicating ownership

Their house is right next-door.

Their vacation has been cut short.

they're: serves as a contraction for *they are*:

They're going to be at the party tonight.

They're unsure as to how to get to your house.

Semicolons: Semicolons are used to separate independent clauses. You can use a semicolon if you are joining two independent clauses that are related in one sentence. An independent clause is one that can stand on its own as a sentence:

Matt loved to play baseball; he carried his mitt around all day.

The parts of the sentence before and after the semicolon are independent clauses. We know that because if we replace the semicolon with a period, we would have two full sentences. Semicolons are also used when separating a number of things in a list that are already separated by commas:

I brought a football, just in case we needed something to do; a flashlight, if we needed to go out to collect firewood at night; an extra gallon of water for a really hot day; and a first aid kit, if anyone had any injuries while hiking.

Don't hedge. The reader wants to know how you think and feel, and because you are the author of this essay we can assume that you will be sharing your thoughts and opinions. You should be assertive about your opinions and experiences. Do not write "maybe," "might," or "perhaps" or "It could be possible." Say what you have to say with conviction. If you do not believe what you are writing, no one else will either.

Hide transitional words. When you use words like "however," "thus," "yet," and "therefore," you want to put them in the middle of the sentence rather than at the beginning or end. Instead of saying something like, "However, she felt that his apology was insincere," you might want to write, "She felt, however, that his apology was insincere."

You or One. Either way is acceptable, but whatever you choose you must be consistent. If you are talking about people in general or making general statements like "One must understand the importance of friendship," the "one" and the "you" are interchangeable as long as you use the same one consistently throughout.

Write about works of art in the present tense. Not all students choose to write about an influential movie, book, or piece of art in their essay, but those that do must always talk about it in the present tense. For example, Hamlet's father will be visiting him as a ghost and Forrest Gump will be running across America well after your grandkids have graduated from college.

Simplicity makes for clarity. You can get across a powerful sentiment in your essay without a) a pompous tone and b) three adjectives per noun. Terms that sound important will speak for themselves without you pumping them up. You will often see people on television doing this, but do not follow their example. For example, the word *use* is stronger than *utilize* and means the same thing. If you are using a string of multi-syllabic words in your essay, go through and decide if they are all necessary and that you are indeed using them in the right context.

Chapter 8: After the Essay: Editing and Revising

The hardest part is done. You have a story, a slice of your life or an experience down on paper. But you aren't finished yet. There are still important steps left to ensure that you have the most successful essay possible. The tricky thing about writing, which most writers will tell you, is that you are never quite sure when you are finished. This is where it will be important that you have left yourself enough time. If you have started your essay early, you will have the time to let it rest. You have been brainstorming and writing so that after a while it becomes easy for you to miss where there is no transition, a misspelling or a weak conclusion. But there are a number of things you can do to ensure you send the best version of your essay to all your schools. First, ask yourself the following questions about your essay. If you have a difficult time answering them have another person who has read your essay answer the following questions:

1. Can a hundred other applicants write this essay?
2. Does the first sentence create mystery or draw the reader into the essay?
3. If it opens with a quotation, story or statement, do I bring the essay full circle by referencing this idea again?
4. Can the reader predict what the essay will be about in the first two lines?
5. Are there smooth transitions between paragraphs?
6. Is the essay free of spelling mistakes?
7. Have I punctuated correctly?
8. Does it answer the question correctly, or answer the correct question?
9. Have I put together a story, or created my emotional arc?
10. Am I bored reading my own essay?

Put it away. This is one of the reasons why we encourage students to start their essays early. Your best chance for being able to read your own essay objectively is to put it away. Put it in a folder or a drawer and don't think about it for a week. Don't read it. Then, come back to it later and read it again. There will be errors, discrepancies or

portions you don't like that have become obvious, that you did not notice as you were writing or the first few times you read it over. By putting some distance between you and your own writing, you will be able to get a "fresh look" at your own work. Many writers, as they are laboring incessantly over a piece of work, become attached to a certain phrase or paragraph, even though it may not work. They become attached to their "brain-child." If you distance yourself for a few days, a week, or a month, you become more willing to change something that you initially refused to let go that was hurting your essay.

Borrow another set of eyes. No matter how many times you read it over, you still may be missing something. You need another perspective as to how the voice in the essay sounds. In fact, ask a few people to read it, maybe a family member and a friend. Ask them if it sounds like your writing. If they can't find *you* in the essay, then you need to change some things. They can also check the transitions and the general flow of the essay. You may not notice if the essay is choppy because in your head it makes sense, but your friend will notice if one minute you are talking about your dedication to music and next you are telling stories of you and your brother at the beach when you were three.

Read it backwards. We all know that spell-check is not 100% reliable. If you have already read your essay a hundred times, and you read it again for spelling errors there is a good chance you may miss one because your brain already knows what word is supposed to come next. Instead, start from the last word of the essay and read each word from end to beginning. By interrupting the regular flow of reading, you will become more aware if an individual word is spelled wrong.

Read it aloud. You get a completely different feel for the flow of the essay when you read it aloud. You have probably noticed these differences if you ever had a project to present in class. What an essay sounds like in your head is far different from what it sounds like out loud. This will also help you to identify where you may need to create clearer transitions.

Pare down. Your essay should be clean and free of any unnecessary words and phrases. Believe me, I love adjectives and adverbs, but your admissions essay is not meant to be a flowery description of your garden (no terrible pun intended); it's supposed to be informative. A great way to start the essay is with a description, but make sure you don't overdo it. No noun needs five adjectives, or even three for that matter. I had a professor who called it the "cold, hard, grey rock" syndrome. We know most rocks are cold, hard, and grey. Unless there is something terribly unusual about a usual object, you don't need to tell the reader what he already assumes. Also, many students feel they need to say the same thing in a few different ways for emphasis. Instead, make sure you are saying it once, effectively.

The beauty is in the details. Yes, I just told you not to overdo the details. You certainly want to include details; you just want to be choosy. Describing an elephant as big and grey is unnecessary and expected; describing your newborn baby brother as a wonderful, smiling peach is not expected, and is an observation that is unique to you.

This is still a formal essay. Although you want to write this essay using the comfortable pattern of speech and writing style you usually use, this is still considered a formal essay. The way you speak with your friends is colloquial. It is okay to be comfortable in your essay, but avoid being too colloquial. Speak in a way that is natural to you, however, you do not want to be so comfortable that you abandon all appropriate rules of writing. For example, describing an experience as "cool" or saying that, "My two years at summer camp were awesome," is too informal, and frankly, not very descriptive. You should also never write with abbreviations that you might write in emails or over IM, unless of course you are including an exchange with someone you had over email or IM.

Vary sentence structure. This essay is about you, but that doesn't mean every sentence has to begin with "I think" or "I feel." Instead, challenge yourself to start each sentence with a different word. Vary the length of sentences; too many long sentences in succession can become confusing or wordy, and too many short sentences are choppy. To check that you are varying the length and start of each sentence, underline the first two

words of each sentence, and label each sentence with an L (long sentence) an M (medium) and an S (short). The pattern should vary. If you have LLLMLL or LSSSS, then you know the unvaried sentences will cause your essay to be long-winded or choppy.

Chapter 9: Work Shop- Writing a Sample Essay

Now that we have gone over all of the steps to writing a successful college essay, let us write one step by step. We will use the question from the common application, "Discuss an important person or event in your life."

The topic of my essay is going to be a sibling. The essay is fictitious but it can give you an idea of what a well-written essay looks like. Now that we have our topic, let us move on to the introduction.

Step 1- Writing the Introduction: The first thing we need in our introduction is a catch phrase. We need to grab the reader's attention so that they are drawn in from the start.

Example- "I am not proud to admit that in my younger years I felt embarrassed and ashamed of my older brother John. John came into this world just like you and I, with a loving mother, a tough, caring father, and a bright new world to conquer."

The opening sentence is different and leaves the reader wondering why the author is embarrassed of his brother and now ashamed of himself. The next few sentences will explain the relationship in general terms and the last sentence will be the main focus of the essay.

Example- "There was one way that John's birth was different from others; John was born mentally handicapped. I think that there is truly no way to explain to someone who has never had the experience of living with a handicapped person and then fully appreciate it. My life with John has been full of ups and downs. I have gone through times of ridicule, spite, and embarrassment, only to be rewarded with times of hope, love, and most of all inspiration. I can pinpoint the day when my whole negative manner of thinking about John's uniqueness changed. As cliché as it sounds, that day will forever be ingrained in my memory because my eyes were opened and my life was changed for the better."

The last sentence is referring to a life-changing moment so we know the focus of the essay will be on this event. The introduction has all of the ingredients that are necessary. We have a catch phrase (in italics) and we have our focus (underlined) in the last few sentences. The focus of the essay is clear and we are on the right track.

Body Paragraph One- In this paragraph we will get some background information on the actual relationship of the two brothers. We are not going to give every single detail but enough so the reader gets a good idea of whom the author is and what his relationship with his brother was like before his life-altering event. The first sentence of your body paragraph is the topic sentence. It tells what the paragraph is about. The topic sentence is underlined. The topic is about John being a big supporter of his little brother, so the rest of the paragraph needs to support this with examples. I put the examples in italics. The wrap-up sentence is the last sentence. It wraps up the ideas of this paragraph and

also is a transition to the next paragraph. It makes a smooth transition into talking about the specific life-altering event. I underlined the concluding sentence.

Example- John was my biggest supporter in every endeavor that I attempted. He was at every single baseball practice and game that I participated in. He would cheer so loud for me out of love and pride, but I would turn every shade of red and pretend that I did not know who was cheering. He acted this way no matter what I did, good or bad, and it never failed to drive me insane. He screamed so loud at my school play in 4th grade that they had to pause the production for 10 minutes to wait for him to quiet down. When I won an award for my science project in 6th grade, John ran on to the stage to hug me when I accepted my plaque and I pushed him away. And in 7th grade, long after I believed in Santa Claus, John wore a Santa suit every day (even out to restaurants!) for a month to make me happy. At that point in my life I only felt anger and shame for my brother. Before I went to bed at night, I prayed for a “normal” family. It never dawned on me that the negative feelings that I had towards my brother would someday cast a dark cloud over that time period in my life.

The next paragraph will introduce the turning point for the author and describe the much-anticipated event in detail. The topic sentence of this paragraph will introduce the event. I underlined the topic sentence. The details of the event are in italics. The concluding sentence is underlined. This sentence wraps up the ideas and events of the paragraph. It also makes a smooth transition into the conclusion.

When I think back to my younger years, I am not proud of whom I was. I want to go back in time and grab that kid by the shirt collar and scream, “What are you thinking? Show your brother some love!” Unfortunately there is no time travel and I cannot take back what has already happened. Luckily for me, and most importantly my brother, my attitude finally did change.

*I remember the day clear as a bell. It was a hot night in July and I was on fire at my local summer league baseball game. I was making great plays in the field and my hitting was superb. I had already doubled and hit a single so when I came up to bat in the 9th inning with the score tied, the bases loaded and two outs I felt confident that I would win the game. I was imagining myself being carried off the field on my team’s shoulders. Everyone was cheering for me and of course John’s voice was the loudest of all. To make a long story short, with everyone counting on me, I struck out. All clapping stopped abruptly and the cheers were replaced by loud groans. Suddenly I felt alone and like a complete fool. As I walked back to the dugout with my head hung low I could hear clapping and one single voice yelling, “Good job!” I looked into the stands and my eyes locked with my big brother. At that moment, John spoke to me the way that I always imagined a big brother would. **He was beaming with pride for his younger brother and he did not care one iota that I had just lost the game for the team. I looked back into his eyes and I smiled; I smiled because he did not care.***

The last step of the essay is the conclusion. In the conclusion it is necessary to bring the essay full circle and show what the author has learned and how he has grown from his particular experience. We have to be careful not to use language that is cliché.

Conclusion- In that instant my life changed. The anger and frustration that I had been carrying around with me for years suddenly melted away. John was cheering for me because he loved me; he did not care if I hit the ball or not. I realized that he was right; it didn't matter. What really mattered was that I had someone who would always be behind me, who would always love me. Things like striking out in a summer league game are not important, things like loving my brother are important. John has taught me the value of unconditional love and support and thanks to his constant encouragement I am pushed to achieve things that I never thought possible. Although I cannot change the past, I can learn from it and change my future. I have decided to emulate my big brother and live life with a positive and upbeat attitude and I have finally come to realize that life is much better this way. Big brothers always seem to know what is best.

The essay is complete with a solid introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion that brings the essay full circle. The essay flows well thanks to the smooth transitions. By reviewing the essay it is clear to the reader that the essay shows what was learned and how the writer grew from his experience. The author is very sincere and honest in his essay. By writing about a mistake that was made, it allows the author to show how he was changed by the experience.

Chapter 10: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly: Sample Essays and Reactions From a Former Director of Admission

The comments at the end of each essay are intended to show the writers how to improve their essay. There are many positive aspects of each essay but they are not emphasized. Do not be discouraged when you read the comments at the end, because in any person's essay there is always room for improvement.

Sample Essay 1

Throughout the years there have been many different heroes. Ulysses S. Grant, Martin Luther King, John Kennedy, and even sports figures like Michael Jordan. However the man I admire most is not so widely known. He is my grandfather, John Gaynor.

I realize he doesn't quite measure up to these men by some standards. He wasn't a war hero, though he did serve in the laundry room of a ship at the end of WWII. He wasn't a great political leader, but a distant relative was the mayor of New York. Finally he wasn't a sports hero. In his illustrious high school career he scores only two points, on a point after touchdown conversion.

Despite all this he is my hero. He represents family values, hard work, and everything that I consider good in America today.

He has kept our family together in a time when family values are supposedly gone. All together our family numbers seventeen aunts, uncles, and cousins, who all live within a quarter mile radius. We are very close, and often eat and vacation together.

Of my grandfather's three children, three are now divorced. Despite that neither my cousins nor my immediate family comes from broken homes. My grandfather is the mortar that holds our families together.

When my parents got divorced my grandfather was there for us. On Wednesday nights when my father works we go to my grandfather's house for dinner. When we were younger we'd go to his house before school to wait for the bus.

Through this whole divorce my grandfather's main concern was us, the children. He consoled us and spent the time with us, all the while keeping his own feelings inside. Like a good friend who fall on a grenade for another, this almost killed him. He had a heart attack.

While he was in the hospital, I had time to think about how much he means to me. How will I ever repay a man who has done so much for me but expects nothing? How can I express in words how I feel for him? There is no possible way to do either of these things adequately.

Most of my fondest memories include my grandfather. He has instilled in me a sense of family. I am blessed to be related to a man who is always busy, yet

always has time for me; a man who is not an athlete, yet shares with me the joy of sports; a man who still loves his wife very much after forty years; a man, who in every sense of the word is a hero.

Comments From a Former Director of Admission:

- Avoid using real names i.e. your grandpa
- Be cautious about writing on divorce and relatives as role models since it's overdone on college essays
- Be original, truthful, and real
- Don't belittle grandpa comparing him to famous people, rather focus on his accomplishments instead of what he wasn't
- Expand family values and hard work characteristics since those are admirable qualities
- More detail about dinners, waiting for the bus, consoling; what did he teach you?
- Have English teacher proofread for grammar i.e. more commas and change out to our in 3rd paragraph
- Expand on memories and what you learned from him; you've told us, now use examples of why he's a hero
- How do you live his values in your daily life?
- Consider replacing hero with role model
- Define hero from dictionary
- Develop yourself as a hero in your essay
- May want to avoid names of heroes since your reader may disagree with your opinions, rather could use war hero, president, civil rights activist, athlete, decorated woman or man
- Write in compound sentences rather than short choppy sentences
- Focus on positives i.e. WW2 vet rather than laundry room worker
- Make the reader want to meet him b/c of who he is and what you have become
- Good description in mortar, console, fall on grenade
- Is he still alive? Need closure
- Did he accompany you on your campus visit to the college?
- Last paragraph has strong emotions; essay needs more of that
- You describe him as busy. Busy doing what?
- Be careful when asking questions in essays

Sample Essay 2

Athena is, in Greek Mythology the Goddess of Wisdom, and also the sister I have never met. In fourth grade my parents sat me down in our piano room. The piano

room is really my room-a glossy black piano where I've learned, practiced, and sang; beautiful artwork of musicians; a guitar; my music; and pictures of my family adorn the tables and shelves. It is in this room that my parents told me that my biological mother had a daughter who was seven years older than me. Thoughts raced through my mind: "Why didn't my parents tell me earlier?", "Does she look like me?", "How come I was adopted and she got to stay?" Today these thoughts and questions still itch at my brain.

On December 3rd, 1988 I was brought into the world. When my birth mother placed me for adoption, I became Jane Olivia Doe, the newest member to an already outstanding family. My family includes my parents, my sister, Joan, and my two dogs (who are both red heads). Both of my parents have dark brown hair and brown eyes, and my sister has blonde hair and blue eyes. As for me, I have red hair and hazel eyes. I was sad that I didn't look like anyone around me except my dogs! I would get into arguments with my family and say hurtful things like, "You're not my real mother!", or "You're not my real father!", or "You're not my real sister!" Sometimes my sadness turned to anger.

From an early age my parents were always open with me about my adoption, answering any questions that I had. However they decided not to tell me about my sibling until they felt I was ready to digest it. As a child and adolescent it is still very confusing for me. The concept of adoption was not about a mother caring for a child and giving them a better life, but about a mother not wanting the child. Throughout elementary school and junior high school, I found a way to channel my confusion and irritation about my adoption through writing poetry. Still it was not enough. I was still sad if I heard the word "orphan" or "adoption". Even some of the kids at school made fun of me because they said it was ironic that my last name was Foster and that I was a "foster child". Every year around my birthday I would write letters to my birth mother hoping she would like what she read then take me back. When I was younger, I thought this was my temporary family until my "real" family decided to come and get me. Now that I look back I see how silly that was, I was already with my real family. I have realized that my adoption is not something that should make me sad; instead it is a blessing. Family is not about the people who have the same DNA as you, but about the people who love you with every ounce of their being. I have been brought up in the most amazing home with the most amazing people. Our hair and our genetics may not match, but we are all tied together in our love for each other. My sister is my best friend and we do everything together, whether it is watching a movie or beating our parents at pool. Maybe meeting Athena one day will give me the opportunity to have two sisters. Before I looked at my adoption as a loss, now I see it as a gain. If I was not adopted then I might not have been given all of the opportunities that have been put before me. Today as I sit in the piano room and play my mother's favorite song of mine "My Heart Will Go On", I know that someday I want to meet my biological family, but I know I don't need to meet them because I have the greatest family I could have ever chosen for myself. Thankfully they chose me.

Comments From a Former Director of Admission:

- Potential to be a heart warming essay
- Write with positive emotion vs. anger and resentment
- 2nd paragraph may be better as 1st paragraph
- 1st paragraph needs a hook
- Eliminate piano room and musical accomplishments since the theme of the essay doesn't include a music focus
- Make reader want to know and like you
- No need to define Athena since wisdom isn't a major theme
- Write in chronological order i.e. birth then 4th grade
- Avoid date of birth
- Have English teacher proofread for grammar (more commas)
- Good sense of humor with resembling of pet
- Elaborate on feelings when told of adoption i.e. confusion, why me? Anger
- Rephrase itch my brain and digest it
- Use poetry in essay or as the essay
- It's ok to look vulnerable with real vs. temporary family
- Expand on sadness and cruelty of Foster
- Avoid writing how you speak and run on sentences w/out commas
- Sympathy vote for being teased (reader can relate to you)
- A letter to birth mom could be the essay
- Powerful line: love you w/ every ounce of being
- Replace DNA w/ genes or genetic make up
- Expand on "amazing" home and people
- Good use of optimism to meet sis and mom
- A letter to biological sis maybe unique essay format
- Rephrase to write yesterday adoption loss, today gain
- May want to use song title as essay title
- End essay w/ something powerful like why college wants to choose you like your step parents choose you

Sample Essay 3

From the first day of orientation, I was convinced that I was different. I was a fish thrown out of water, an Asian girl attending school in a predominantly Caucasian community. I did not look "American" because my Vietnamese heritage strongly manifested itself in my appearance and yet I did not want to have myself branded as Asian. I did not see myself as belonging to the stereotypical "model minority," the meek, dark-haired girl whose life revolved solely around her ambition to succeed in school. Although I was the girl who got straight A's and graduated valedictorian, I always had an inner drive to do more, to be more than what was expected of "studious" Asians. As much as I tried to call myself an "American" and tuck away my heritage, it was ineluctably a part of me. The contours of my

face were not the same as my classmates and I did not have their prominent noses, but rather jet black hair and fairly slanted eyes. I did not come from a family of prestige and my parents were neither erudite, nor doctors or lawyers. Uncomfortable in my own skin, I felt like my American identity were a counterfeit.

My feelings, however, changed after visiting Vietnam. In going to Vietnam, I confronted the contradictions within and threw myself into the Asian jungle. There, I fell in love with the timeless beauty and charm of Vietnam. I loved cycling to church in the traditional Ao Dai dress, amongst a uniform movement of flowing dresses and cyclos. I still muse on the thought of colorful Saigon streets filled with vendors thrusting bamboo hats of rice on their shoulders and the man who never stopped playing his melancholic melody. And as my love for the people of Vietnam grew, so did my understanding of my cultural identity. I am a Viet Kieu, a Vietnamese American. My reflection shows a world of intertwining cultures; a part of me that I had been denying to others and to myself. It was this underlying close connection to Vietnam that drove me to succeed. I now can grasp the impact of the values that my parents have instilled in me, like work ethic, respect for elders, and preservation of the family.

It is people like me who redefine America. We are not just "Americans", we each also have a heritage that we should embrace. Each culture has been woven into the fabric of American life. By sharing the unique facets of my culture, I'm able to teach others about what it means to be a first-generation Vietnamese American. Entering my house, you will inevitably find a mountain of shoes and smell the aromas of Vietnamese herbs and spices. But you will also notice a television and a music shelf full of contemporary rock. My family has adapted to American culture while still keeping our values intact. There should not be a clash of cultures because one is built off the other. I have learned that tasty ethnic dishes, like tamarind shrimp soup and mint chicken, can be combined with "all-American" tuna sandwiches and Coca-cola. I did not have to choose between my motherland and Vietnam. I am after all a Viet Kieu, a microcosm of two worlds.

Comments From a Former Director of Admission:

- Paragraphs too long
- Careful about using stereotyping in essay as you don't want to offend the reader
- Rephrase 2nd sentence of 2nd paragraph
- Expand on parental values
- Redefine America and teach but how?
- Good use of sight, smell, sound and taste
- Use diversity angle to your advantage since all colleges stress importance of a diverse college community
- Sell yourself as you tell your story
- 1st paragraph needs hook and better visual of you standing out in the crowd
- Avoid clichés

- 1st paragraph too detailed about appearance
- Why should they admit you?
- Need more substance than being worldly and diverse

Sample Essay 4

[This application tells you my class rank, my SAT I & II scores, and my GPA. It tells you that I was better at French and English than Algebra and Physics. But it doesn't tell you who I am. No social security number or class average can do that. So this is my attempt to describe the real me. This is my story, an effort to make me more than a number.]

I am a daughter and a sister. My birthday is June 18th. I am a Gemini. I believe all daydreams can come true. I love to read. I volunteer. I hate math. I have always wanted to own a pair of ruby slippers. My room is always messy; my locker is always organized (go figure). I am quick to apologize.

I have a Varsity letter for Drama. I am a Daddy's Girl (and proud of it). I cry at movies. I work in an ice cream parlor. I believe that life exists on other planets. I start humming Christmas carols the day after Thanksgiving. My favorite flower is Alyssum. I love spring. I am a really good poker player. I believe in God. I am very trusting. I love to laugh. I work well with kids. I ride all roller coasters with my arms in the air. I like to pretend I can draw. I collect dolls, books, and memories. I am a good friend. I am a National Honor Society officer. I love to sleep. I am a photographer. My scrapbook is currently more than 120 pages.

I believe in fate. I make a wish every chance I get. My lucky number is 8. I save everything. I am an actress; some would say a real "drama queen." I still sleep with stuffed animals. I am afraid of fire, escalators, and loneliness. I will go to Paris someday. I eat way too much ice cream. I have my own phone line.

I am a writer. I am writing a novel now; someday I will write a bestseller. I enjoy listening to others tell stories. I am a hopeless romantic. My room is decorated with photographs, collages, and dried roses. I like to watch clouds. I get dressed up as often as possible. I procrastinate. I get embarrassed easily. I keep a journal.

I am not very athletic. I got a car for my 17th birthday. My best subject is English. I can watch Dirty Dancing six times a day and never get tired of it. I am a poet. I need a big tree to sit under and write inspiring verses. I have a childlike sense of wonder. I like surprises. I try not to take anything for granted. I am a bargain shopper.

I like school. I am an alto in concert choir. I have a puppy named Mindy. I am going to be an English teacher. I have four best friends. I am mature beyond my years, or so people tell me. I am Editor-in-Chief of my high school's yearbook. I will never get tired of visiting Disney World. My favorite dessert is my mother's strawberry shortcake. I think everyone I meet has something worthwhile to teach me. I always have the last word.

I doodle while I'm on the phone. I give people a second chance. I would love to ride in a hot air balloon. I sing loudly and dance around the house when I'm home alone. My mother is my heroine. I used to be a cheerleader. I read my horoscope everyday. I am creative. I have gone to a Catholic school all my life. I love to walk in the rain.

I love having my picture taken. I am an eternal optimist. My first house is going to have a white picket fence around it. I am good with computers. My favorite color is purple. I think "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" was written to describe my friends and I. I am a Peer Minister. My life is great. I know who I am. I know that I would love to go to Boston College.

Comments From a Former Director of Admission:

- Omit entire paragraph in [], not necessary
- Too much I
- Need compound sentences
- Why should we admit you?
- TMI
- Too much detail: pick a theme and focus
- Reads like activity sheet of everything you ever did; overkill

*Note TMI means "Too Much Information"

Sample Essay 5

Should I have a sandwich or a salad? Should I wear white or black? Which schools should I apply to? Whether deciding between two universities or just what to have for lunch, everyone faces both easy and difficult decisions. Recently, I was faced with a difficult decision; the pressure to make the right choice for myself was like nothing I had ever experienced before. I shocked even myself when I discovered how truly unprepared I was for the huge commitment that I faced.

Immediately after the 2005 school year began, I was offered a chance to attend a highly competitive school for the arts. This school, the Educational Center for the Arts, had limited positions available in their visual arts department and I knew that I should appreciate such an opportunity. However, attending ECA would

mean that I would only stay in my original high school until 12:15 PM instead of staying for the typical 2:00 dismissal. This shortened day would limit the classes I was eligible to take as well as make it difficult to attain the minimum amount of credits and fulfill my graduation requirements. If I chose to participate in the ECA program, many of the classes I would have to take to graduate would be scheduled for my already demanding senior year. The two restrictive and conflicting school schedules made my decision very difficult.

In addition to differing class schedules, ECA classes would end at 4:00 PM. This lengthened my school day by two hours. The extended day would interfere with my participation in my high school softball team as well as any other extra-curricular activities I wished to pursue. Softball had already been especially important to me because I had played on a team every year since I was eight years old, and it was an activity I anticipated all year. Also, I had been offered opportunities to play on the Varsity softball team both freshman and sophomore year and I had looked forward to playing full-time with the Varsity team my junior year. However, with the opportunity to attend a terrific school for the arts at hand, I still found it difficult to decide between my two passions: visual arts and softball.

Finally, I faced yet another dilemma. My family and I had taken annual vacation trips to Florida to visit my grandparents for fifteen consecutive years, and we were looking forward to planning our sixteenth trip. Although I aspired to attend ECA, it became apparent that we all would have to sacrifice the family trips to visit my grandparents. The ECA program requires absolute commitment, and while it would be a unique experience, I felt guilt asking our family to give up our single vacation.

Although I faced many challenging decisions regarding my education, personal activities and family pastimes, I am pleased to say that I accepted ECA's invitation to participate in their visual arts program. After weighing all of the benefits and disadvantages, I decided that ECA was a great opportunity to expand my knowledge of visual arts and prepare me for a busy and competitive work environment. I have learned invaluable information about the technical aspects of visual arts, as well as why artists use art as an outlet and how to analyze their pieces. I am thrilled and honored to be part of the program. I have never regretted committing my time and energy to such a unique and advanced educational opportunity. Now, I wish I could decide on what shoes to wear!

Comments From a Former Director of Admission:

- Avoid questions
- Why should we admit you?
- 1st paragraph; expand on last sentence
- Too much chaos and detail choosing schools
- We know you're a teenager, but you're applying to college and should be more mature

- Focus on a theme like why you chose ECA and then expand on it's benefits for your success
- Omit last sentence since too childish
- Avoid writing like you talk and think

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