College Application Essay Tips

Securing acceptance into nearly any college or university continues to become more difficult as more applicants apply for a limited number of open spots. Writing a top-notch personal essay as part of the application process is one way a student can improve their chances.

"Applications to colleges [and universities] are going up and it is important for students to have the opportunity to tell us more about themselves than their academic credentials can show," says Cheryl Brown. She is the director of admissions at a university.

"Admissions officers want to get to know their candidates, to understand their talents and aspirations and to use this information to build a real community on our campuses. We want to enroll people with a variety of beliefs, outlooks, experiences, goals and achievements."

Essays enable students to tell admissions officers aspects of themselves that aren't apparent in the other credentials they submit through the application process. "They tell us how they feel about things, how they communicate and how they integrate life's events into their world view," Brown says.

Essays demonstrate a student's level of readiness for college writing, says Chris Markle. Markle is the director of admissions at Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania. Essays also can "carry particular significance for students whose grades and scores are less than stellar," Markle says.

Choose a Winning Topic

For starters, students should choose a topic with which they are familiar and about which they are passionate, Markle says. "Watch out for generic sports/music essays and overwhelming morbidity," he says.

Through the essay, tell the admissions counselors something they don't know about you. Don't repeat activity lists that can be found elsewhere in the application, says Al Newell, vice-president of enrollment at Washington & Jefferson College.

Newell remembers one student he was unsure whether to admit until he read his essay. It wasn't the most beautiful prose, Newell says, but it exposed the vulnerability of this football player as he wrote about how much he appreciated the love of his widowed father.

"Lessons learned in a losing season are better than stories about the winning touchdown - - let the essay show your character," Newell says. "Use the essay to focus the admissions team on what you want them to know about you personally."

Experts agree that students need to take time to create a winning essay. Students must carefully go through the proper steps in the writing process: prepare a good outline, create a draft and proofread the text.

"Don't write the essay at the last minute," Brown says. "Give yourselves time to think about the idea, to execute the idea well and to proofread it so it is perfect."

Shawn Reid is an admission counselor at Gustavus College in Minnesota. He says somebody should proofread for the writer after every revision. "Take time to think about what you want to say in your essay and how you are going to say it," Reid says. "As with everything, practice makes perfect."

Students should show their drafts to people whose opinions they value, but they shouldn't have their parents or teachers craft their essays, Markle says.

Reveal Your True Self

The best essays Brown reads are personal. "They illuminate the personality and the goals of the writer," she says. "They are honest and heartfelt. The worst essays are those in which the student tries to sound knowledgeable in an area they know nothing about. Those essays just don't ring true and they do a disservice to the writer."

Clear, crisp essays have the most positive effect on the admissions team, Reid says. "If writing about an experience, give specific reasons why and how that has shaped you," he says.

"For example, if writing about a mission trip to Costa Rica, tell us in what ways you have changed your daily life because of that mission trip beyond 'it changed my life.'"

Students need to involve themselves in their writing. "You should have the starring role in your essay," Markle says. "Don't be afraid to take risks. Show us your weaknesses as well as your strengths; they make you uniquely you. Incorporate humor - - with good taste. Make us laugh and your essay will stand out."

Newell says he fears that admission counselors have led applicants to believe that they must have "scaled Kilimanjaro" to have anything interesting to say in an essay. Newell feels the opposite is true - - that the more common human experiences make the best essays.

"I don't expect a student to have had the kind of life experiences they shouldn't have had yet," Newell says. "Most kids applying have had pretty ordinary lives."

Newell deems his favorite essay of all time as the "Raisin Essay." The writer, who won a scholarship, related the events of a family contest to see who could blow a raisin the farthest with their noses. "She felt her father, an eye, ear, nose and throat specialist, had an unfair advantage," Newell says.

Write It in Style

Use concise wording, Reid says. "No need to use 10 words when three will do," he says. "Also, the bigger the word does not necessarily mean the bigger your brain. Admission counselors are not impressed when they have to use a thesaurus to read an essay."

Markle says there are "seven deadly sins" of college essay writing. At all costs, he recommends that students avoid being wordy, overblown or flowery. Essays also should not appear to be colloquial, folksy or too informal. "Avoid words such as 'very,' 'a lot,' 'cool,' 'awesome' and 'nice,'" Markle says.

Third, stay clear of being trite, using cliches in metaphors and symbolism, such as "American as apple pie." The fourth error is underdeveloping an essay, using ideas that are introduced without being fully discussed.

The fifth "deadly sin" is being cynical and condescending, with an essay that contains sweeping generalizations, such as "all Americans are conforming cowards," Markle says.

Having essays that contain redundancies (where the same words or ideas are repeated), sentence fragments and incorrect punctuation are the other errors to avoid, Markle says.

"The best essays are not necessarily written by valedictorians," Markle says. "There is no perfect essay. All essays have quirks and nuances which give them character. Remember the cardinal rule of college application essays: Your reader should know you better after reading your work."

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