

“IT WAS A DARK STORMY NIGHT . . . ”

TIPS ON WRITING THE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAYS

Writing the college applications essay is one of the most dreaded components of the application process. Students agonize over topic choices and struggle to find their true narrative voice. Some students will pull out the *thesauri* and try to wow the admissions officers with their brilliant word choices. No matter what the issues are, the essay is a very important component of the application. Here are some tips for crafting the essay that will make your application strong.

Know your audience

Many admissions representatives are younger and oftentimes alumni of the university or college. Put yourself in the shoes of the person who will read your essay: S/he has thousands of applications to read in a compacted time, battling fatigue is a problem often solved with lots of coffee and snacks, and some of the applications begin to all look alike. So, you need an essay that stands out for the right reasons.

Often, admissions reps are given geographic territories. A large college might have one person assigned to the Cleveland metropolitan area. A smaller college with fewer applications might have one person assigned to Ohio. Most likely, your application will be reviewed along with others from your same school or area. This is to gauge the resources available and how strong you are in comparison with others with access to the same opportunities.

Know yourself

The best essays seem to be effortless in that the writer starts writing and cannot stop because the words are flowing. Some students are able to write a lengthy essay in a short period of time because the words are natural, specific and honest. Other students get so caught up in trying to impress readers that writer's block sets in and nothing is written. The object for the college essay is not to impress, it is to share something about yourself that cannot be found anywhere else in the application. The best essays are stories that are important to the writer.

Know Topics to Avoid

Admissions reps do not necessarily expect to read an essay that sounds like J. K. Rowling, E. L. Doctorow, or John Steinbeck. They expect to read an essay from a high school student. That being said, there are some topics to avoid because they have simply been overdone and they are, yawn, predictable. Here are some of the overused topics to avoid:

- My trip to another country and how much I learned (everyone learns something when going abroad)
- I helped win the game for our team in the last inning, seconds, quarter or whatever (that is nice, so did 20 other students in the area)
- I know that I can make a real difference in the world (well, we all want to, okay?)
- I went to this contest/competition/event and it changed my life (no, really?)
- Adversity; unless you can be genuine (admissions reps are not pity party providers)
- Excuses (really? And you think that is mature?)
- I'm the smartest person in the world (hmm . . . move over Stephen Hawking?)
- Mom or Dad wrote this essay (are they going to college or are you?)
- Shock value (oh, yes . . . the admissions rep will really remember this essay and how quickly it needs to be in the rejected/denied/absolutely NO pile)
- This is my take on a winning essay that was published in one of those books: *Winning Essays* (did your English teacher ever talk with you about plagiarism?)
- Humor and it fails (there are reasons that some comedians are working and some are unemployed)

Know to Show Don't Tell

The fundamental difference between *show* and *don't tell* is that telling involves just listing or summarizing emotions and actions. Showing brings the words to life in that it helps create images in the reader's mind. Showing allows for the reader to imagine or visualize the scene instead of being told this is all there is to it.

Examples:

Telling:

Our band has performed at many places.

Showing:

There are high school bands, and then there is our band: Rose Bowl, Orange Bowl, Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade . . . been there, done that. Our "Marching Mustangs" have played at the Browns' stadium, Progressive Field, and for local morning TV shows. We're a well-oiled machine.

Telling:

All of my life I have been a little on the shy side.

Showing:

Now, I'm not the kind of guy who is going to grace the cover of *GQ* or *Esquire*. Rather, *PC World* or *Popular Science* is more like it for characterizing my style.

Telling:

Jane is the kind of girl who is usually well-dressed.

Showing:

Jane wore an ocher Banana Republic suit that probably had its tags on yesterday. The suit complemented her blonde hair that was pulled into a chignon. As I watched her sit down, I noticed her shiny yellow leather pumps. It was just another day for my good friend.

Know Good Topics: So What is a Good Topic?

This is just like about anything in life, it depends. It depends on you. If you are a great student but you have stayed in your bedroom studying all the time, you won't have a lot to write about. If you have done a lot in high school, you may have a difficult time deciding which experience reveals the most about who you are as a person.

Some topics are always good if they are creatively developed. Here are some suggestions:

- **“Why do you want to come here?” or “Why is this school your top choice?”** Admissions reps like to read essays that reveal that you see yourself as a good fit for the college because you have really done your homework. Be careful about sharing ideas that are found on the school web site and not from personal experience.
- **An experience that shows your passion for your interests or goals.** If you want to be a doctor, you could share an experience from career shadowing that affirmed your interest in medicine.
- **Influential people.** Be careful; make sure the essay is really about you and not the person you admire.
- **Humor done well.** If you have a funny experience or a quirky way of sharing a story, humor is fine as long as it has a meaningful purpose and it is actually funny.
- **Less is more.** Sometimes the stories about the simple things in life are the best topics. The objects in my backpack, the people at my lunch table, a dinner with my family, a small moment in time that influenced you or something that was of great value

Know a Grammarian

The best thing that can kill any essay is a misspelled word or a grammatical error. Ask someone with a keen eye to proofread your essay. After that, ask another person and another . . . and another.

It is okay to get advice about your essay, just make sure the final essay is really yours. English teachers are often asked to read essays. If you ask your English teacher, please make sure you give him or her plenty of time.