

SEVEN GREAT AND UNEXPECTED TIPS ABOUT COLLEGE ENTRANCE ESSAYS

1. YOUR ESSAY IS NOT GRADED BY OLYMPIC JUDGES:

College application essays are not graded like Olympics diving or gymnastics matches where you start with a 10 and lose points for every error.

The essays are not read by tyrants with red pencils, they are read by harassed admissions officers who are looking for an impression. That impression is mostly emotional. The reader of your essay is reaching an emotional conclusion about YOU, not an intellectual conclusion about your topic.

And the very best emotional conclusion that reader can reach is: "I really like this kid."

2. MAKE SURE YOU HAVE ONE GREAT IDEA:

This follows from the first point. The reader of your essay is looking through the writing—and reading very fast by the way—to get to the gist of what you have done with the question. If you have repeated any one of the thousand most frequent ideas [wrestling taught me to concentrate; grandma's death taught me to stop and smell the roses; I like to help others in my community, and thus I help myself], you have not aided your cause one iota, no matter how well written, typed, and proofread your essay is. In fact, adding polish to a routine idea often makes it worse and less personal.

3. YOUR GOOD IDEA SHOULD BE A PERSONAL, SMALL IDEA:

- Avoid "BIG TOPICS"—not only the obvious big topics like peace in the Middle East, ecology, civil rights and general human nature—but also the thousand smaller versions of those BIG IDEAS which slip into an essay as a pasted on "moral". Keep your idea personal, contained and original. If you paste on a "moral"—try to make it unexpected, but somehow "right" for you.
- LESS SUCCESSFUL IDEA: I was at camp when Uncle Harry died, and finding out about his life from my parents convinced me what a warm and generous man he was.
- BETTER VERSION: The first time I confronted my parents in an adult way was when Uncle Harry died. I was at camp, and they didn't tell me about it for two weeks, thinking I would rather stay at camp than go to his funeral.
- COMMENT: The better version is about YOU, not Uncle Harry (who isn't applying for admission) and you now have a concrete, limited, and personal story. In telling that story, the details can show the committee who you are: mature, aware and eager to grow. The "real" story of the essay is not about death, Uncle Harry, or even you arguing with your parents. It's about your success in growing up.

4. MYTH # 1: JUST RELAX AND BE YOURSELF:

The application people love to tell you this but the truth is that you have about as much chance of relaxing and being yourself while writing a college application essay as any untrained person would painting a mural or acting in a movie. Painting and acting are things that anyone can "sort of" do but which require practice and training to do well. So is writing. You have to earn relaxation. You'll start to relax when you feel secure. That usually means after you have written several drafts, and someone knowledgeable has guided you through them.

5. MYTH #2: JUST RELAX AND BE YOURSELF:

Who is yourself? We all have several selves. One for our family, one for our friends, one for formal occasions, one for when we are alone. The snapshot taken while fooling around in your basement with a Polaroid is you, and so is the picture of you as the best man in your brother's wedding. Which picture does the admissions committee want to see? It depends. You have to make a strategic decision. You should be a considered and well executed version of one of your better selves. Which self? The self which is best able to get the job done—the self which can present you as unique and passionate about something important.

6. LOVE IS NOT ALL YOU NEED BUT IF YOU GOT IT, GO WITH IT:

Any topic can be handled well, but if all things are equal, choose an upbeat topic. Write about a passion, not a doubt. Teen anxiety and cynicism are pretty tiresome to admissions officers. If you love something, and you can convey that love with detail and conviction, do it. If you are fortunate enough to really love someone in your family, and you can capture that feeling with anecdotes, dialogue, facts, images and stories—write it. If you are rare enough to love a younger sister or brother, and you can explain why, using anecdotes, dialogue, facts, images and stories—and in the same essay tell us something important about you—your chances of getting in anywhere just got a big boost.

7. THE TWO EFFECTIVE AND SIMPLE RHETORICAL DEVICES LEAST USED BY COLLEGE ENTRANCE ESSAY WRITERS:

a. Dialogue:

- Weak Version: Mrs. Von Crabbe, my piano teacher, taught me more than just how to play the piano. Her lessons were filled with advice that one could use in life. Even though her English was often just a little off, and her manner seemed odd, she will always be memorable to me.

- Better Version: "Alex," Mrs. Von Crabbe would say, "The concert is starting even before you sit down on the bench." She had told us the first day never to call her Mrs. Von Crabbe Apple "even with my back in the behind." But how could we? We loved and feared her too much.
- Comment: Both essays could become weak essays if the only point they made was that Mrs. Von Crabbe was wonderful. The second essay, however, rich in quotation and detailed memory, has the promise of letting the reader "hear" Alex, the writer, and like him. Having the reader like you is probably the best kept secret of college essay writing.

b. Facts

- Which one of these sentences is better?
 - A. I live in a suburb outside a big city where half the property is conservation land, and the other half is large plot houses.
 - B. I live in Lincoln, Massachusetts, a town 15 miles west of Boston, where half the property is conservation land, and the other half is large plot houses.
- Comment: Both sentences are OK, but B is better. Readers are nosy, they want to know the name of the town. Do not say "my father works for a big law firm in a big city" as if you were writing a bad version of the Great American Novel and were fearful that any real details might limit the "timelessness and universality" or your masterpiece. Write: "My father works for Arnold & Porter, a large law firm in Washington, D.C."
- Of course, there's always the possibility of too much detail. "Large law firm" in the sentence above could itself be "a 340 member law firm with branches in 12 cities [and you could name the cities]."
- There can be too much detail, but that flaw is extremely rare in high school writing.

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Ten **BAD** college essay topics

You should avoid these ten topics, according to *Time* magazine and The Princeton Review. Some of the them are simply bad topics that are inappropriate for college applications. Others are extremely popular topics that make admissions officers' eyes glaze over. Why not list the ten best topics? Because, then they'd be overdone, and therefore be on this list. Therefore, for one reason or another, don't write about:

1. Your relationship with your girlfriend or your boyfriend; young love isn't that interesting.
2. Your religious beliefs; why my cult is better than your cult.
3. Your political views; or why you collect assault rifles.
4. Sex: anything about SEX.
5. How much you love yourself; tell them something they can use.
6. The importance of a college education; the admissions office knows this already.
7. Big ideas, such as your plan for how to make the world live together in peace.
8. You SAT scores. Why bring that up again?
9. "The Best Game of my Life" or other athletic incidents written in glib style.
10. Your trip overseas unless truly noteworthy.

Source: Time, The Princeton Review



Getting into College the Write Way (even more advice)

1. Select a topic that you feel strongly about.
2. Brainstorm everything you can about your topic. Put them away for a few days. Then start.
3. Organize the essay. Should have a logical beginning, middle, or end. Avoid standard gimmicks and trite expressions.
4. Revise and edit.
5. Appearance counts! Do not handwrite your essays, unless directed to do so. Choose a standard, easy to read font of sufficient size. Double space with standard margins. Print on white paper with a high quality printer and black ink.
6. Mail it on time.

Ten Common Mistakes:

1. Procrastinating until the last minute.
2. Selecting a topic because it seems easy.
3. Answering the topic or question with a general rather than personal approach.
4. Modeling your essay after an academic paper.
5. Bragging or trying too hard to be funny or clever.
6. Repeating information that is stated elsewhere in the college application
7. Neglecting to have someone else proofread your essay.
8. Getting so much help from others that you lose your own "voice."
9. Relying on computer spell-check and grammar programs.
10. Submitting an essay that is messy and difficult to read.

Source: *U25: A magazine for young adults*, Winter, 1999

Essay Questions and Topics You're Likely to Face

1. Discuss some current issue of importance to you.
2. Why is this college a good choice for you? What can you contribute to our community?
3. What do you expect to gain from your college education?
4. If you have a strong record, tell us about the academic accomplishment of which you are most proud. If, however, you feel your transcript does not reflect your true abilities and accomplishments, use this space to help us better understand your situation (Whitman College).
5. If you were to spend an evening with anybody real or fictional, deceased or living, who would it be and why.
- 6.. Describe a situation in which you acted with integrity.
7. Please write an essay in which you describe an especially meaningful experience, accomplishment, or personal quality of yours.
8. What character in a book you've read can you relate to best? How do you see yourself in this character?

Topics from the 2010 Common Application

- Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
- Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.
- Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.
- Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.
- A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.
- Topic of your choice.