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Sincerity, fact best in writing college application essays

By John F. Dolan

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It's the time of year when college seniors in Colorado and across the nation are writing the most pressurized piece of prose they've ever assembled. This essay has ramifications that affect family finances, self-esteem, future earnings - in short, a student's whole life.

It is college essay season, the annual contest in which high school seniors from all spectrums of life chase the ultimate prize of college admission. For many contestants, admission alone isn't prize enough. They're also chasing an essential scholarship.

No college-bound senior escapes the experience. No matter your address, gender, socioeconomic background or ethnicity, your task is the same. Like it or not, the essay can put you in the winner's circle or secure defeat from the jaws of victory.

Having read college essays for more than 20 years, I've encountered musings on just about every topic delivered in just about every medium: a complete discourse penned on the outer skin of a football, delivered to the university in a shoebox; an original score burned on a DVD; and even a few essays written on rolls of toilet paper.

So how do you succeed in the college essay game? The wise seniors look to their life histories, perhaps a divorce or an injury before the big game, to compose genuine stories that reflect the person behind the application. Those with family problems, such as alcoholism or mental illness, may explain obstacles they've overcome. The point of the essay, from the university's perspective, is to complete the "whole person" picture for the admission committee.

After years of reading all types of essays, I've come to realize that some simply aren't genuine. Rather, they are built on exaggerations. A minor car accident is recast as a crash out of a "Terminator" movie. The death of a pet is stretched to explain poor academic performance. The memory of a recently deceased

grandparent reading "Goodnight Moon" becomes the root cause of a debilitating depression that accounts for an embarrassing algebra grade. So many essay writers seem to stretch things beyond reason and common sense.

Some parents even hire personal coaches to help their children build extracurricular resumes, prepare for the SAT and draft - or write - admissions essays. Make sure your essay is your own work, or you're sure to be regarded suspiciously. That could be harmful to your candidacy when final decisions are made.

In the end, everyone has a story to tell. A good essay is simply a matter of taking the essentials of your life story and making an honest, sincere effort to speak with your own voice.

Anyone can do it.

A couple of years ago, Eva, a solid "B" student from a single-parent family, asked advice about writing her essay. One proposed topic addressed whether the student was employed while in school. Eva worked in a convenience store three nights a week, and on weekends she worked at a bookstore, for a total of 30-plus hours a week.

"That is a ton of hours," I said. "Oh, everybody says that," she said. "I like my job, and my mother needs the help, so I give some money to her and my sisters. I save the rest. I've been doing it for three years now, so it is no big deal."

It was no big deal to Eva, but I encouraged her to write about it. In her final essay, she explained why she works. She told the college why she is so dedicated to her family. Simply put, Eva showed the institution that it could expect the same kind of dedication when she enrolls. Not surprisingly, she was admitted with both a scholarship and an on-campus job.

No matter the topic you choose, remember to be honest, genuine and sincere. You should have help with writing style, grammar and editing, but make sure your story is in your own voice.

The race does not always go to the swiftest but to the individual who has the tenacity to finish. Defeat comes, however, when students fail to recognize that their own life stories - unembellished by exaggeration and unadorned by excuses - are remarkable. That is what colleges are looking for when they select candidates.

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