

CREATING WINNING ESSAYS Handout 1

The College Admission Essay: What makes it great?

Why do colleges require essays?

- ⌚ To evaluate your writing. Most schools are reading and writing intensive and admission officers want to know that you'll succeed in the college classrooms.
- ⌚ To learn about you. When admission officers read your essay, they often ask themselves, would I want to be his/her roommate? What is this person like? What would this person bring to the freshman class? Is he/she likeable?
- ⌚ To learn about your maturity. The college essays can really highlight your maturity and the quality of your thinking. It's important to show depth/maturity in your writing; this insight provides perspective to your readers.



What is the essay bottom-line?

- ⌚ This is not an English essay! It's ok to use I, me, and even some slang. The essay is about you and your experiences, so give it your voice!
- ⌚ The best essays write themselves. Make it real and tell your story.

The 5 most important rules/advice about the college essay.

1. Don't try to impress the admission officers. Don't try to give your reader what you think they want to hear rather, give them what you want to tell them.

- Be yourself. Be genuine. Make it personal.
- Don't try to suck up

2. Own your story. Write something no one else has written.

- If you're having trouble taking ownership, then don't write about it.
- Example: The *Quinceanera*

Without detail:

I was extremely nervous before my *Quinceanera*. I was outside of the church waiting for my moment to enter the church when my mom came up to me and helped me to relax.

With detail:

I stood there outside the church I've known all my life however, today I was struck with a sense of panic. For the first time, I would be presented to my family, friends and community at one of the most monumental events of my young life. My *Quinceanera* would be the moment when my community would see me, not as a little girl, but as a young woman. I'm supposed to walk into the church with confidence, yet all I could feel was fear. I thought to myself, "What if I fall? What if I panic and am unable to walk?" All I could think about were these heels that were killing my feet! I knew I had to gain some composure. Then, all of a sudden, I see my mom. As she walks up to me, she says, "*Mija, te ves linda,*" (My darling, you look beautiful) and she gives me the *bendicion* (blessing). At that moment, I stopped thinking about my fear, my panic and my feet. Her gesture helped me to relax and gave me the confidence to step into the church and welcome my guests at my *Quinceanera*.

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- The story you tell can be cathartic; it can allow you to release emotions while you tell your story. Ask yourself, would you be able to remember this story when you're 70 years old? Would the details be fresh in your mind? If you can identify a story like this, then write about it.
- Give it color. Help the reader to see it, feel it, and maybe smell it.

3. Don't repeat what you've already talked about in your application.

- The essay is a window into your resume, it's not your resume. Don't list activities/awards you received.
- Have you ever heard a joke that you already know? If you repeat aspects of your application in the essay, it bores your reader. If you want to talk about one significant activity, then share it with a story that provides depth and perspective about you.

4. Write in your own voice.

- Admission officers can tell if your essay is not your own. They can tell when someone has jumped in and basically written it for you.
- Admission officers can also tell when you've had too many re-writes. Your essay should have at least 2, but no more than 3 readers provide comments. You should have someone who knows you well (friend/sibling), someone who doesn't know you very well (distant friend), and a teacher/advisor/counselor (to correct grammar/spelling). The order is up to you.

5. Avoid cliché topics.

- Athletics – Be careful, teamwork essays are common. Make sure yours is different.
 - Community Service – Be genuine. If you only did community service a couple of times for school, don't blow it out of proportion unless you really mean it. If you're writing an essay on how community service changed your life, make sure you can back it up with continuous service.
 - Trips Abroad – Can be cliché if the essay lacks substance and ownership. Admission officers can easily pull up numerous abroad essays that sound the same (i.e. "Insert location here ____" are common essays).
 - Anything about "learning the importance of life" is cliché because at 16-17 years of age, you've experienced very little. A lesson is different. Talk about the impact of the lesson in your young life.
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