

Before You Start to Write

1. Begin thinking of essay topics early in the fall.
2. Write a time-line of your life, noting special dates and important events.
3. Make a list of five or six possible essay topics and discuss them with your friends, parents, teachers, etc.
4. Find a quiet place, and "write" the essay in your mind.
5. Everyone procrastinates to some extent. Be sure to give yourself plenty of time to work on the essay before the deadline.

Journal Assignment: Read "An Interview with an Admissions Officer." Write a five-minute first reaction. Write a for another five minutes beginning with "On the other hand ..." and look at the article from a different perspective.

This article is from *Essays That Worked* edited Boykin Curry & Brian Kasbar

An Interview With an Admissions Officer

He still had a hundred essays to read before 6:00 p.m., and he was beginning to grow tired. My interview with him would offer a brief break from the Herculean task of narrowing 10,000 applicants to a freshman class of 900.

"I hope your book works," he joked, "so maybe next year I won't have to read 500 essays about the year-long drama of being student council president. I'm sorry, but successful car washes just don't make for enthralling reading."

I smiled. He rubbed his eyes.

"On a Wednesday in the middle of March this job gets tough. Sometimes it seems that there are only four types of essays: the 'class-president' essay, the 'I-lost-but-learned' sports essay, the 'I-went-to-Europe-and-learned-how-complex-the-world-is' essay, and the good old 'being-yearbook-editor-sure-is-hard-work' essay. When I read one of those, it takes amazing willpower to get to the third paragraph."

"So sometimes you don't read the whole essay?" I asked.

"No comment," he replied, changing the subject. "I wish students would realize that when they write they should have something to say. They should try to present their values and priorities by writing on a subject that really means something to them, because, other than the essay, all I have is a bunch of test scores and activities: 10,000 sets of numbers and facts. I'd like to be able to see beyond that. I want to see what makes someone tick."

"But couldn't that be dangerous?" I asked. "What if someone writes something really bizarre, just to avoid being 'boring'? Can strange ideas or comments hurt an applicant?"

"Well, if someone expressed homicidal tendencies, it would probably have a negative effect. Still, you'd be surprised how tolerant we

are a few years ago, we had a kid from Palestine apply. In his essay, he endorsed Yassir Arafat and the PLO. As far as he was concerned, Israel had usurped the rightful land of his people and should be treated as a criminal state. The admissions officer who covered the Middle East was an Orthodox Jew. Not only did the student get in, but he graduated with honors in political science.

"In fact, being off-beat or daring is usually a plus, as long as the student stays in control of his writing. The essays which are most effective seize a topic with confidence and imagination. Too many applicants treat their essay like a minefield. They walk around on tip-toes, avoiding anything controversial. Of course, the essay comes out two-dimensional, flat, and boring. It seems like many essays have been read, proof-read, and re-proof-read until all the life has been sucked out. I wish kids would just relax and not try to guess what the admissions committee is looking for. As soon as they start playing that game, they're going to lose. The essay won't be from the heart, and it won't work.

"The great essays—good writers discussing something of personal importance—stick out like diamonds in a coal bin. When we're sorting through the last few hundred applications, an essay that sticks out in an admissions officer's mind has got to help the applicant who wrote it."

"How important is it to be a good writer?" I asked.

"Writing style tells you a lot about the way a person thinks. I like when a student brings a sense of style to a piece, as a good essayist or editorial writer would do. I've always advocated reading the essays of E. B. White as a means of preparing for writing the essay. I also suggest that students read the editorial pages of the local newspaper. But we never discount the student who writes a simple, even awkward, essay which is sincere and moving.

"That's why I urge students to write as they would in a diary or a letter to a friend. When you write a letter, you may ramble, but when you're finished your letter sounds like something you would really say."

"So an honest, personal essay is best?"

"No, there is no 'best' type of essay. But when a 'personal' essay is done well, it can be very effective. The best I've ever read was written about 15 years ago by a football recruit. His application was perfect: high-school All-America quarterback, president of his class, 3.8 GPA, and a mile-long list of extra-curriculars. But his essay was about his stuttering. He wrote about his loneliness in junior high, about the girls who laughed at him, and about the wall he built around himself. Since football was something he really loved, he buried himself in it, spending afternoons in the weight room and on the track and nights in front of a mirror, practicing words and signals so he wouldn't embarrass

himself by stuttering on the field.

"When you put an essay like that beside one of those self-absorbed recitals of high school achievements—there's just no comparison." I decided to change the subject a little. "What really irritates you in an essay?"

"Arrogance and pretentiousness are bad, but the only thing that really bugs me is when a student doesn't put his personality into an essay. I always hear parents and students complain that colleges don't look so much at the individual student as they do at scores, grades, and class rank, so I'm disappointed when students don't take advantage of the only place in the application that allows them to express their individuality."

"Okay, then," I asked, "what do you really like to see?"

"I always enjoy essays where the author realizes that he's writing for an audience of real human beings. I also like essays with a touch of excitement and enthusiasm, and I like an applicant who demonstrates the ability to look at himself from the outside. And, of course, wit never hurts."

"So should applicants try to write funny essays?"

"'Funny' isn't a good word, because there's a fine line between something that is humorous and something that is obnoxious or inappropriate. I much prefer an essay that is amusing because of its insight over one in which a kid is trying to write a string of one-liners—that rarely works."

I paused for a moment, thinking how to word my next question tactfully. "How much of a 'sell' is expected?"

"How much do I expect? Tons. I expect that most kids will try to wow me with their accomplishments, even though I could just look at their activities list if I really want to know. Each year, we have enough valedictorians, class presidents, and team captains to fill our freshman class five times. With that many talented kids, it's hard to impress me by listing your glorious achievements."

"How much of a 'sell' would I like? None. We enroll people, not cars, and I want more than a list of 'added features.' I am less interested in hearing what a student has done than hearing *why* he does what he does. Anything that comes across as a 'sell' is negative. If what comes through is a healthy self-confidence in your own accomplishments, then that's positive."

"Also, of course, a hard 'sell' can really backfire if the essay is not consistent with the rest of the application. A student once wrote an angry essay about social injustice and how the world should feed and clothe the poor. So I checked her list of activities. She had never been involved

in any... rities or community service programs, so I was pretty skeptical... or true feelings. No one likes hypocrisy, so if an applicant's record doesn't back up the essay, it can add a large negative factor into my decision."

"A common theme which is both uninteresting and unrevealing is participation in organizations which are 'in' at the time, such as SADD and SafeRides. Also, stating that you were listed in *Who's Who of American High School Seniors* only tells me that you were willing to pay."

"What works the best? Honesty, brevity, risk-taking, self-revelation, imaginativeness, and fine writing: many of the attributes which are edited-out when you ask someone's opinion of your college essay. If a student reads his application before mailing it and can say 'this sounds like me,' then he's probably written the best essay possible. Students should feel more comfortable trusting their instincts. Nine times out of ten, an essay that feels good to the writer will be good for the reader too. And that should make the process better for all those involved—as essay writers or essay readers!"

(The quotes from the "admissions officer" above were compiled from the comments of all the admissions officers we interviewed.)

The Essays

For organizational purposes, we divided the essays into seven groups: Essays About the Application Process, Self-Description Essays, Realization Essays, Off-Beat Essays, Thought Essays, Activities Essays, and Descriptive Essays. Please bear in mind that this grouping is completely artificial. You don't have to write an essay that would fit neatly into one of these categories.

We created the introductions to each group of essays from the comments submitted by admissions officers about the essays they sent. As well as being a fine piece of writing on its own, an essay might also exemplify a "type." For example, the piece about an inchworm by Jamie Mayer is a good example of the "Thought" essay. So, if you are going to write this type of essay, pay particular attention to the comments in the introduction, as well as to the styling of the essay.

Of course, the essay question may limit your range of responses. Most colleges have a vague, open-ended topic, like "Write a brief essay that in some way describes who you are." For that, you could write about practically anything. Other schools have questions that are more specific, like "Which adjective would describe you by those who know you best?" or even, "If you could have dinner with one famous person, who would it be and why?" Though answers to topics like these must be tightly structured, they still offer you the chance to develop a unique and memorable image.

The essays are reproduced exactly as they were submitted, though of course the typeface and spacing are different. (Also, a couple were handwritten.) We did not correct punctuation, spelling, or grammar errors in the essays. But note that very rarely would such correction be needed.

Finally, a warning. We know that no one would be foolish enough

The ----- That Changed My Life

I yearn for the admissions essay in which sports are not a metaphor, the race is not always to the swift, and life is just a bit confusing.

● Describe Don't characterize

Eliminate all adjectives and adverbs. "The Coach Who Changed My Life" may be healthy, wealthy and wise, but these qualities can best be conveyed in a narrative of what he actually said and did. In "Ode to Dad," a Cornell applicant explained her father's values by describing his hands, encrusted with dirt from a career as a truck farmer. It worked.

● Resist the temptation to let others speak for you. A quotation from a philosopher, poet or politician may appear to be the perfect opportunity to parade your erudition. More often than not, you will impress no one while you hijack the personal essay to a place you have never been. This year, a young woman concluded an essay about her embarrassment over her parents' Old World values and foreign accents, her desire for the approval of her peers and a tear-filled confrontation with her father by invoking Ralph Waldo Emerson. We never got a glimpse of the aftermath of "The Conversation That Changed My Life."

● Academics tend to see through a glass darkly. They value ambiguity, uncertainty and irony. For these reasons, and not because they have an antireligious agenda, selection committees invariably prefer "How I Lost My Faith" to "God Is the Center of My Life." But above all, writers should establish distance from their subjects, including themselves. Distance discourages essaysists from drawing the clichéd moral. Every semester I yearn for the applicant who will declare that organized sports are not a metaphor for life, that coaches are often wrong or a little crazy, that the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. Years ago we admitted a student whose essay, "Riding the Fine," found that no evading truths came from sitting on the bench for an entire baseball season. It's O.K. to be just a bit confused, to find the meaning of life elusive.

● Selection committee members are pretty savvy. They have learned to look for authenticity, not profundity. But knowing yourself, on paper, takes imagination, reflection and time. Start early, let parents and friends read it, and then revise: the voice you find may be your own.

● Essays about national, global and cosmic issues seem as if they have been written by Applicant Anonymous. If that you know about the crisis in East Timor comes from Time magazine or from Tom Brokaw, you will probably conclude, as have the thousands of other applicants who have written on the same topic, that ethnic and religious repression are reprehensible and peace desirable. And you'll sound like a teen-ager trying to sound like an adult.

● Write about your world and your experiences. Seventeen-year-olds inhabit a foreign country, and adults who work in colleges and universities are curious about what it's like to live within its borders. Essays about a friendship that was forged or one that failed, buying a pair of sneakers, an afternoon working at Dunkin' Donuts, the first trip to the museum without Mom or Dad, or getting robbed on the subway can provide glimpses of your ideas, values and passions.

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CONSULTANTS CHARGE UP TO \$300 an hour to help prepare and polish it, and \$60 for a quick appraisal. Prep schools offer a weekly class throughout the fall to conceive, draft, rewrite, revise and edit it. Parents ghostwrite it and get secretaries to type the final version, spell-checked and grammatically correct, on 24-pound bond paper. Students who write it without assistance experience what William Hiss, the former dean of admissions at Bates College, calls myopic paranoia: "I don't know why they are asking that question, but I know they are out to get me."

Why does the personal-essay portion of the application to college cause so much angst and expense? Because a lot is at stake. Since many institutions have eliminated the personal interview, the essay is now the one opportunity for students to exercise control and provide a glimpse of how they think and write, and to convey what is important to them. In the most competitive colleges, where there are more applicants with glorious grade-point averages and terrific test scores than there are spaces in the freshman class, selection committees often turn to the personal essay to indulge their subjective instincts in deciding who gets in, who doesn't, and who must languish in higher education's torture chamber, the wait list.

To separate the sheep from the goats, a few institutions provide specific topics for applicants to address. In its list of possible essay subjects, Bennington College has asked aspiring students to design and describe "an experiment that attempts to determine whether roads can hear." In the tradition of the "school of improvisation and its offshoot, the Second City comedy troupe," the University of Chicago is currently looking for, among other possibilities, a television pilot set on a college campus. It is to include Enrico Fermi's personal trainer, a starting investment banker, Godot or an evil clown as a character, and must have as a prominent prop Cliff Notes on "Finnegans Wake," Van Gogh's ear, a proton accelerator or Muddy Waters's guitar.

Better to "err on the side of intellectual pretension than on the side of pure silliness," the admissions staff advises in the directions to the applicant. Perhaps anticipating that the courts will ban such assignments as cruel and unusual punishment, most colleges now invite applicants to write about a person-

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