



How to Write a Killer College Application Essay

BY MELANIE SCHWED, SPECIAL TO USA TODAY

Most of the students I teach are in 11th or 12th grade. They are consumed with the process of gathering transcripts, taking standardized tests, whittling down their lists of schools to apply to, and dodging questions about their future. I hear unending college talk as I walk through the halls or quiet down a room to start class. They are consumed with the whole process, and who can blame them? Each year is labeled "the most competitive college application pool ever." Students feel more pressure than ever to make themselves distinctive.

The opportunity lies in the personal essay section of their applications.

Often the most daunting part due to its open-ended nature, this section is students' chance to stand out from the crowd. Here are some tips on how to make the most of this 600-word golden opportunity.

1. THIS IS NOT MERELY A LONGER VERSION OF YOUR RÉSUMÉ!

The whole purpose of the essay portion of any application is to let admissions counselors know who you are outside of your qualifications. "What makes you stand out?" says Gayle Evans, college/career information coordinator at Walter Johnson High School in Bethesda, Maryland. "Think about what makes

you interesting." A mere list of accomplishments on paper is not telling of your personality, drive and character. Colleges want to get a feel for the person who could be joining their campus; there isn't time to interview all applicants, so the essay will serve the same purpose. This is your opportunity to give your application a personal spin and to show who you are and what makes you a good fit for their school.

2. SHOW, DON'T TELL.

Just like in a job interview, you don't just want to tell someone what makes you great. You also want to be able to show them through >

some sort of anecdote or example. If you plan on telling colleges how responsible you are, don't just write that; provide a story of a time you displayed the characteristic. Let them judge what your stories articulate about you. You have the power to craft a narrative that is an exemplar of your attributes.

3. DON'T BE BASIC!

The admissions counselor who will read your essay has also read around 2,000 others this year alone. Do not just write what you think he or she wants to hear or what seems like the obvious choice. Anything that you care about or that makes you different is refreshing. Owen Knight, a senior admissions counselor at Tulane University, says: "Write what you want to write. A lot of students fall into the trap of thinking that I want to read a particular type of essay. I'd much rather they write about something they actually care about."

It is apparent when you are writing about something that interests you, so choose a topic you are passionate about. "This is your one chance to put your voice in your application," Knight emphasizes. Use it to shine through in your writing and make you stand out from others.

4. WHAT'S IN IT FOR THEM?

Be sure your essay mentions what you've done to help others or how you've contributed to the community. Not only does it speak to your character, but it shows the college you will contribute to their campus atmosphere if you're accepted. Colleges want to admit students who will get involved and make their school a better place. Bonus points if it relates to your area of interest/study! This shows you're dedicated to your major and have a plan you are passionate about. The admissions counselors can then see that their school fits into your plans and ambitions, and that they are not just a bullet point on your list of applications.

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DON'T
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5. EDIT WITH A FINE-TOOTH COMB!!

Have others edit after you. And then one more person for good measure. Do not have any spelling, grammatical or punctuation errors or use abbreviations or slang. It sounds like obvious advice but remember, I teach high school students for a living. It needs to be said again and again.

6. EXPLAIN IF YOU NEED TO.

Sometimes your résumé and transcripts do not accurately reflect

your potential. Sometimes students go through difficult times in high school and don't perform to the best of their potential. Students often grow up a lot over the course of four years. If there is something you feel would help give the admissions counselors a better picture of who you are and how you got to the point you are at, use the essay to tell them. This doesn't mean you write 400 words on how you got a C in that one class that one time. Only write about it if it shows how you have grown as a person. If you have gone through a hardship and it affected your performance, share it, but only to show that you are resilient and a better person because of it, not to make excuses.

So instead of being intimidated by the open-ended nature of the college essay, see it as an opportunity to help yourself stand out from a crowd that is increasingly remarkable on paper. Show who you are and why the school would be lucky to have you on campus. ■

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