

Ideas for Writing Your College Application Essay

By Heather Ricker-Gilbert

It's September, and by this time high school seniors have toured colleges, taken the SAT tests and are deciding where they want to apply to college. Soon, it will be time to face completing the college application and essay. More and more colleges are requiring essays as a way to get to know applicants beyond grades, co-curricular activities, and standardized test scores. The essay allows admissions staff members, who may read through hundreds of applications, to find out if an applicant can express himself or herself clearly and grammatically and to learn about the prospective student as an individual. The essay should provide a personalized glimpse into the life and background of the student writer

As a college admissions consultant working with young people applying to college, I know that the essay often seems like an unwelcome task for high school seniors to complete among the myriad of other things they need to do. However, students should look at the application essay as an opportunity to give admissions staff members a chance to gain insight into who they are-- their values, goals and experiences. College essay questions may range from asking you to respond to a famous quotation, describe why you want to attend a specific school, or, as in the Common Application, evaluate a specific experience or ethical dilemma and its impact on you. Let me make the following suggestions as you get ready to write your responses to essay questions:

- 1. Spend Time on Your Essay and Take It Seriously.** Allow yourself enough time to brainstorm topics and write down all your ideas on your computer. Talk with others about your ideas and develop a theme for your essay. Start to compose a draft and put it aside for a few days. Then edit and rewrite it. Be sure and carefully follow the guidelines with regard to length and topics for the essay as stated on the application form. In other words, answer the questions asked! Don't repeat information listed elsewhere in your application such as restating your GPA.
- 2. Personalize your Essay.** Tell a story about yourself. Let the reader know about your ideas, your personality, your goals and observations. Explain something about your home, school, summer camp, or neighborhood. Your essay should reveal something about your life and the environment in which you live. You want to be conversational and friendly, honest, confident, and enthusiastic. Remember this is not a formal research paper. Be natural and revealing. At the same time, take care not to offend or embarrass your reader.
- 3. Avoid Trite or Common Responses.** Don't choose to write about the obvious. For example; "I enjoyed sports because it taught me the value of team work," or "I think it is important to get a college education to survive in today's workplace," or "My trip to Chile taught me a lot about different customs and that people are all

alike.” In addition, limit cliches which are overused, tired phrases such as “actions speak louder than words,” or “we live and learn,” or “last, but not least.”

- 4. Organize Your Essay with a Clear Introduction, Discussion, and Conclusion.** Be sure and capture your reader’s attention immediately with a startling statement, a funny example, or an anecdote. Make sure your content is focused and has a clear purpose. Conclude by referring back to your introduction to give your essay a sense of balance. Briefly restate the thesis or point you have made. If appropriate, end with a quotation or show how your topic has widespread appeal.

- 5. Use Concrete Examples, Experiences, Comparisons, and Imagery.** Select expressive verbs, and descriptive nouns. Let your reader envision what you are talking about. Your word choice should be natural and express who you are. Don’t overuse a thesaurus, because you will sound stilted and your essay contrived. Be specific and include details rather than making vague, unsupported generalizations. Vary your sentence structure with both long and short sentences. Use active rather than passive verbs. Remember: “A good essay is like an interesting letter from someone you once met.”

- 6. Customize your essay to the specific school to which you are applying.** Whether you are using the Common Application or an individual college application, be sure and orient the essay to each school to which you are applying. You don’t want to say in your essay, “I hope to study international relations at Georgetown University” when you are sending the application to George Washington University! Take care!

- 7. Proof Read and Revise.** Check for spelling and grammatical errors. Make sure every sentence is crucial to the story you are telling or the point you are making. Be certain that your introduction engages the reader right away, that your conclusion is memorable and that your essay makes sense. Ask someone else to help you edit and review your finished essay.

I hope you find these suggestions helpful. Once you finish your essay ask yourself if what you have written tells the reader what you want him to know about you. A well written essay should be a reflection of you and your accomplishments. Good Luck!

Heather Ricker-Gilbert, is a college admissions consultant and can be reached at collegegateways@comcast.net or 860-872-8779. www.collegegateways.com