**How to Write A Killer College Admissions Essay**

**The Basics**

Your essay should reveal something important about you that your grades and test scores can't — your personality. It should give admission officers a sense of who you are, as well as showcasing your writing skills.

**BE YOURSELF.**  Write in your own voice. Write what you feel, **not** what you think the admissions officers may want to hear. Many students try to sound smart rather than sounding like themselves. Others write about a subject that they don't care about, but that they think will impress admissions officers. Also, note that admission officers will be able to tell if your essay was written by an adult.

**Choose a topic that is meaningful to you and highlights your strengths.** It could be an experience, a person, a book–anything that has had an impact on your life. Share your personal story and thoughts. Take a creative approach and highlight areas that aren’t covered in other parts of the application. This isn't the place to list your awards or discuss your grades or test scores. Consider these questions: *Is there something else about me that this college should know about that there wasn't a blank for? Who am I now and who do I want to become?*

**Answer the question being asked.** Don't recycle an answer to a similar question from another application. Nothing will land your essay in the circular file faster than an obviously recycled or “near match” essay.

**Find a creative angle.** Try to come up with something different. Remember that the people reviewing your essay have read hundreds — if not thousands — of essays. Don’t give them one more “The Teacher Who Influenced Me Most” or “Drinking and Driving is Bad” essay to wade through.

**Be specific.** Keep your focus narrow and personal by figuring out how the question relates to your personal qualities and then taking a specific angle. Make sure everything you write supports that viewpoint. But don’t adopt a preachy tone. College admission officers don’t want to be lectured on rainforest destruction. Instead, tell them how you became interested in environmentalism.

**Use the active voice.** This is a challenge for all writers. As a matter of style, writing in an active voice energizes an essay. Avoid the passive voice. Word processing programs often provide assistance with converting passive sentences to the active tense.

**Avoid clichés.** Clichés usually sneak in when you are trying to be descriptive. Sadly, they dilute your distinctive voice. Don’t rely on phrases or ideas that people have used many times before like, “There is so much suffering in the world that I feel I have to help people.” Avoid overly formal or business-like language, and don’t use unnecessary words. Although humor is good, avoid one–liners, limericks and anything off–color.

**The Process**

**1. Start early.**

Starting early buys you the luxury of revising and rewriting the essay. You can write it, put it away for a few days, then take a fresh look at it later. Walking away and then coming back brings a fresh perspective to the work -- without the pressure and stress that comes with a time crunch.

**2. Brainstorm.**

Starting the essay can be the hardest part. Brainstorming about your personality traits and defining your strengths is a good place to begin. Your goal is to reflect about who you are as a person. Don’t think of it as bragging. Think about it as a self-commercial. No one will see it except the admissions officer who will probably never meet you in person. Be honest and generous with yourself!

Then list a bunch of essay topics and add some key points for each one. Decide which topic has the most potential; it should be something that you feel strongly about so that it really comes alive when you write about it. Make a list of all the ideas you want to include--don't rule anything out. List everything you can think of. Then go back over the list and check off or circle the major points you want to cover.

**3. Organize your thoughts.** After you've gathered your notes, create an outline to organize your essay and decide where you want examples to appear.

**4. Let your first draft flow.** Don’t worry about making it perfect. Just get your ideas flowing and your thoughts down on paper. You'll fix mistakes and improve the writing in later drafts. Be personal and, if it comes naturally, add humor. Imagine that you're talking to a close friend when writing your essay. This technique should help the real you shine through. Remember, a rough draft doesn't have to be perfect. It just has to be a start.

**5. Develop three essay parts.**

Introduction: One paragraph that introduces your essay. Start with a catchy first sentence. If it grabs the reader’s attention, he or she will be encouraged to read on. You might use a meaningful quote or start with a rhetorical question that fits your situation. You might open with a detailed description of the setting of an important experience you've had so that readers feel they were really there. You might start with a mystery that will be revealed later in the essay or double-entendre. If you are experiencing writer’s block, skip this first sentence, and work on the rest of your essay. Explore your theme and brainstorm examples. Then, go back to the beginning and nail it.

Body: Several paragraphs explaining the main idea. Concentrate on content, use descriptive language, and give clear examples. Don't just recount–reflect! Anyone can write about how they won the big game or the time they spent in Rome or on a mission trip. When recalling these events, you need to give more than the play–by–play or itinerary or the trite “This experience changed my life forever”! Describe **what** you learned from the experience and **how** it changed you. Write as if you are talking to a friend, not like you are writing an essay for British Literature class.

Conclusion: Your conclusion should leave a lasting statement that reminds the reader of your essay’s key points. Reiterate the main themes of your essay, but say it in a different way than you did before. Make sure that you do not bring up new ideas in your conclusion.

**6. Review What You've Written. Get Feedback.**

This time use a more critical eye. Is the essay interesting and well organized? Does it give a good picture of who you are? If it isn't as interesting as you'd like, add more examples and details. Read your essay out loud to see if the essay flows. Make sure you're writing about yourself in your own voice--not the person you imagine the admissions counselor will find interesting. If at some point you read over your essay and you hear your mother's voice, something is wrong! Ask for input. Teachers, counselors, friends, parents, siblings – ask people you respect for some candid feedback. “What do you think I’m trying to say?” “Does it sound confusing?” “Is it boring?” “Do I come across well?” Other people can often tell if there isn't enough being revealed, whether the essay rambles, or if the humor is falling flat.

**7. Rewrite Your Essay**

Writing the essay the first time is hard enough, but taking time to write another draft is well worth the effort. Revise, rewrite, reword. Revision is the key to all good writing including college application essays. Read it aloud. Your ears can pick up problems that your eyes may miss.

**8. Edit Your Final Draft**

This time really look at the mechanics of the essay. Grammar, spelling, sentence structure, style, and tone all count. Double check everything so that nothing detracts from the finished product.

**9. Take a Last Look for Details.** Pursue perfection. No essay needs to be error-free more than this one. Have your English teacher look it over. Quadruple-check the spelling. Perfect the format. When applying online, your essay will automatically be formatted to fit standard guidelines. However, if you decide not to send the application electronically­ — **follow these guidelines***: use single space, use Times New Roman in a 12-point font, make sure that each page has your name, high school and date of birth, print on only one side of the page.*