

ESSENTIALS OF College Essay Excellence

BY ELISE DALY PARKER

"This is your chance to tell us something about yourself that's not in the rest of the application."

ADMISSIONS COUNSELORS ACROSS THE U.S.A.

In preparation for my fourth and last daughter's departure from the nest, we've just returned from another college tour. As with many admissions talks I've heard before, we were told once again how important the college essay is.

Many colleges have eliminated or greatly reduced the opportunities for a personal interview, so the college essay is often the student's only shot at making a "personal statement." Of course, the essay should be well written and must be grammatically correct. However, as importantly, it should reveal a bit about who the applicant is – their unique personality, passions, and accomplishments – in their voice.

Here's a primer on how college-bound students can approach this daunting task.

KNOWING AND CHOOSING WRITING TOPICS

First, find out the essay requirements of the colleges to which you are applying. Over 500 schools now use the Common Application (www.CommonApp.org), which has a Writing section that outlines your essay question options. The Common App requires two essays. The first is a 150-word essay through which you elaborate on your extracurricular or work experience. The second is a 250-500 word essay in response to your choice of one topic out of five that help you tell your story. Many colleges using the Common App also require a Supplemental Essay (often having to do with why you are a particularly good fit for that specific school). There are still plenty of other colleges that don't use the Common App and have their own application complete with their specific essay question(s). This is usually available through the school website. Regardless, the majority of essays required fit into the category of "personal statement."

Once you've explored your essay requirements, get one notebook to record all your essay thoughts; the traditional marble composition book works well. Then follow these 5 Steps to an Excellent College Essay.

1. WHO ARE YOU?

Start out simply. Make a list of three to five adjectives that best describe you. Think about the impression you'd like

to make on the essay reader. Are you adventurous? Breezy? Funny? Focused? Charming? Edgy? Intellectual? Independent? Artistic? Gutsy? Talented? Sincere? Vivacious? If you have trouble figuring this out, ask a few people who know you well to choose three adjectives that describe you.

Hint: Try these websites for lists of adjectives: <http://bit.ly/NlgIom>, <http://bit.ly/bgH5rT>.

2. BRAINSTORM.

Now that you've got a few adjectives, go a little deeper to describe who you are. Write some notes in answer to these questions. What do you care about? What do you know about? What are some of your favorite personal memories/experiences/trips? What are your favorite books/movies/music or characters from stories (even from your childhood)? If your topics are in some way unique, all the better. If not, you can still use them to shine a light on you.

Now match up your adjectives from step one with the answers to questions above. If you're adventurous, tell about a daring character in real life, a book, or a movie who you admire and how you relate or are similar. If you're compassionate, what have you done that demonstrates your concern for others?

Hint: Good writing comes out of something you know and care about.

3. ELABORATE

Armed with words that describe you and stories that help you demonstrate your traits, consider the essay question you're answering, and start writing. Try free writing a paragraph on each possible topic. Don't overthink this and don't edit yourself. You can do that later. This will help you overcome "writers block," perfectionism, and help you develop your thoughts. Be as specific as possible and Show Don't Tell. For example, instead of "On my summer vacation this year I went bungee jumping..." try, "I stood at the edge of the Bloukrans River Bridge in South Africa. My heart was pound-



My latest graduate, Catie.

A Few College Tips from Experience

BY CAROL MEERSCHAERT

I have two kids who successfully navigated the college process, graduated, and are now out on their own. I found that there was no substitute for good grades in college prep classes. This has always been and will continue to be one of the most important factors in being prepared and able to choose among top colleges.

My tips for getting through the application process and then enjoying a great college experience are pretty straightforward: Take a breath. There is no need for the process to be so stressful. It's not a tragic situation. There are a lot of schools that will educate your child and in plenty of those schools, your child will thrive. A student will be most successful where they feel comfortable. It's not necessarily about the most competitive school possible or your idea of the best college for your child. Fit – academic, social, geographic, and financial – is the most important thing. Your money is wasted if your student drops out because they

really didn't want to be there in the first place.

My financial tip: I've done this a few times and have to say that all the scholarship listings were not useful. Save your time. Sock money away the best you can. And, remember that student loans cannot be discharged in a bankruptcy, so tread carefully and don't overextend yourself.



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ing, palms sweating, fear mixed with exhilaration as I readied myself for the most daring step of my life..."

Hint: If you have trouble elaborating, try writing your paragraphs as though you're writing a letter to a good friend or favorite relative.

4. PUT YOUR PARAGRAPH IN CONTEXT

Like all good stories, your essay should have a beginning, middle, and end.

- **Beginning** – Begin your story with an introduction. Tell the reader a little about what led you to, for example, bungee jumping, your passion for helping others, or your love of music. You can use a quote you like, or a memory that stirred your interest, or a personality trait that led you to your topic. Keep this section short and to the point...and creative, if possible, to draw the writer in. For example, "I was born with music inside me." *Ray Charles*. Then a couple of sentences about what this quote means to you and your love of music.
- **Middle** – This is where you get personal; where your very specific story is shared. Follow your intro with a couple of paragraphs that show your story and express who you are. Bring the reader into your story using as many senses – sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste – as you can.
- **End** – Wrap up your story with a few concluding statements. What does your experience/story mean to you? How has it changed you or challenged you? How might it prepare you for college in general or this college in particular? And how will you apply your interest, lessons learned, or experience in the future?

5. EDIT, EDIT, THEN EDIT AGAIN

Even the greatest of stories needs editing. (It took J.K. Rowling five years to complete the first *Harry Potter* book, but you

don't have that kind of time!) Take these steps to go from first draft to final essay.

- Write your first draft, then put it away for a day or two (Start your essay early enough to give yourself time for this step!)
- Read your essay out loud to yourself or, even better, in front of someone who is willing to give you feedback. Is it clear? Logical? Does it convey your personality and passion? Is it engaging, informational, captivating? Edit with answers to these questions in mind.
- Have someone or a couple of people you trust – parent, teacher, friend, guidance counselor – read your essay with the same questions you've asked yourself in the step above. Get feedback on the overall essay, grammar and punctuation, story flow, clarity, and personality. Edit according to your reader's comments.
- Finalize your essay. Take all the comments you and others have made about your essay and incorporate them into this draft. Get rid of any extra words, and use expressive, specific words. Check your word count and cut if necessary. Do a final check on grammar, spelling, and punctuation. If you're using Microsoft Word, pay attention to the red, blue, and green lines – Red is for spelling errors; Green for grammatical errors; and Blue is for a word spelled correctly, but used in the wrong context. Two eyes, not too eyes.

That's it. If you follow these steps, you will be on the path to an excellent college essay that helps the reader get to know unique and wonderful you!

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