

PLAINVIEW-OLD BETHPAGE CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
Plainview, New York

Preparing the College Essay

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PLAINVIEW-OLD BETHPAGE CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Mission Statement

The mission of the Plainview-Old Bethpage Central School District is to provide an academically challenging and stimulating environment for all students, and to enable them to realize their full potential to be happy, ethical, and analytical citizens of the world. We do this by:

- making tolerance, acceptance, respect, honesty, and kindness expectations for all students, and for members of the Plainview-Old Bethpage school community;
- identifying each student's academic, social-emotional, aesthetic, and physical needs, and striving to meet those needs; and
- encouraging communication between and among students, teachers, parents, administrators, and community members.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

1.	How to Use This Packet.....	6
2.	Why Colleges Require an Essay:.....	6
3.	Some Statistics to Consider	6
4.	What Admissions Would Love to See in the Essay.....	7
5.	What Admissions Would Like You to Avoid in the Essay	10
6.	What They Hate To See.....	11
7.	Tips for Writing:	12
8.	Tips for Revision:	14
9.	Who Should Help You?	15
10.	The Teacher’s Role	16
11.	Using Electronic Media Successfully	16
12.	Structure of Essay	16
	(a) Where will my ideas come from?	17
	(b) Outside the Box.....	17
	(c) Write Positively About Something Negative.....	17
	(d) I Have Writer’s Block.....	17
13.	Common Application Essay Topics Analyzed	18
	(a) The “Tell Us about Yourself” Essay:.....	18
	(b) The “Influence” Essay:	18
	(c) The “Creative” Essay:.....	19
	(d) The “Why I Want to Go Here” Essay:.....	20
	(e) The “Why I Want to Major in _____” Essay:.....	20
	(f) The “Issue” Essay:	21
	(g) The “How I Will Contribute to Diversity” Essay	21
14.	Annotated Sample Essays:.....	23
	(a) Question: How Would You Change History?	23
	(b) Question: Tell Us About Yourself.....	25
	(c) Question: Describe an experience that changed your life in a positive and meaningful way.....	27
	(d) Question: Describe a person who influenced you.....	28
	(e) Question: Describe a Person Who Has Influenced You	29

(f)	Question: Why Do You Want to Go to Our School?.....	31
(g)	Question: Diversity /What Will You Bring to the College Campus?.....	32
15.	Essay with Revision.....	33
(a)	The Original Essay.....	33
(b)	The Revised Essay.....	33
(c)	Commentary.....	34
16.	Print Resources	35
17.	Web Resources.....	36
18.	Glossary of Terms.....	38
19.	Appendix 1 — Paragraphing Tips	41
20.	Appendix 2 — Modern Language Association (MLA) Format	42
21.	Appendix 3 — Self Evaluation Form	43
22.	Appendix 4 — Peer Evaluation Form.....	51
23.	Appendix 5 — Questions You Should Answer	59

1. How to Use This Packet

This packet has been compiled to help you through the essay portion of the college application process. Included are general tips for writing and revising your essay, common application essay questions with strategies, a number of sample essays that have been annotated to call attention to the writer's craft, a list of web and print resources that may be helpful to you, and a glossary of terms used in the packet, as well as other appendices that you may find useful.

You may not under any circumstances copy or otherwise "borrow" from these essays. They are provided as models of good student writing to give you ideas for improving your own essays. Plagiarism is a serious offense; these essays have been submitted to many of the same colleges and universities to which you will be applying.

2. Why Colleges Require an Essay:

- The sheer volume of applications in relation to the number of open spaces makes getting into the college of your choice challenging.
- Many applicants will have the same or similar "paper" qualifications. I.e., they will have the same/similar SAT or ACT scores, the same/similar GPA with the same/similar course loads from the same/similar high schools.
- Many applicants will have similar extracurricular résumés as well.
- The essay gives an applicant the chance to become an individual and win the admissions ticket over a candidate with similar transcripts.
- The essay also shows college admissions officers that you can write an organized, cohesive essay.
- The essay, therefore, also shows college admissions officers that you *can* think, and furthermore how *deeply* you can think.

3. Some Statistics to Consider

(Use the College Board College Search function to check on the schools you are most interested in attending.)

Keep this in mind: According to the National Association of College Admission Counseling, in 1993 only 14% of colleges polled reported that the college essay was of "considerable importance," but that number had *jumped* to 23% in 2005! The trend is going up; this is especially true of private schools that view the essay as a "tip factor" (like

recommendations, work experience, and interviews) when other indicators are the same. This is also true of more selective public universities. Remember, the more selective a school is the more important a “tip factor” it is likely to be!

- Albany (SUNY) accepts 52% of applicants. No Early Decision available. Essay is recommended.
- American University accepts 53% of applicants. Out of 370 Early Decision applications, 203 were accepted; essay is required.
- Binghamton (SUNY) accepts 39% of applicants. Out of 4,925 Early Decision applications, 2,592 were accepted; essay required.
- Boston College accepts 27% of applicants. Out of 6,056 Early Action applications received, 2,027 were accepted; Essay required.
- Boston University accepts 59% of applicants. Out of 1074 Early Decision applications, 400 were accepted. Essay required.
- Buffalo (SUNY) accepts 52% of applicants. Essay is considered, but not required.
- Cornell University accepts 21% of applicants. Out of 3015 Early Decision applications, 1,101 were accepted. Essay required.
- Columbia University accepts 11% of applicants. Essay required.
- Geneseo (SUNY) accepts 36%. Essay required.
- LIU C.W. Post accepts 85%. Essay required.
- MIT accepts 12% of applicants. Essay required.
- New Paltz (SUNY) accepts 36%. Essay considered, not required.
- NYU accepts 37%. Essay required.
- University of Pennsylvania accepts 16% of applicants. Essay required.
- Towson University accepts 60% of applicants. Essay considered.

4. What Admissions Would Love to See in the Essay

- Jennifer Wong, director of admissions at Claremont McKenna College:

Please use your own “voice,” especially when writing your personal statement. This should not be an exercise in packing in as many SAT-prep words as possible! Write about something that you care about, something that gives us a window into your perspective / experience. Students who take some calculated risks in their essays, and in doing so, really show their personality.

- John Latting, director of admissions at Johns Hopkins University:

Get your pen and paper or saddle up to the word processor; the important thing to keep in mind is, don't write as if there is a correct answer. Don't be too cautious. It seems to me that we work hard to craft questions that prevent that, but we see students who are too cautious. Be adventurous intellectually-write unconventionally. Applicants have more freedom than they think, and it's in their interest to use that flexibility.

- Lorne T. Robinson, dean of admissions and financial aid at Macalester College:

Be yourself. Use your own voice. “Own” your essay rather than letting someone else tell you what to write. Address any questions the admissions committee may have about your application up front. Tell your “story,” if you have one.

- Alyssa Sinclair, assistant director of admissions at Middlebury College:

Most students should “write what they know,” and not worry about being completely original in their subject matter. In most cases, we care more about how a student writes about a topic than the topic itself. Ideally, we love to see truly fine writing that reflects mature thought, a mastery of the language and mechanics, and a topic that reveals a great deal about the applicant simply because it tells a good story. Essays of that caliber are fairly rare, so we also enjoy pieces that possess the elements mentioned above but may not have them in equal share.

- Joel Bauman, dean of admissions at New College of Florida:

Once you've written your essays, let them sit for a few days. It's very tempting to hit the “send” button or drop them in the mail, but it's definitely a good idea not only to proofread for mechanical errors, but also to consider whether there is a real point to each essay. Are they well developed? Do the ideas flow logically? Our college writing consultant points out that she can teach someone how to use semicolons, but she can't teach them how to think. We're looking for some sort of organized, well-reasoned argument, without typos or grammar errors-looking for the ability to reason and think clearly and make a reasoned argument on some topic. The greater the evidence of thoughtfulness, the better. The essay should

show some level of sophistication, technical skill, and reasoning ability. We love to see a clear sense of engagement—that the student hasn't just fulfilled her or his obligation to submit an essay, but has really thought about it and obviously cares about the topic. We also get a big kick out of colorful metaphors—although these, in and of themselves, will probably not make the difference in an admission decision.

- Carol Lunkenheimer, dean of admissions at Northwestern University:

Answer the whole question. For example, we have a question that asks what an applicant would do with five minutes of airtime; what would you talk about and why? Kids don't answer the why part, they go on about the subject but there's no analysis, no reflection. In addition, we like writing with a natural voice. Don't be formal if you're not formal. If you're funny, be humorous. We're trying to get a sense of what you're like; stay with your natural voice.

- Jim Miller, dean of admissions at Bowdoin College:

Keep it narrow, get readers' attention right away, and stay on task, on point. We like to see things that are personal and simple. People try to get complex. Things that are meaningful come across that way as you read them.

- Janet Rapelye, dean of admissions at Wellesley College:

I'm a complete sucker for the grandparent essay, i.e., what I learned from them, what they taught me, what they taught my family. In my 22 years in admissions, I haven't read a bad grandparent essay. I like to hear about gratitude for someone, such as a family member or favorite teacher.

- William K. Poirot, college counselor at Andover, Massachusetts:

Don't write an essay that anyone of a thousand other seniors could write, because they probably will... When you have finished, read it and ask if anyone else could have written the same essay. If you are going to write about a topic that you fear many other students will be writing, make sure that your attention to personal detail is prominent as that will set you apart. Don't try to sell yourself. The college will exercise its quality-control function using the grades and scores, not the essay. They use the essay to flesh out the numbers, to try and see and hear the person in the application. Rather than persuading the college that you are great, just show them who you are, what you care about, what moves you to anger, what the pivotal points in your life have been so far. Don't try to write an important essay... These essays tend to come across as much more pompous than their authors intend.

- Susan Case, college counselor at the Milton Academy of Massachusetts:

Avoid overly familiar quotations or definitions. Dialogue works. Think small-anecdotes and rich details work. Don't write about writing, SAT's or the college process. Accentuate the positive-even in a painful experience. The first few sentences are critical. If you are stuck, have a brainstorming session with someone close to you.

- Jay Matthews, college interviewer and Washington Post staff writer:

There is nothing more attractive than an occasional confession of weakness and error. Of course, you actually have to believe that you have imperfections for this to work. If you have difficulty figuring out what your inadequacies might be, ask a friend. If you don't have any friends, try a sibling, your lab partner, somebody. If all else fails, ask one of your teachers. I hate to burden them, but you need help.

5. What Admissions Would Like You to Avoid in the Essay

- Amherst:

Students playing the college application process too safely ... it's refreshing to see a kid being him or herself—you don't have to climb Mount Kenya as long as it's sincere.

- Bowdoin:

The rehash of the editorial, like nuclear disbandment. Trite conclusions. The travel abroad conclusion: "No matter where we are, we're all the same." The travelogue to Italy: "We went here and here."

- Middlebury:

We always encourage students to write what they want us to know about them. The least compelling essays are those that seem to be written to impress an admissions office; they tend to lack authenticity.

- New College:

It's pretty dreary to read an essay on a "hot topic" that does little more than restate the obvious arguments.

- Wellesley:

I don't want to see a laundry list of extracurricular activities—the information from the third page of the Common Application. It does not help to receive this

list. Take one or two activities from this list and explain why they're important. Take that next step. Simply listing activities is not enough.

- Williams:

Essays that aren't very curious. Essays that rely too heavily on humor, particularly, puns and jokes I've heard before. Funny essays can be quite effective, but only if there's substance below the cleverness.

- Yale:

Superficiality. There are many students who, for whatever reason, do not go beyond the superficial. They'll tell us what they've been doing and keep it fact-based. But they don't get it to a reflective level.

6. What They Hate To See

- Macalester:

Misspellings, poor grammar, and typographical errors really get in the way of reading an essay, so attention to detail is important.

- Middlebury:

Individual admissions officers would respond differently to this, but we all seem to agree that any essay focusing on a boyfriend or girlfriend, no matter how well written, is a very poor choice. The use of profanity, even for "effect" may be viewed as reflecting poor judgment. We don't expect perfection when it comes to grammar, but careless mistakes, especially misspelled words, suggest that students may not be putting much effort into their applications.

- Johns Hopkins:

There are two things that I see regularly, two "lines" that are crossed. (1) Ideological issues are best left aside. An applicant who gets too much into specific political issues just might be thrusting these views on someone who disagrees, and then the reader has to work at remaining objective. We train our staff to take students on their own terms, but we're all human. I don't see why an applicant would test the waters. (2) Sometimes students come across as immature. Showing a sense of humor is great, but don't use humor in your college application that you wouldn't use with your parents!

- Northwestern:

Swear words.

- **USCGA:**
Essays that are three lines long and poorly written. Almost don't like to see an essay that is too well written—that's written by parents.
- **Wellesley:**
Gratitude goes a long way and ingratitude falls flat. We're looking for maturity. Some students think that in order to stand out they need to shock us. We call it the Oprah effect. They shouldn't tell us everything. Overcoming adversity with grace is great, but sometimes telling of a horrific case leaves the committee hanging. Students should sift through their experiences and ask themselves whether the admissions committee needs to hear about this. We're looking for readiness to enter college and intellectual curiosity.
- **Yale:**
Forced creativity or forced humor or sort of self-consciously trying to be different. By itself, is that going to keep somebody out? No. But it doesn't help their cause. If a topic feels forced, they just need to put that pencil down. Students ask themselves, what does that college want to hear? And we keep telling kids that you're 180 degrees in the wrong direction if you're asking yourself that question. They do need to sit in the driver's seat and ask, "What should this school know about me?" This is not the time to be particularly shy; on the other hand, you don't want to go at it with a great deal of braggadocio. You don't want to start every paragraph with the letter I. They should be asking themselves, what kind of essay is going to get them as close to what I'm like?

7. Tips for Writing:

- Start early!
- Be yourself! This is your chance to distinguish yourself from other applicants who have the same or similar academic qualifications as you.
- Be original! These admissions officers are reading *thousands* of applications. Trite or overused topics like "the big game" or "my summer job" will be more difficult to make unique.
- Write a draft and then set it aside for a few days before attempting to proofread or revise.
- Use vivid and precise language; don't be too basic, but don't "thesaurize" your essay either. Loading your essay with SAT words makes it sound stilted and unnatural.

- *Your* voice should shine through—after all, this essay is supposed to be showing these admissions officers who *you* are (not who your parent, tutor or teacher is).
- Show, don't tell! Narratives "work" better than lists, especially for questions that ask you to "tell about yourself" or "talk about someone who has influenced you".
- Keep your audience in mind. These officers are spending about 2 minutes on your essay; you need to hook them with an interesting lead sentence and introductory paragraph. Don't restate the question!
- Stick to the word limit (if there is one). See above re: time constraints.
- REVISE! Revision is not the same thing as proofreading. Revising literally means "seeing again"—you should make big changes. (See Tips for Revision)
- PROOFREAD! Your essay should be as technically perfect as possible. Nothing turns off a reader more than careless errors in spelling, usage, grammar, or punctuation.
- Show your essay to someone you trust to tell you the truth before sending it in.

According to Quintessential Careers, an organization that offers comprehensive education, job-hunting, and career advice (www.quintcareers.com):

- Don't mention weaknesses unless you absolutely need to explain them away. You want to make a positive first impression, and telling an admissions officer anything about drinking, drugs, partying, etc. undermines your goal.
- If you are planning on writing an essay on how you survived poverty in Russia, your mother's suicide, your father's kidnapping, or your immigration to America from Asia, you should be careful that your main goal is to address your own personal qualities. Just because something sad or horrible has happened to you does not mean that you will be a good college student. You don't want to be remembered as the pathetic applicant. You want to be remembered as the applicant who showed impressive qualities under difficult circumstances. It is for this reason that essays relating to this topic are considered among the best. Unless you only use the horrible experience as a lens with which to magnify your own personal characteristics, you will not write a good essay.
- Will your topic turn off a large number of people? If you write on how everyone should worship your God, how wrong or right abortion is, or how you think the Republican or Democratic Party is evil, you will not get into the college of your choice. The only thing worse than not writing a memorable essay is writing an essay that will be remembered negatively. Stay away from specific religions, political doctrines, or controversial opinions. You can still write an essay about Nietzsche's influence on your life, but express understanding that not all intelligent people will agree with Nietzsche's claims. Emphasize instead

Nietzsche's influence on your life, and not why you think he was wrong or right in his claims.

- In this vein, if you are presenting a topic that is controversial, you must acknowledge counter arguments without sounding arrogant.

8. Tips for Revision:

- **Spend quality revision time trying out different “hooks” to gain your reader’s interest.** Introductions are often the most difficult paragraphs to write. Remember, these admissions officers are reading hundreds of essays; yours must stand out from word one. Rhetorical questions and famous quotations *can* work, but keep in mind that many people use these techniques. Your goal is stand out from the crowd. Try grabbing the reader’s attention with a one-word opening sentence, an “in the middle of the action” beginning, or a bit of dialogue that adds intrigue. Avoid clichéd openings like dictionary definitions. Show the various forms of the intro to a parent, teacher, or friend to get feedback before determining which one is best.
- **Be as personal and concrete as you can.** You want to write an essay that only you could have written. Check your essay for generalizations, lists, and too-broad topics. Narratives and specific examples work best.
- **Use vivid, active verbs often as possible.** Try to get rid of most of your “to be” verbs: is, are, am, was, were, etc. While you are at it try to replace “seems” and “feels” also.
- **Replace bland nouns with specific nouns.** For example, trade “shoes” for “lime green Nikes” or “lunch” with “half-smushed peanut butter and jelly sandwich”. Never use “things” and “stuff” when you could be more specific.
- **Beware of ambiguous pronouns.** Every pronoun you use should have a clear referent. Be especially aware of “it,” “this,” and “that,” which can often be vague or confusing. Also, if more than one male or female name has been mentioned, a simple “he” or “she” may also cause confusion.
- **Vary your sentence length and sentence structure.** Intersperse short declarative sentences with longer complex and compound sentences. Notice and revise repetitive sentence structures such as subject-verb-object. Avoid using “I” over and over again as the first word of sentences. **DO** use intentional repetition to bring home a point, as in the famous “I Have a Dream” speech.
- **Check for redundancy.** Don’t use two adjectives in a series that mean the same thing as in “gorgeous, beautiful” or an unnecessary adjective in front of a noun or

verb as in “fast sprint.” When in doubt, choose a vivid verb or specific noun over an adjective or adverb.

- **Write everything you can think of.** Don’t just stop writing when you reach the word limit or get tired. Your essay needs a powerful ending. **You can always prune later.** Make your last sentence count. A stand-alone sentence can sometimes be the most effective concluding paragraph. Don’t summarize or repeat information; the essay is short enough that the reader will not have forgotten any details.
- **DO NOT rely on spell check to catch errors.** Spell check only notices when a word is spelled incorrectly, not when you have used the wrong word in a given circumstance. There, their, and they’re and other common usage problems will not be corrected. Likewise you may not catch typos like “form” instead of “from” or “if” instead of “or”. Reading your essay aloud can help you catch these as can showing it to someone else. We often read what we meant to write when we proofread ourselves because we know what was intended. Try reading backwards to catch spelling mistakes. A second set of eyes can be invaluable!

8. Who Should Help You?

You should help yourself. That said, don’t go for help to anyone until you have read through this packet and sketched out some ideas IN WRITING at the very least.

Use Appendix 3 — Self Evaluation Form section of this packet.

If you are still only at the idea phase (I just can’t think of anything to write...), try talking to your friends about events in your life that were significant, talk to parents, siblings, and former teachers, coaches, and administrators.

If you have drafted an essay, you might want a parent, older sibling, friend, your CURRENT English teacher or a former English teacher to read it over and offer suggestions. The first draft is NOT the time to **edit**, it is the time to **revise**. See the Glossary of Terms for explanation.

Make an appointment. No matter whom you work with, and especially if you want to see your CURRENT English teacher, make an appointment and keep it! Your approach to the task will influence others to behave the same way. If you are serious, they will be serious.

9. The Teacher's Role

Your CURRENT English teacher can be a powerful resource in the writing of your college essay, but remember, this is your application process, not his or hers. Also, your English teacher has a case load of students who need him or her for remediation during 9th period. This is why you should 1) ask your teacher if he or she can help you, and 2) MAKE AN APPOINTMENT and keep it.

Your teacher is not responsible for proofreading and editing your paper—that is your job. According to Randy Cohen (The Ethicist/NY Times Magazine), “A teacher may read students essays but not write them” and should “...eschew anything as hands-on as editing or proofreading...”

10. Using Electronic Media Successfully

Save multiple versions of your essays on a thumb drive so you can bring your essay with you wherever help is available.

Use sensible file names, e.g.: InfluentialPersonBrownU.doc, InfluentiaPersonSUNY.doc, InfluentialPersonDraft.doc. This way, you will know which version of an essay to open and where each is going.

Put the filename, date (automatically updated) and page number in the footer of your electronic document. This way, you'll know which version of the essay you are working on. However, don't send the final version to colleges with the filename in the footer.

Update files as soon as possible and resave to your thumb drive.

11. Structure of Essay

There is no single structure that works best. This will depend a lot on the question you are answering and on your own writing style. For instance, a traditional five-paragraph essay may work just fine for an issue-based question whereas a narrative describing a significant experience may include more short paragraphs and dialogue. Write what feels right for the occasion and get lots of second opinions. The bottom line is that the essay needs to follow a logical progression, must flow, and must stay focused on answering the question at hand. No matter what style you write in, you need to introduce your topic, develop it with concrete details, and reflect on it in a conclusion.

For more detailed information about what should go into each paragraph in a traditional essay, see Appendix 1.

(a) Where will my ideas come from?

Dig out those old photo albums, diaries, and journals to help refresh your memory about seminal events in your life. Also, consider looking over last year's essays from all of your classes. These assessments reflect your learning over the first three years of high school; your success or failure on them leads to insights about the kind of student you are. Explain why you failed/passed/wrote what you wrote. Consider creative writing assignments as well. Ask your former English teachers if they have those writing samples we all give at the beginning of the year. Also, even though they usually don't get distributed until the end of senior year, look for the time capsule letter you wrote yourself in 8th grade—ask guidance or your former 8th grade teacher for this.

(b) Outside the Box

The standard college essay questions can be refined by you to become uniquely personal to you. Think of the question you'd like to write about as a Critical Lens. What words could you replace with synonyms to change the perspective of the question? For example, "What *person* has had the greatest impact on your life?" could be reworded as "What *creature* has had the greatest impact..." opening up a whole new avenue of experiences for you to write about. Sometimes we don't think to use stories of our pets, or even an inanimate object such as a "blankie" because we are afraid to seem immature or silly, but as a young adult, you now have the perspective to see your own growth from these early childhood experiences—this can be very revealing of who you are now.

(c) Write Positively About Something Negative

Are you the kid who used to, or who is known to have "puked" in kindergarten? Pain and tragedy can reveal character in a "show, don't tell" way. Don't make the thrust of such an essay the pain of the experience, but the insights gained as a result.

(d) I Have Writer's Block...

If you have an idea about what you want to write about, but can't think of a way to start writing it, grab a recording device and a close friend or family member who remembers the incident and tell that person about the event. Make sure before you begin recording that 1) the recording device is working properly, and 2) the person is prepared to ask probing questions about the event: who else was involved, what was the worst/best aspect of the event? How did that make you feel? What did you learn? If you had it to do all over again, what would you do differently? etc. Then listen to the recording and transcribe some or all of what was discussed.

12. Common Application Essay Topics Analyzed

(See Appendix 5 — Questions You Should Answer)

Applications fall into several large categories. Essentially these are: tell us about yourself essay, the influence essay, tell us about why you want to go to this college specifically essay, tell us why you want to major in your chosen field essay, the creative essay, and thinking/issue based essay.

(a) The “Tell Us about Yourself” Essay:

On the Common Application, which is accepted by 345 schools, this question comes in the form of “Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you,” the “Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you,” or the “topic of your choice” option. Some schools simply state “Tell us about yourself” or “Tell us about an experience that changed you”. Michigan State phrases it as “In view of your educational experiences and the socio-economic environment in which you grew up, provide an example of a challenge you faced. How did you overcome or strive to overcome this challenge?”

Pros	Cons
You know a lot about yourself! No faking it necessary!	The topic is very broad and you may have a hard time boiling it down to a concrete, focused essay.
Your personality, style, and voice can really shine!	You may be afraid to “brag” about yourself, or, the converse, you may sound like you are bragging.

Tips:

Focus on an emotionally significant experience that shows off your most important qualities (for example, diligence, loyalty, good judgment); do not write a laundry list of activities and qualities.

Remember that modesty does not mean that you can’t truthfully discuss your good qualities.

(b) The “Influence” Essay:

On the Common Application this takes the form of “Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.” Many colleges offer an option like this one.

Pros	Cons
Everyone has been influenced by someone else in some way at some time in his or her life.	You may feel “obligated” or at least very inclined to write about a mother/father/sibling/aunt/uncle/grandparent/teacher. This is dangerous because everyone has a similar story. Go for something more unique.
Like the “you” essay, there is no need to research here. You already know about this person and his/her influence.	Or, if it is true that your mother/father/sibling/aunt/uncle/grandparent/teacher is your hero/mentor/strongest influence then make sure that the “influence” is unique—not just that your mother showed you what it means to care for someone else; that is what mothers are supposed to do. Now if she did that by taking in a foster child or volunteering her time with a charity, then maybe you have something. But if it is just that she makes your lunch and tucked you in at night, keep searching for a more interesting topic
It is often easier to write when something is closer to your heart, rather than a forced academic topic.	

Tips: Be careful not to focus so much on the person who influenced you that your own personality and qualities are lost. This is not simply a character sketch, you need to analyze/reflect on the *influence* the person has had on *you*. After all, *you* are the one applying to the school, not your grandmother. After the committee reads your essay you want them focused on you, not her! We promise that your mother/father/sibling/aunt/uncle/grandparent/teacher will be much happier to see you get into the college of your choice than to see you write about him/her in your essay.

(c) The “Creative” Essay:

This is the type of question that asks you to use your imagination. Some schools ask how you would change history if you could change one thing, or whom you would invite to dinner, dead or alive, and what you would talk about; others ask about characters in literature. You get the idea. On the common app this is “Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.”

Pros	Cons
Creative license can be a beautiful thing. You can really have fun with this one.	Your choice of topic will say a lot about the kind of person you are. Choose wisely.
This is a chance to flex your creative and intellectual muscles simultaneously.	Tone can be tricky. Humor can backfire on you if you are not adept at it. <i>Writing</i> something funny takes a different skill than <i>saying</i> something funny
You can really stand out as an individual here.	Choosing something unconventional is NOT a free pass. You must be able to PULL OFF the topic you choose—including knowing your facts.

(d) The “Why I Want to Go Here” Essay:

This essay is required at some schools. Sometimes it appears as a “mini-essay” question requiring a 100–200 word answer. Don’t take it lightly. Anything you have to “write” on the application beyond filling in informational blanks is an essay. The committee will be looking at the content as well as form and style. There is really one golden rule here: **do your homework**. What we mean by this is look at the college’s website, check out their course offerings, their faculty, their extracurricular offerings, etc. Check out the geographical area too. If there are culturally significant attractions nearby, you can throw that in as a side benefit—especially if they relate to your major. For instance, in New York City, the MOMA if you are an art history major or the New York Philharmonic if you are a music major. If you are heading for Washington DC as a Poly Sci major, the availability of government buildings and museums, etc. If you had family members or friends who attended the college/university you may mention it, especially if you have visited campus, but **beware** the essay needs to be about how **you are a good fit for the school and vice versa**.

For Pros and Cons see below.

(e) The “Why I Want to Major in _____” Essay:

Like the “Why I Want to Go Here” essay, this requires that you do some homework on the school’s website. Check their Major requirements, pre-requisites, and course offerings. Be prepared to refer to their specific program, including internship opportunities. It would be really embarrassing to say that you want to major in something that the school doesn’t offer! You can also include narrative elements in this essay by telling about a moment or incident which brought you to your decision about your major/career path. For instance, you may relate a personal experience with illness leading you to the medical field, a favorite book leading you to English, student government leading you to Political Science, etc.

Pros	Cons
It's about you, so you are an expert!	You need to do some research about the specific school.
	You may be tempted to simply list qualities, rather than write an interesting essay.

(f) The “Issue” Essay:

This type of question asks you to write about a social, political, local, national, or international issue that is important to you. The tricky thing about this type of essay is choosing your “issue”—you need it to be something that you know a lot about and you need to understand that your choice of topic will say something about you. For example, global warming makes you an environmentalist, the economy makes you politically minded, as does the Arab-Israeli conflict, genocide in Darfur makes you a humanitarian, etc.

Pros	Cons
This can be a chance for you to display your knowledge about something.	If you are uninformed about your topic you risk sounding ignorant.
Your choice can reveal your values, ideals, and beliefs.	If you do research to make sure you are informed, you must be careful not to plagiarize.
You may be able to work in your chosen major/profession and why going to X college would be so helpful.	If you are well-informed, you may sound preachy or bombastic.
	This is not a forum to solve the world’s problems. Don’t presume that you know better than the reader and/or experts in the field.

Tips: Stick with something you know well and have some experience with. If you volunteer at a retirement home, maybe elder care/rights is a good choice (you can talk to staff, etc.). If you are a member of DECA, then by all means something economic/business oriented may work well. If you are a member of METMUNC, then go for something global, etc. Scan your résumé for ideas; make your club affiliations work for you.

(g) The “How I Will Contribute to Diversity” Essay

This one can be tough if you are like the majority of the other students in your school culture (Caucasian, “All-American”, middle-of-the-road person). Thankfully, the Common App realizes this and has opened the question up to include experiences that have taught you the value

of diversity as well as diverse interests. On the Common App this question is phrased as “A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.”

Pros	Cons
Again, this is about YOU—a subject about which you are an expert!	You may be “reaching” for a topic if you come from a “standard”—whatever that means—background.
This essay is just begging the admissions officers to see you as a DIVERSE individual—not a cookie-cutter image of a college applicant.	You need to read very carefully around issues of race, gender, ethnicity, and creed. Choose your language carefully, but be honest about your experiences. You may need to show the prejudices and bias that exist in the world.

Tips: You cannot change who you are or what kind of family you were born into. Don’t despair! Think of your outside interests—maybe you like to go antique hunting or refurbish old cars. Think of your extracurricular skills—maybe you can paint murals on campus buildings, etc. Think of experiences you have had with diverse groups, maybe as an exchange student, working in a camp, volunteering your time with a charity, etc. **Remember:** Diversity is NOT LIMITED to race or religion! It is about moving beyond what you are familiar with and allowing it to influence you.

14. Annotated Sample Essays:

The following essays were written by real students. Use their essays and the annotations to generate ideas for possible topics and for improving the style and voice in your own writing.

College: The American University

(h) Question: How Would You Change History?

Grandpa has told the story many times. It is Radom, Poland, 1941. The young, Jewish people have been taken to labor camps. The old, the children, the sick have been left in the ghettos.

Comment [DS1]: Notice that the essay does not begin by restating the question. Instead, it invites you into a story.

My grandpa is eighteen; his sister Fay is two years younger. They work in the camps as a tailor and a seamstress. Because of the need for these professions, their lives are still bearable.

Comment [DS2]: The writer is using present tense to show that this is a flashback.

Daily, on the way to the labor camp they pass the ghetto where their mother and young brother are closely guarded by Nazi soldiers. It looks peaceful; falsely, they assume that the laborers are taking the Nazi abuse and those in the ghetto are safe.

On one particular day, on the way back from the labor camps, Max met up with a young girl who has escaped from Treblinka, a concentration camp nearby. She had hidden herself in a wagon under old clothes. This young girl told them of the atrocities she had witnessed at Treblinka. Her listeners allowed her to finish, gave her some bread they saved and helped her on her way. In private they called her the crazy girl from Treblinka - "the meshuganah." They didn't believe.

Comment [DS3]: A short simple sentence works well here. Note: there should be a variety of sentence lengths and structures in your writing.

Little by little, others swore to her testimony. Names like Auschwitz, Bergen Belsen began to surface; liquidation camps, gas chambers.

Comment [DS4]: Short paragraphs can make information stand out and maintain reader interest.

One day the news buzzed around the labor camp that the Nazis were going to liquidate the Radom ghetto. Max, in a desperate attempt to save his mother and brother, bribed a soldier with a new coat and then ran to his house. He had arranged for a Polish family to hide them.

When he arrived, to his horror, his mother wouldn't leave. He grabbed her. She wouldn't budge. No argument could convince her of the danger. She didn't believe anyone could be as cruel as the stories Max described.

Comment [DS5]: Notice the placement of the intervening descriptive phrase.

Comment [DS6]: Three short active voice sentences help set the tone here.

Because he had been taught to have absolute respect for his parents, Max couldn't bring himself to use physical force and so he left without her. His mother and brother died in Auschwitz months later.

When you talk to Grandpa now, he says he would have dragged her by the hair, kicking and screaming. He would have saved her. So, what fact about human history would I change? I would make Grandma believe. I would make all the Jewish people believe. If they had, they

Comment [DS7]: The writer introduces the essay topic here and crystallizes the connection between the story and the topic.

might not have gone so passively to their deaths. They might have lost but they could have put up a fight.

Comment [DS8]: Notice that the writer has chosen something very personal to change. She doesn't stop Hitler or WWII, she focuses on something much more concrete. An essay about the horrors of the Holocaust in general terms might come across as too clichéd or lofty; this personal Holocaust story has emotional impact and shows the reader something about the writer as an individual. (Any number of people could say they would stop Hitler, only she could write this essay.)

Colleges: Colgate University, Brown University

(i) Question: Tell Us About Yourself

At five-thirty the alarm rattles. It is winter and I quickly dress, hoping my clothes will be as warm as my pajamas, and the desk lamp as soft and dim as the moonlight on my drawn shades. But the clothes are cold and the light is blinding, so I hurry to dress, and pack my books, towel, and suit. I stumble through the dark house with my stuffed tote-bag, to the car in the driveway. Soon I am in the quiet car traveling to school where a twenty-five yard pool is waiting patiently to greet me.

Comment [DS9]: Be careful with a topic like this. Avoid listing qualities, which can come across as awkward or bragging. Don't try to tell your whole life story... "I was born..." This writer wisely chooses a narrative form to answer the question through indirect characterization.

Comment [DS10]: A "day in the life" offers a snapshot of the writer, keeps it concrete and narrows the scope of such a broad question.

I arrive at the school grounds where the dark building sprawls majestically and then surrenders to acres of fields and parking lots. I walk through the chilled parking lot to the unlocked doors of the main entrance to the building. The hallways are unlit except for a trophy case that guides me to the locker room. There I redress, this time in briefer attire, and carry myself, my towel, and my goggles to the dark stairwell that leads to the incandescent glow, radiating from the natatorium door. I climb the stairs sluggishly and open the door. The brightly lit natatorium appears as a modern temple, decorated with fluorescent blue and green geometrically designed walls, and a high white paneled ceiling. The centerpiece is a calm tiled pool of water. As I walk further into the room, I see other swimmers with tangled hair crawling slowly, like creatures from the locker rooms, looking as if they did not belong in such a place.

Comment [DS11]: Vivid verbs, like *sprawls* and *surrenders*, add interest. Compare to "I arrive at the large, dark school building which is surrounded by many empty fields and parking lots."

Comment [DS12]: There is no need for such a fancy word; indoor swimming pool would do just fine.

From somewhere out of my field of vision, I hear a voice shrieking with authority and aggravation. I turn my head, and there is a person who does not look like any of the other swimmers. He carries no goggles. His hair is combed, and he is dressed warmly, the coach, our mentor and friend. He commands the twenty swimmers to assemble behind the starting blocks. I watch as they align themselves behind the blocks, pull the beetle-eyed goggles over their faces, and stand as if to prey on the sleeping water. At the blow of a whistle, they sabotage the water. My turn being next, I join them in their attack, and in one splash, I am drowned in the chlorinated warmth. I begin to swim, marking progress by each white tile I pass on the floor of the pool. Churning the water about, pull upon monotonous pull, push upon push, I move like a machine. I reach the wall and swing my legs over my head like a hatchet. I have changed directions, recrossing the pool. Stroke upon stroke; turn upon turn; lap upon lap. I am mesmerized. I am swimming again.

Comment [DS13]: This sounds awkward. I would revise to say "When my turn comes, I join them..."

Comment [DS14]: This is a great sentence. It begins with a participial phrase "churning the water about", includes balance and repetition "pull upon monotonous pull, push upon push", and employs a simile, "like a machine".

Six hours later, the morning practice has long passed and I return to the locker room where I will change clothing for the afternoon workout. I notice I am neatly dressed and well awake as I reluctantly begin to shed my warm sweater and shoes.

Comment [DS15]: A string of fragments can be used for stylistic reasons, but be diligent in finding unintentional sentence fragments!

I am soon wearing my swimming attire, and I walk out of the locker room to the large multi-colored natatorium. I walk on deck and look around. Busy swimmers are gathered around a reel of lane lines, and backstroke flags five yards from the ends of the pool. We assemble in the pool in ten minutes and cluster behind each of six lanes. The coach is congenial, but demanding as he announces the first set. We are all obedient and six at a time, we pull our goggles over our faces, and splash into the pool.

The water feels warm and almost refreshing as I begin to pull the monotony of “freestyle”. Stroke upon stroke, I reach the first wall and swing my legs over my head, and complete the turn. Wall to wall again, I push and swim. The coach is yelling. His demands are loud and penetrate the air I breathe. “Go,” he says. I churn and chop frantically, to the rhythm of his commands. “Faster!” he tells me. My blood pulsates through my head. Faster and faster, I gasp for air. Stroke upon stroke, tile over tile, lap upon lap. Kicking, pulling, pushing, gasping, I reach for air. My body is weakening.

Practice is eventually over and as I catch my breath, I feel sore, but healthy. Practice is finished, and I leave the six-lane pool for the locker room where I dress to go home.

I exit through the same doors I had entered this morning. It is dark outside, and cold. I have not seen the sun all day. I walk through the pale-lit parking lot to the automobile. It shuttles me to my house, my home where I engage in homework and hobbies until it nears midnight. The tune of a record sings me to sleep.

At five-thirty the alarm rattles and chirps again, and I wake to another day. The rest of the world sleeps.

Comment [DS16]: Adding short bits of dialogue keeps reader interest. Compare to “The coach tells me to go.” “Go, he says” is more active and sets the tone better.

Comment [DS17]: Who else’s blood would it be? Eliminate the word “my”. “Blood pulsates through my head” sounds better.

Comment [DS18]: These phrases mirror the language used to describe the morning practice.

Comment [DS19]: Without directly describing herself, it is clear that the writer is hard-working and dedicated, as well as an athlete.

Comment [DS20]: The ending directly mimics the beginning. Framing like this is a very effective technique.

Colleges: University of Michigan and Cornell

(j) **Question: Describe an experience that changed your life in a positive and meaningful way.**

My skin burned, my body poured sweat. I chanted in ancient ritualistic fashion, my only visions hallucinations. No, this was not hell, but in fact this was a religious rite, a Native American Sweat. And I had been privileged to partake in its solemn intensity, chosen by Roy Big Crane to be one of the first white people at this sacred ceremony. In return for months of community service building homeless shelters on the Flathead Indian Reservation, we had been so honored by the chief of the tribe.

Comment [DS21]: An intriguing opening is a great "hook" because it creates mystery and forces the reader to keep reading.

Comment [DS22]: A little humor placed appropriately is a useful technique

What led me to this place in my life? How had a teenager from the Northeast arrived on the Flathead Indian Reservation of Northern Montana? Well, it wasn't easy. Even though my family stressed serving others and giving something back to society, they were concerned when I asked for permission to go to Montana to provide community service for the local Indian tribe. Wasn't there a closer group in need, they wondered? After all, New York City was only an hour away. No, this experience had to be close to the land. It had to take me as far away from my normal life as possible. I wanted to help others, but I wanted to transport myself to another time and place. I had to immerse myself in this new culture and become one with it.

Comment [DS23]: Rhetorical questions can be effective, but don't overuse them.

Comment [DS24]: Another rhetorical question... try to differentiate your techniques!

And one I did become. I learned about every facet of the Indian civilization. I hiked in the Wilderness Preservation; I participated in the Tribal Council and I even joined in on a ceremonial dance. So it was with knowledge, I thought, that I entered the sweat, this place of prayer. It was a cold August morning. Inside the lodge was absolute darkness. In the center hot rocks were doused with water. Tribal custom called for proper ritualistic dress, colorful headdresses and intricate leather and beaded garments. But I was not prepared for the effect. Within moments, I found myself losing sense of time and place. The chanting mesmerized me; the steam burned my skin but I was oblivious. What took minutes felt interminable, yet took a second. It was a mystical experience. To this day, I still dream about it.

Comment [DS25]: This seems a bit vague and could probably be revised to be more concrete and descriptive.

Immersing myself in another culture is unlike any other experience I have had. Yes, I've been vice-president of my class, and I've been a representative of my school to Boys State. But I've never proven to myself that I was worthy of earning respect, worthy of being called a leader until this summer. Building a house, especially for people who need it so, that's a feeling of worth. For two months I fixed, hauled, painted sheet-rocked, sided and cleaned. For two months I belonged to the Indians. But more important, they now belong to me.

Comment [DS26]: The writer slips in the more traditional experiences that high school seniors might write about for an essay like this, but subordinates them in favor of this more unique and "authentic" experience.

I hope I never lose the will to try my best, to be open to new experiences, and to seek honor in everything I do.

Colleges: University of Vermont
George Washington University

(k) Question: Describe a person who influenced you

We met on the first day of kindergarten. From the beginning Shawn wasn't just another kid. He was my buddy. Much to our annoyance, everyone commented on the strange pairing. Shawn was a hyperactive, mischievous little boy and I was a quiet, orderly little girl. But we saw in each other two pieces of a whole. Our friendship was right. He seemed to give me the courage to attempt the frightening, and I gave him the patience to resist the same.

In third grade we made up a list of questions to stump our teachers; What is life? How do we know we're alive? Is your color blue the same as mine? We soon discovered that even our teachers did not know all the answers, and because of our constant interchanges, they usually assigned us to seats on opposite sides of the classroom.

As friends, we continued to be compatible. I helped him with math; he taught me computers. We both loved music, books, and skiing. Both sets of parents indulged us and allowed vacations to be shared on the ski slopes. Even though Shawn was the better athlete, I was the better skier. His aggressiveness never allowed him to perfect his form.

In all aspects of life we developed a pattern of watching and learning from each other. I learned that sometimes men put sports above homework; he learned that sometimes women nag. But we both learned that compromise is the key to getting along. Empathy, putting yourself in another person's place, that was important.

That's why I miss him so much. On an ordinary Friday night, on the way home from an ordinary movie, a most extraordinary thing happened. A drunk driver careened into a 1985 Chevy station wagon, injuring the front seat passengers, and killing Shawn.

At first I was inconsolable — not a minute went by without sadness. But soon, the aching in my chest lessened and hours, even days went by when my thoughts, though of Shawn, were good ones. I began to realize, too, that as clichéd as it sounds, I had an obligation to make his life count. Finding the right vehicle was easy. I joined S.A.D.D., Students Against Drunk Driving. Knowing that I could save even one person's life has made a difference in mine. Shawn would be proud.

However, I can't help looking back and thinking, we started kindergarten together, but only I will graduate. It really hurts.

Comment [DS27]: This is a common question. It is one on the Common Application. It can be difficult to avoid cliché here. So many people will write about mothers, fathers, grandparents, or teachers who have been supportive, etc. It is fine to choose one of those people, but make the influence concrete and unique, not just "typical" parent/mentor qualities.

Comment [DS28]: This writer chooses to use a friend. A risky choice, but in this case it works and stands out.

Comment [DS29]: These concrete examples really give the reader a sense of what these children were like.

Comment [DS30]: This is not a "traditional" influence. Typical essays might cite lessons like "being true to yourself" or "working hard" or "not taking things for granted".

Comment [DS31]: This is an unexpected development. The writer could have opened with saying that she lost her friend to an accident at the beginning. Instead, she wisely allows the reader to get to know Shawn and like him, maybe even sense a brewing romance, before delivering this blow. This maximizes the emotional impact, allowing us to feel some small fraction of her loss. It also adds significance—he's not just a typical friend.

Comment [DS32]: Again, she could have made her involvement in the cause the main thrust of the essay, but she makes the better choice by keeping it unique and personal.

Comment [DS33]: A short but powerful closing sentence really stays with the reader. Notice that she does not summarize or restate the question at all, but she has still answered the question and stayed on topic.

(1) Question: Describe a Person Who Has Influenced You

It is 8:17 A.M. on a Friday morning during summer break. My mother calls my name and wakes me. She reminds me that I am helping my father at his store today, and to hurry up and get dressed. I rub my eyes for a minute or two, focus my brain, and stumble to the bathroom where I dunk my face into ice cold water. I am dressed in minutes, and my father and I are out the door by 8:30 A.M.

Comment [DS34]: Notice the narrative framework. She begins, as a story might, with setting a scene.

Comment [LH35]: Even though this event takes place in the past, the writer gives immediacy to her subject by writing in the present tense, as if the events are happening in front of the reader.

I call him Daddy, and although he has always been there for me, and occasionally spoiled his youngest child, I do not know him. I am not sure what happened, but now that my sister and brother are in law school and college, I realize how little I know and appreciate my father.

Comment [DS36]: This is not typical of an "influence" essay and prompts the reader to wonder why she has chosen this topic (and hence to read on).

My father parks the car, and we walk together to his store. He has been working at this store for twenty years, Monday through Saturday, stocking up supplies on Sunday morning before church. He has aged. My father greets his regular customers with a warm word and introduces me as his baby girl. They smile wisely, and tell me I have a good father. One customer says I look-just like my dad, and my father smiles wide with pride. I sit behind the counter and read *L'Étranger* by Albert Camus in French, and I see my father watching me almost cautiously as though I might mind. I look up from my book, and he hides a wistful look in his eyes. He is proud of me. He knows that while he works, I learn French, though he cannot learn English.

Comment [LH37]: The writer describes one of her strengths without bragging about it; she "shows", rather than "tells" the reader that she reads French.

I remember there was a time not so long ago when I was ashamed of my father. He is neither a doctor nor a lawyer. He owns a small store in a dangerous town. He speaks broken English, and he wears simple clothes. I was embarrassed of all these things. I could never see why he did not have a top-notch job, or why he worked in Far Rockaway, or why he never took the time to learn English, or why he didn't dress better. I can't see now why I was so blind. Didn't I know he was a respected pharmacist in Korea, and that he had only come to the U. S. in order to support and be with his mother and siblings? Wasn't it clear to me that he had no time to learn English properly? Don't I wear a Polo jacket because he does not?

Comment [DS38]: Don't be afraid to admit things that may not seem pleasant or right. Honesty wins points.

Comment [DS39]: There is a nice symmetry between what she couldn't see then and what she can't see now—being so blind.

Comment [LH40]: The use of rhetorical questions here is effective because they are used to introduce new information about the writer and her subject.

I am ashamed of myself. For all that my father has given me, I have always taken; I gave him presents, yet never gave time. He is shy of his children, and he does not know how to express his love for us. Already my brother and sister are grown, and seeing his last child ready to leave for college, his heart pulls tight. He is afraid I will become a stranger and turn away from him.

Comment [DS41]: His "heart pulls tight" is a great example of vivid language. It sounds so much more interesting than "makes him sad" or even "makes him nostalgic".

It was his birthday last week, October 12, and he is now 52 years old. I asked him what he wanted for his birthday; he told me he only wanted his favorite soup for dinner. I was silly to ask him what he wants — I know too well what he wants most.

Comment [LH42]: A poignant connection to the book (*The Stranger*) she is reading in French, which is strange, to both the writer and her father since it is written in neither person's native language.

Comment [DS43]: Nice use of a timely detail and also a semi-colon! A semi-colon is used properly to connect two independent clauses that are closely related in content. They could be separate sentences but work better together.

My father tries to think up conversation, and asks me how my college essays are going. I reply that they are coming along slowly, and that I'm having trouble picking a topic to write about. He, self-mockingly, says I could write about his store. He laughs and goes to straighten out some notebooks, and I smile to myself.

Comment [LH44]: Without directly stating, the author indicates that she and her father are actually more intimate than the essay initially suggests. The influence the father has on the daughter is her reflection of his form of intimacy—quiet and based on observation. She has demonstrated that she is like him, which is the point of the essay.

Comment [DS45]: This is a nice ending because the lesson is implied, but not directly stated. The reader smiles too with dramatic irony—we know that she has, in fact, written about his store, but he does not.

Comment [DS46]: NOTE: Before using this technique, make sure the lesson is obvious to several readers!

(m) Question: Why Do You Want to Go to Our School?

"Jennifer, put the crayons down and go to bed. You'll never be able to get up in the morning."

Surreptitiously, I slid the crayons under the covers and awaited my mother's entrance. "That's a good girl. You know I'll never understand how you can spend so much time doodling up here. Sleep well." Eagerly I took the box and the flashlight and with determination finished my picture.

No, she would never understand. As early as kindergarten days, there was nothing as wonderful as going to the stationery store to buy a brand new, unbroken set of sixty-four glorious Crayola brand crayons. To me, each new box was a friend to be treated with respect and dignity. One would never find broken, missing colors in my boxes. Each picture was lovingly created and with ceremony given to a new friend or relative.

As I got older, my parents began to realize that huge amounts of my time were spent drawing. They felt that it was unhealthy and that I needed physical exercise. So my father, a soccer coach, put me on his town team. For years I played to the best of my ability, going so far as to make the high school team. But my heart wasn't in it. In my sophomore year, I finally dug to the soles of my feet to find the nerve to tell my father I had gone as far with it as I could.

Throughout high school my parents allowed me to take art courses to "keep me happy"; however, they always saw my love for the arts as a hobby. In their hearts, they did not see it as a livelihood, starving artists and all that.

But then something happened to change things. Last month my grandfather died. There was nothing anyone could do to console my grandmother. After forty-nine years her Louie wasn't there anymore. I didn't know what to do or say. My words seemed fake; they were just like everyone else's. So I painted his portrait. It didn't take long; the pastels flew about the paper. Soon, there he was. With nervous anticipation I approached Grandma, afraid I would upset her. When she saw what I had done, she began to cry. She understood.

So now I am applying to a school for the arts, because after a full-fledged, no holds barred, down and dirty campaign launched by me, my A/P art teacher, Mrs. Rowe, and my new ally, Grandma, my parents have finally realized that I do have talent, that I want this very much, and most important, that there is a possibility, a good possibility, that going to a fine art school will allow me to make a living at something I love. I hope to have that chance.

Comment [DS47]: This could become a boring essay with a list of adjectives and qualities of the school of her choice. Try a narrative approach, as Jennifer does here to add interest.

Comment [DS48]: Beginning with dialogue sets the stage and drags the reader into a story in medias res.

Comment [DS49]: Opening a sentence with an adverb can add to sentence variety. Her it is done smoothly, but beware of misplaced and dangling modifiers!

Comment [DS50]: PASSIVE VOICE. While there is nothing "incorrect" about passive voice, active voice sentences tend to be more engaging. "...my parents began to realize that I spent huge amounts of time drawing" sounds better.

Comment [DS51]: Contrary to popular relief—and what teachers have told you—beginning a sentence with a conjunction *can* work SOMETIMES, but NOT IN A FORMAL ACADEMIC ESSAY!

Comment [DS52]: This is a great image. It is VIVID and engages the reader more than "I got the courage".

Comment [DS53]: An em-dash would work better here since it is more of a conversational aside. "—starving artists and all that."

Comment [DS54]: This is the proper use of a semi-colon. The ideas are closely related independent, complete thoughts joined without the aid of a conjunction.

Comment [DS55]: A short simple sentence has a dramatic impact here. Don't be afraid to vary sentence length!

Comment [DS56]: This is all one super-long sentence, but it is properly punctuated and reads reasonably clearly. The opening word "so" is very conversational, but not necessarily inappropriate in the context of this particular essay. It is balanced by the very short final sentence.

(n) Question: Diversity /What Will You Bring to the College Campus?

I used to think that my life, free of any major tragedies or tensions, was really great. My parents aren't divorced, and they don't beat me. I am a normal white Jewish teenager, a good student involved in school and community activities. My life was happy until I realized that I live in a middle class community that probably sends more applications to the Ivy League than any other area in the nation, and that on paper, I look like a generic person.

Comment [DS57]: Relatively speaking, this is a minor problem—and the writer knows this and is making a point about it. Keep reading.

Okay, so it's too late to move to Montana, and I can't turn myself into an Eskimo or Navajo Indian. I'm good at a lot of things, but by no means am I gifted in any one of them. I've never found a cure for any important diseases, and for that matter, any unimportant ones either. I've never played my trombone in Carnegie Hall, although I can play a pretty mean swing. I've never stopped a violent crime nor have I solved the Middle East peace problem. Often, I hallucinate on how grand an essay I could write if I cracked a major spy ring, thereby keeping America's secrets out of foreign hands. Of course, I could ask the President for a letter of recommendation.

Comment [DS58]: This is very clever humor. Use humor carefully, and only if two or more people really, honestly think it is funny.

Comment [DS59]: This phrasing is awkward. Idiomatically speaking we don't generally say, "hallucinate on" we "hallucinate that" –it would be better if her had said "fantasize about".

Comment [DS60]: This paragraph relies on contrasting grand and heroic deeds with the author's real life accomplishments. He uses hyperbole and understatement skillfully to do this.

I know I must try to show that I am something special, while at the same time I want to retain some shred of my dignity and humility. I see my classmates casting their ethics aside for the sake of a recommendation, and forming organizations to put on their applications - "President and Founder, Students for Peace and Justice." I have nothing against peace or justice, but I do find it morally reprehensible to use the misfortunes of others as a means of bettering an application. For this reason, a friend and I have formed our own society "Students against the trivialization of important issues for the sake of enhancing their college applications" or just SATIIFSETCA, because acronyms are so vital to a big organization. More importantly, our group has no officials at all; to be a president of such a group would be the ultimate hypocrisy.

Comment [DS61]: This is funny, and it shows something about the writer and he kind of friends he has. He can make a cynical observation, yet he doesn't come across as bitter or overly negative.

Preparing applications turns my thoughts to Mook, in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. "Well I'll be washed and ironed and starched." I had better wash and starch and iron myself very well, though, because in terms of college admissions, I'm told that it's more important that you win than how you play the game. But the way I play is important as well. I would like to believe that what the college sees on paper is what they get, not some hollow list of meaningless clubs and activities.

Comment [DS62]: There really should be a transition to link these two ideas more closely.

Comment [DS63]: Here he shows off a bit of his literary knowledge.

I am witty and humorous, hard working, bruised if not adept at lacrosse, well versed in the Norwegian spoon industry, responsible, dependable, and an avid mayonnaise lover. While I understand the value of good grades, I have not become infected with the syndrome of "grade grubbing", a malignant high school malady. Academics have always played a key role in my life as have music and sports. I do not want to embellish my application with contrived activities and inflated grades.

Comment [DS64]: Notice the intermingling of honest qualities and humorous additions.

Comment [DS65]: Here again, he is able to criticize some of his peers and the "process" without sounding too condescending.

College packaging can be a ruthless business, a "win at all costs" mentality. It's one thing to be washed, ironed and starched and quite another to be packaged. I am not a commodity that needs to be packaged. And besides, what university's cultural plurality could not be enhanced by a connoisseur of fine mayonnaise?

Comment [DS66]: He really takes the lighter side of "diversity", but it works. This essay is one that will likely get the reader to share it with his or her colleagues at the table.

15. Essay with Revision

(a) The Original Essay

This is the essay as it was first written:

What do people want out of life? Is it understanding of the world around them? Could it be truth or acceptance? There are a multitude of applicable nouns that may be inserted to complete the question. Perhaps the real substance of what people want from their lives is the ability to make goals for themselves and be able to reach for and attain those goals.

It all boils down to an individual's personal goals. In my case, my personal goals are my educational goals as well; to do all I can to succeed in life; to know that I am here for a reason and leave my mark on this world through my chosen path. My path was discovered during participation of the Brown Environmental Leadership Lab (BELL) Hawaii program in April of 2007. Marine science and biology had always been what I wanted to study, however, I was unsure of where that part of academia could take me in life. While in Hawaii I found the answer in coral reef conservation. BELL Hawaii had opened a doorway, an opportunity for a path to walk. Striving to preserve a part of our world that holds such unsurpassed beauty for future generations is what life contains in my future.

As an avid outdoorsman and nature lover, traveling the globe focused toward preservation of coral reefs will bring meaning to the high degree of education received in marine sciences and biology. As a widely renowned school for such academic programs, including not only masters and doctorate programs, but research of various topics, especially coral reef ecosystems, UNCW will without a doubt facilitate my life goals. I will go anywhere, meet any challenge head on, and overcome any obstacle to realize my goals.

(b) The Revised Essay

Here is the revised essay:

What do people want out of life? Some may say an understanding of the world around them. Others may wish for truth or acceptance. In reality, there are a multitude of applicable answers to that question. However, they all boil down to people's ability to make goals for themselves and their ability to reach for and attain those goals.

The specific answer to the question, therefore, all depends upon an individual's personal goals. In my case, my personal goals are the same as my educational goals: to do all I can to succeed in life; to know that I am here for a reason and leave my mark on this world through my chosen path. I discovered the path for doing so during my participation in the Brown Environmental Leadership Lab (BELL) Hawaii program in April of 2007. Marine science and biology had always been what I wanted to study, however, I was unsure of where that part of academia could take me in life. As soon as I dove beneath the clear blue waters of Hawaii I found the answer in coral reef conservation. BELL Hawaii had opened a doorway, an

Comment [DS67]: Too many rhetorical questions!

Comment [DS68]: Actually the answer to this question would likely consist of both verbs and nouns. The writer should simply say "answers" or "phrases".

Comment [DS69]: This is a classic example of an ambiguous pronoun. What, exactly, is the "it" here?

Comment [DS70]: A colon [:] would be better here than the semi-colon [;] since the clauses that follow elaborate or answer the initial clause.

Comment [DS71]: Avoid PASSIVE VOICE: "I discovered my path" is MUCH better!

Comment [DS72]: This should be a semicolon. The clause that precedes the punctuation is independent and so is the phrase that follows the punctuation mark.

Comment [DS73]: Another awkward PASSIVE VOICE construction!

Comment [DS74]: This is a MISPLACED MODIFIER!

Comment [DS75]: Idiomatic error. We normally say "focused on" not "focused toward".

Comment [DS76]: MORE passive voice!

Comment [DS77]: Long, clumsy, and you guessed it... passive voice!

Comment [DS78]: Now this reads as a question and answer.

Comment [DS79]: Note the TRANSITION which links this new idea with the previous paragraph.

Comment [DS80]: Revised to a colon.

Comment [DS81]: Changed to active voice.

Comment [DS82]: Note the new semi-colon!

Comment [DS83]: Much more vivid!

opportunity for a path to walk. My future will be filled with my efforts to preserve a part of our world that holds such unsurpassed beauty for future generations.

Comment [DS84]: Notice the new ACTIVE VOICE here. Compare to "what life contains in my future."

As an avid outdoorsman and nature lover, I believe that traveling the globe with a focus on preserving coral reefs will bring meaning to the high degree of education received in marine sciences and biology. Since UNCW is a widely renowned school for such academic programs, including masters and doctorate programs as well as research programs focused on coral reef ecosystems, attending UNCW will without a doubt facilitate my life goals. By accepting me, UNCW will be admitting a student who will go anywhere, meet any challenge head on, and overcome any obstacle to realize his goals, which, after all, is what people want out of life.

Comment [DS85]: Adding the pronoun "I" corrects the misplaced modifier by making it clear who the avid outdoorsman and nature lover is.

Comment [DS86]: This is still long, but is a tad more stream-lined and gets the salient points across.

Comment [DS87]: This new ending echoes the original rhetorical question and helps to bring the essay full circle.

(c) Commentary

This essay is still far from perfect or professional; however, the few changes that were made do a lot to improve the voice, tone, and flow of the essay. The overall organization and cohesion has been improved. More details about the trip to Hawaii and the BELL program may have made this essay more vivid, but the writer accomplishes the task of explaining his choice in schools and majors.

16. Print Resources

50 Successful Harvard Application Essays, Second Edition: What Worked for Them Can Help You Get into the College of Your Choice, 2nd Edition

by Staff of the Harvard Crimson

Amazon.com: \$12.30

On Writing the College Application Essay: The Key to Acceptance and the College of your Choice by Harry Bauld

Amazon.com: \$13.95

How to Write a Winning College Application Essay, Revised 4th Edition

by Michael James Mason

Amazon.com: \$10.17

The College Application Essay: Revised edition

by Sarah Myers McGinty

Amazon.com: \$10.85

100 Successful College Application Essays (Second Edition)

by Harvard Independent

Amazon.com: \$10.20

College Essays That Made a Difference, 2nd Edition

by Princeton Review

Amazon.com: \$11.16

and more...

http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_ss_gw/103-1301746-9266233?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=college+essay

17. Web Resources

Accepted.Com

Accepted.com is a website that offers free sample essays and general tips for applying to college. They also offer an editing service for a fee. While the free information is very useful, we strongly advise against using any service that is unethical and borders on plagiarism. Please be very careful in selecting any resource that is willing to write your essay “for you.”

<http://www.accepted.com/college/sampleEssays.aspx>

The College Board

The College Board offers *many* valuable resources for students preparing for college. This link takes you to a page of solid Dos and Don'ts. Also see the related articles and sample essays offered by the College Board.

<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/9406.html>

National Association of College Admission Counseling

This resource from the National Association of College Admission Counseling was written by Jennifer Gross and contains great tips for writing your college essay. This site also offers general advice for getting into college via the “Student Resources” link in the sidebar.

http://www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/News/StepsNewsletter/tips_college_essay.htm

“Writing the Essay: Sound Advice from an Expert”

This article “Writing the Essay: Sound Advice from an Expert” was written by Parke Muth, Senior Assistant Dean and Director of International Admission at UVA. He has years of experience reading essays and his advice is down to earth. There is also a link to the 2008 essay questions for UVA admission.

<http://www.virginia.edu/undergradadmission/writingtheessay.html>

Creative Writing Prompts

Having trouble getting the whole process started? Try this link; it's a fun, interactive sight that can motivate you to think and write about topics beyond the college essay. This link could provide you with an unusual angle from which to express your unique identity.

<http://creativewritingprompts.com/>

The Write Source

Another link that could provide you with that unusual angle from which to express your unique identity.

<http://www.thewritesource.com/topics.htm>

Teen Ink Magazine

The English department has a yearly subscription to this magazine as well. See the department chair for copies. However, the website link has many examples of college essays together in one place. Read examples for inspiration and ideas for your own essay.

<http://www.teenink.com/CollegeEssays/index.php>

Good Essay Topics

While many of these ideas are standard, garden-variety essay questions, enough are not, and can spark fresh ideas or simply get you motivated to write.

<http://www.goodessaytopics.com/college-application-essay-topics.html>

College Summit

Get REAL. You think you've got it bad? Read some of these essays from students who are NOT guaranteed access to college. Hear their authentic voices. Notice the typos and mistakes that just don't matter in the face of authenticity.

<http://www.collegesummit.org/students-alumni/students/in-students-words>

18. Glossary of Terms

Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

A sentence written in active voice makes the subject the doer of an action. For example, “Johnny threw the ball”. A sentence written in passive voice places the doer of the action after the verb or leaves the “doer” out completely, which eliminates responsibility. For example, “The ball was thrown by Johnny,” makes the ball the focus of the sentence, not Johnny. “The ball was thrown,” eliminates the “doer” altogether.

Direct Characterization vs. Indirect characterization

Direct characterization states *directly* the qualities of the character/person. For example, “I am tall” or “I am good at math”.

Indirect characterization *shows* by example and *implies* the quality. For example, “Dunking the ball is no problem for my 6’ frame” or “I answered each question on the calculus test correctly.”

Em-dash and Hyphen

The em-dash should never be confused with a hyphen. Em-dashes look like this— Hyphens look like this -. Em-dashes are used to introduce an “aside” or parenthetical, interloping phrase. For example: I love—or at least don’t hate—writing essays. Think of the em-dash as replacing commas or parentheses. Hyphens separate two parts of a compound word like em-dash, well-spent, or pet-friendly. One dash on a keyboard is a hyphen, not a dash. Most versions of MS Word will autocorrect two dashes to look like an em-dash.

Fragment

A fragment is an incomplete thought, a non-sentence. These are technically grammatically incorrect—they (notice the em-dash!) are subjects without verbs, verbs without subjects, or sometimes simply adjectival phrases. They *can*, however, be used stylistically for emphasis or to set a certain tone. For instance, “The boy with the blue shirt” is a bad fragment. “I wasn’t just angry. I was livid. Boiling. Out of control.” The last two phrases here are fragments, but they work for emphasis.

Framing

Framing is a narrative device in which the writer sets the stage for the essay with a particular idea or scene and then returns to a “mirror” image at the end.

Hook

A hook is something catchy that pulls the reader into a piece of writing. Hooks can range from rhetorical questions to famous quotes; dialogue to a mysterious description. Basically, a

hook reels the reader in and makes him/her want to read more. It goes beyond restating the question as an opening line.

Hyperbole and Understatement

Hyperbole is purposeful exaggeration for effect—sometimes comical, sometimes dramatic. For example, “A pimple on my chin on the day of the prom? My life could not get any worse.”

Understatement is the opposite. For example, “Among his minor accomplishments, Thomas Edison invented the light bulb.”

Idiomatic Phrase

There are two kinds of idiomatic phrases: phrases that just “sounds right” one way but not another, usually involving a preposition, and phrases that would not make sense to a speaker of another language, but makes perfect sense to native speakers. For example for the first type, think of we “dream *of*” being rich, not “dream *for*” but we can’t really say *why* or for the second type, think of something like “bite your tongue”.

Misplaced Modifier

A misplaced modifier occurs when an adjective, adverb, or phrase is placed somewhere in a sentence that can cause confusion. For instance, “I *only* have eyes for you” makes it sound like the person only has eyes and no other body part. What he means is “I have eyes for *only* you” meaning she is the only one he wishes to look at. This can also occur at the beginning of a sentence: “As an avid reader, the book series appealed to my aesthetic sense.” This sentence makes it sound like the book series is the avid reader. It should read “As an avid reader, I was drawn to the book series.”

Motif and Extended Metaphor

A motif is a recurring idea or image that helps to unify an essay, for instance, multiple references to the weather in a metaphoric sense or describing your cultural heritage as a tossed salad and referring to your _____ aunts as tomatoes and your _____ grandparents as the croutons.

Participial Phrase and Dangling Participle

A participle is a verb form. A participial phrase is a phrase containing the verb form, for instance “dancing down the aisle”. You DO NOT want your participle to dangle! The “-ing” form needs to latch onto a noun or pronoun. Make sure the closest noun/pronoun fits the bill; it must answer *who* or *what* is doing the action in the phrase. For instance, “Dancing down the aisle, the bride and groom were the picture of happiness” NOT “Dancing down the aisle, the photographer took pictures of the bride and groom.” The latter makes it sound as if the photographer was doing the dancing!

Plagiarism

Any thought or idea that is NOT ORIGINAL to you or considered COMMON KNOWLEDGE must be properly documented using MLA form or another accepted form of documentation such as APA or Chicago Manual of Style. This includes summarizing and paraphrasing as well as direct quotations. If you have any further questions, please consult your English teacher.

Proofreading, Editing, and Revising

Editing is the process by which the writer corrects typos and grammatical errors.

Proofreading is the process by which the writer rereads the essay carefully looking for places that need editing and/or revising.

Revising is the process by which the writer makes radical changes to the style or substance of the writing. This frequently requires “pruning” or “trashing” whole sentences—or even paragraphs—in favor of ones that work better.

Repetition

The repetition of a word or phrase for effect—sonic, dramatic, emphatic, comic, etc.

Rhetorical question

A rhetorical question is one that neither requires nor expects a response. Often the answer is implied in the phrasing or tone of the question itself?

Sentence Variety

Sentence variety refers to two things: sentence structure and sentence lengths. If all of your sentences are the same subject-verb-object formula and about the same length it is a little like eating plain oatmeal for breakfast every day—fine, but BORING! Add some spice by beginning or ending with phrases and interspersing long complex sentences with short direct ones.

Thought-shot

A thought-shot lets the reader into the writer’s head *at the time of the incident*. For instance, in a narrative essay if the coach says “Fifty more laps” the thought-shot might be *Was she kidding? Did she think we were machines?* Thought-shots almost always appear in italics to separate them from actual dialogue without having to add “I thought to myself”.

19. Appendix 1 — Paragraphing Tips

Body Paragraphs

The correct format for presenting evidence or support for your topic is within *body paragraphs*—the fundamental units in essay writing. Each paragraph should represent and develop a single distinct idea. The body must supply ample evidence in support of your thesis or topic.

Just as an essay, as a whole, needs clear and cohesive organization, your paragraphs must also be organized around a central theme. This theme is always stated in a *topic sentence*, which is most often the first sentence in that paragraph.

Body paragraph sentences can express different types of information. For example, they can provide reasons for a particular point of view, concrete details, specific examples, facts, statistics, or incidents and anecdotes. Individually or together, these sentences will function in a paragraph to support and prove the topic sentence and thesis statement.

After you have written enough sentences to support the topic sentence of your paragraph, you should write a concluding sentence that not only summarizes the main point of the paragraph, but also serves to transition to the idea about to be expressed in the next paragraph. This process is repeated for each paragraph within the body of your essay.

20. Appendix 2 — Modern Language Association (MLA) Format

The MLA is the accepted standard when it comes to the proper formatting of formal writing. Your essay needs to adhere to the principals set forth by the association.

The following is a list of some of the essentials:

Paper

Type your essay on white, 20 lb. 8-1/2 by 11-inch paper.

Spacing

Double-space your paper.

Margins

Use one-inch margins all around the text of your paper. Some word processing application, such as Microsoft Word[®], use 1.25" margins as the default; these should be changed. Paragraphs should be indented half an inch; this can be accomplished, in Word[®] by using one tab space, or going to Format→Paragraph→Special→First line, and setting this to 0.5.

Headers and Footers

Be sure to supply the information that each college asks for in the headers and footers of the essay. Standard information for headers is your name and Social Security number. Use the footer for page numbers. To format headers in Word[®], go to View→Header and Footer. This will allow you to type the information directly into these areas.

Titles

Center your title on the line below the heading line and begin your paper immediately below the title. The title should neither be underlined nor written in all capital letters. Capitalize only the first, last, and principal words of the title. Titles might end with a question mark or an exclamation mark if that is appropriate, but not in a period.

Other guidelines:

Do not make a title page for your paper unless specifically requested.

Use either underlining or italics throughout your essay for highlighting the titles of longer works and providing emphasis.

21. Appendix 3 – Self Evaluation Form

Starting Points:

Does the essay have a title? If so, do you think that it is a good title or an undesirable one? If not, create one. Look within the body of your essay for a phrase that might hint at the topic of your essay without giving the content away.

If you had to place a “topic” on this essay, how would you label it?

Does this essay concern a topic that could be touched upon by any number of potential applicants? What would you say is your unique take on it?

What are the three strongest impressions that you would like your reader to receive from reading this essay?

Impression One:

Impression Two:

Impression Three:

General Structure:

What is the paragraph structure of the essay? Could it be organized in a different format that could make it clearer or more stylistically appealing?

Did you use transitions appropriately? Give examples:

Did you use imagery often and does this make the essay clearer and more vivid? Give examples:

Is your sentence structure varied or do you use sentences that are all stylistically similar?
Give examples of different styles:

The Introduction:

How does the introduction engage the reader? Is the reader's attention kept from the beginning to the end of the introduction?

The Conclusion:

How does the conclusion provide a sense of closure to the reader?

What is the final reflective thought found within the conclusion? Do you think its placement was effective?

Ending points:

How did you “Why”? That is, explain how you stripped away the top layers of an issue and got to the true heart of the matter or issue. Put in another way, what was the goal of the essay? Did you achieve the goal?

Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This **MUST** be the case. Give any examples of information you believe might be irrelevant:

Whether you discussed an unfortunate experience or the best summer of your life, is the thrust of the essay its effects? Is there just the right amount of development of the recognition process?

How does this essay show that it can be directed towards any audience? Is there any thing about it that could "put off" a potential reader?

What are two things that make this essay stand out and different than the thousands that they will potentially receive?

Stand Out Element One:

-
-
-

Stand Out Element Two:

-
-
-

Why couldn't anyone else have written this essay?

-
-
-

Circle every time you use the words "I, me, or my." Was it used sparingly and effectively? See where you can change your voice between passive and active. Try to make the action of the sentence the focus and not yourself.

Did you avoid overusing the verb "to be" in all its different forms: is, are, were, am, was, have been?

What's the best part of the essay?

Will an admissions officer remember your topic after a day of reading hundreds of essays? What will the officer remember about your topic? What will the officer remember about you? What will his or her lasting impression be?

What's the worst part of the essay?

How would you fill in the following blank based on the essay: "I want to accept you to this college because our college needs more _____."

Give any examples of information that is readily available if the reader were also to see your résumé and transcript:

Is the essay in full MLA format? If not, what needs to be changed?

What do you see as the area that needs to be worked on first?

Are you sure that your own personal voice has not lost after the essay has been revised for the millionth time? Do you still feel that these words and ideas are true to who and what you are? If not, explain to someone else what your essay is about, and then have that person read it to see if you achieved your goal. See Appendix 4 Peer Evaluation Form.

22. Appendix 4 — Peer Evaluation Form

Personal Narrative/College Application Essay Evaluation

Starting Points:

What is the title of the essay? Why do you think that it is a good title or an undesirable one?

If you had to place a “topic” on this essay, how would you label it?

Does this essay concern a topic that could be touched upon by any number of potential applicants? What would you say is the unique take on it?

What are the three strongest impressions that you receive from reading this essay?

Impression One:

Impression Two:

Impression Three:

General Structure:

What is the paragraph structure of the essay? Could it be organized in a different format that could make it clearer or more stylistically appealing?

Did the writer use transitions appropriately? Give examples:

Did the writer use imagery often and does this make the essay clearer and more vivid? Give examples:

Is the sentence structure varied or did the writer use sentences that are all stylistically similar? Give examples of different styles:

The Introduction:

How does the introduction engage the reader? Is the reader's attention kept from the beginning to the end of the introduction?

The Conclusion:

How does the conclusion provide a sense of closure to the reader?

What is the final reflective thought found within the conclusion? Do you think its placement was effective?

Ending Points:

How did the writer “Why”? – That is, explain how the writer stripped away the top layers of an issue and got to the true heart of the issue or idea:

Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This MUST be the case. Give any examples of information you believe might be irrelevant:

Whether the writer discussed an unfortunate experience or the best summer of his / her life, is the thrust of the essay its effects? Is there just the right amount of development of the recognition process?

How does this essay show that it can be directed towards any audience? Is there any thing about it that could “put off” a potential reader?

What are two things that make this essay stand out and different than the thousands that they will potentially receive?

Stand Out Element One:

Stand Out Element Two:

Why couldn't anyone else have written this essay?

Circle every time the writer used the words "I, me, or my." Was it used sparingly and effectively? See where you can change the voice between passive and active. Try to make the action of the sentence the focus and not the writer him / herself.

Did the writer avoid overusing the verb "to be" in all its different forms: is, are, were, am, was, have been?

What's the best part of the essay?

Will an admissions officer remember the topic after a day of reading hundreds of essays? What will the officer remember about the writer's topic? What will the officer remember about the writer? What will the lasting impression be?

How would an admissions director fill in the following blank based on the essay: "I want to accept ___ to this college because our college needs more _____."

Give any examples of information that is readily available if the reader were also to see the writer's résumé and transcript:

Is the essay in full MLA format? If not, what needs to be changed?

What do you see as the area that needs to be worked on first?

23. Appendix 5 — Questions You Should Answer

The goal of each essay is different. Use these questions to help you meet the goals of your specific essay. For example, if the essay asks you to describe a dilemma you resolved, make sure you describe HOW you resolved your dilemma.

The “Tell Us About Yourself” Essay

- What makes me different from my classmates?
- How do my classmates and peers see me?
- What I do reveals who I am. Therefore, what have I done that is significant to me, altered my view of the world, triggered an epiphany, changed another person’s behavior, etc?
- What dilemma have I faced or what difficult choice have I made?
- Although I am similar in many ways to my classmates and peers, how am I different? How do I stand out from the group, even if in a negative way?
- What awards or recognitions have I received beyond school?
- What is the most unusual thing about me, special skill, secret talent (appropriate to the audience)?
- What is the weirdest vacation I’ve been on?
- What is the strangest, worst, best piece of information my parents have ever revealed to me?
- What nicknames have my classmates given me? Are these accurate, why? Why not?
- What incident about me does everyone remember? For example, am I the kid who puked during the school play? Whose shorts ripped in gym? Who tripped while accepting an award?
- How did I respond to this incident at the time? How do I deal with others bringing up the incident?

The “Influence” Essay

- Who influenced me?
- Describe this person physically, mentally, relationship to, age, background, etc (Think characterization.)
- What specifically and thoroughly did this person do to me, for me, with me?
- Why did this person behave this way?
- Why did I need this person to help me?
- How did this person or his or her behavior make me feel?
- Do I still feel this way?
- Where is this person now?
- When did this event(s) occur?
- What was I like before I was influenced by this person? Am I the same or different now? Describe why I am the same or how I am are different.

The “Experience that Changed You/Overcoming an Obstacle” Essay

- Spend a lot of time describing how you overcame an obstacle; don't save it for the end.
- What was the problem I needed to solve?
- Why was this a problem?
- What preceded the problem? What brought about the negative situation?
- Who helped me solve the problem?
- Who else was involved?
- How did I solve the problem? What was my thought process?
- How did the idea for resolution come to me?
- Did the solution work out exactly as I had planned? Why or why not?
- Looking back, what could I have done differently?

The “Why I Want to Go Here” Essay

- What special program(s) does this college offer that I am passionate about?
- Who specifically is on the faculty that I want to study under? Or what is special about the faculty, in general?
- What unique extracurricular activities does this college offer?
- What attractions, cultural centers or activities are available in the geographic region of the college that I am interested in?
- What will I bring to the college? How am I a good fit for the school and vice versa?

The “Why I Want to Major in _____” Essay

- Is my chosen major offered at the college I am applying to?
- Do I meet the Major requirements, in other words, am I qualified to enroll in this college’s program?
- What internship opportunities does the college offer in my chosen Major?
- What incident(s) in my life led me to discover my interest in this Major?
- Who or what else has influenced me?
- When did I first display a talent for the field I hope to study in?
- Do my peers see me majoring in this area or are they surprised? Why or why not?
- Does my résumé correlate with my desire to major in this particular field?

The “How Will I Contribute to Diversity” Essay

- How could I describe the “typical” student at my high school?
- How am I like this description? How am I different? Are these differences based on gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, age, physical/intellectual/psychological abilities or disabilities, extraordinary experiences, either positive and / or negative?
- How is my family “typical” of others in the community? How are they atypical?
- Do I have opinions about those who are different from me? How do I account for these attitudes?

- How do I feel about my differences? Do my differences make me a target, help me hide out, allow me to achieve greater success, allow me to “get away” with consequences, undermine my success?
- What about being similar to my community members is reassuring? What about being similar is disturbing?
- What would I like to do about my cultural circumstances? How will the college I wish to attend help me achieve these goals?