

The Art of Personal Writing

(The College Essay)

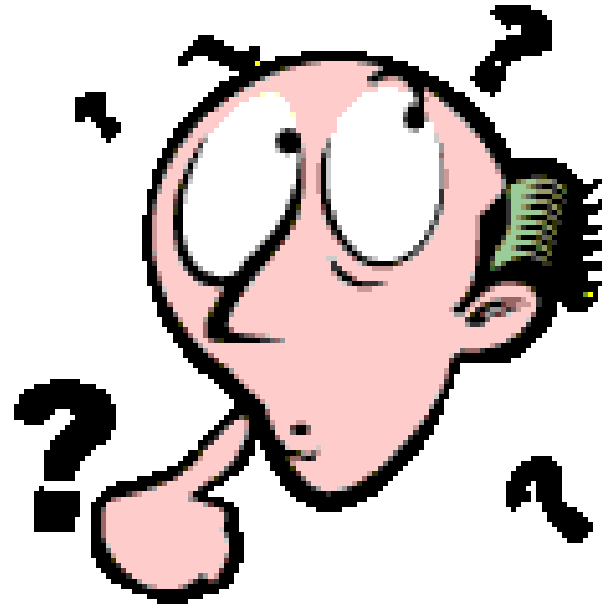


PCACAC Summer Institute

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How Can I Help Students Write
an Effective Personal
Statement?

The College Essay/Personal Statement



- Maybe You've Heard These Before...
 - 80:20 Rule
 - Grow Up, Get a Perspective and Quit Talking Only About Yourself!
 - Be Creative or You're Uninteresting
 - Be Straightforward, To the Point

Educate Your Student




- About the Admissions Process
 - The Importance of the Essay
 - How Colleges Believe Essays Help (or Hurt) Applicants
- About the Writing Process
 - Brainstorming
 - Writing and Editing

NACAC State of College Admissions: *considerable importance*

2012

2014



1.	Grades in College Prep	83.4%	81.5%
2.	Strength of Curriculum	65.7%	63.7%
3.	Admissions Test Scores	59.3%	58.3%
4.	Grades in All Courses	46.2%	51.5%
5.	Essay	26.6%	22.2%
6.	Demonstrated Interest	23%	20.1%
7.	Counselor Letter	19.4%	15.9%
8.	Teacher Recs	19%	14.1%
9.	Class Rank	21.8%	15.2%
10.	Interview	9.2%	7.8%
11.	Extracurricular Activities	7.4%	9.6%
12.	AP/IB Test Scores	9.6%	7.5%

So...What Do We Know?



- Essays are the highest ranked non-academic feature.
- The less a college solely relies on data points ...the greater the importance of the essay.
- Essays are the one thing over which students have absolute control.

Personal Statement - What is It?



- Personal Narrative - Nonfiction narrative writing that tells a true story about an event or a series of events. The writer can (and should) use “I”.
- The focus of these statements – regardless of the topic – is YOU!
- An opportunity to provide YOUR voice/identity/personality to your application!

Personal Statement - What is It?



- Describe the world you come from – for example, your family, community or school – and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations.
- Tell us about a personal quality, talent, accomplishment, contribution or experience that is important to you. What about this quality or accomplishment makes you proud and how does it relate to the person you are.

Personal Statement - What is It?



- We do not require a particular topic for the Personal Statement. We allow applicants to decide what the committee still needs to know in order to accurately evaluate their application. Personal Statements should be no longer than 500 words.
- Common Application (www.commonapp.org)
 - Essay (250-650 words)
 - Supplements – “Why College X?” Direct students to mission statement so they can align their answers and help admission committee “see” fit
 - Supplemental essays are as or more important than CA essay

A Sample Essay



I am a brat. Camouflage is my favorite color. If I am going to wear a ribbon in my hair, it will be yellow. Road trips are nothing if they aren't two weeks cross country. There isn't a state in America that I haven't seen. I was born in Kansas, spoke my first words in California, took my first steps in Washington State, was potty trained in Louisiana, fell off my first bike in Alaska, and will graduate from high school in Virginia. I have an American flag bumper sticker on the back of my car. The Pledge of Allegiance and moment of silence are important parts of every day. The National Anthem is my favorite song. My home is decorated in red, white, and blue and my father is decorated in metals. Forget the three little pigs, my grandfather tells me war stories. Days I look forward to are Thanksgiving, Christmas, and when family returns from Afghanistan. Honor, respect, and discipline are demanded in my home. In my dreams I see liberty bells and in my night mares I see Arlington. November 11th is no ordinary day. Scars on my arm are from tripping on the pavement, scars on my grandfathers' arm are from bullets in Vietnam. At family dinners my uncles talk about war tactics rather than the stock market. My first ID card was from Fort Belvoir, not the DMV. When I see a man or woman in uniform I smile and salute. I am an army brat. (~250 words)

A Sample Essay



- What did you like and dislike about this essay?
- What did the author do WELL?
- Do you think the essay “works”? Why?

A Sample Essay

Picante!

For a guy who is considered straight as an arrow when it comes to food, I can eat fire. For me horseradish is equivalent to ketchup. I envision my dorm FRIDGE to be full of Mrs. Renfro's crushed jalapeño sauce, a jar of hot peppers (for those late night sandwiches) and an economy-size bottle of crushed garlic. As an Eagle Scout I would never steal, so when I go to Taco Bell I always tip the counter person a dollar to get extra packets of the sauce labeled "Fire". If there are any left, I horde them in a plastic bag that contains things like the hot mustard that comes with Chinese takeout. This is my emergency stash should I ever run out of Tabasco sauce.

Whether it is fast food or a home cooked meal, it takes me about ten minutes to spice my food until it is just right. By then the food is getting cold, but if I did my job, there will be a small sheen of perspiration on my forehead after one bite. That is good eatin.

Seeing me in the cafeteria before noon will be a rare event. Salsa on cereal is a losing combination, and I'm not gonna lie, I'm not really a morning person anyway. To me a good morning would involve eating two day old takeout brought back to life with garlic and a healthy dose of chili powder before heading off to class. If I'm lucky a care package from home would include some of Mrs. Tuula's homegrown Asian peppers. Those babies are so hot they give meaning to the words "take your breath away". One little bite and you are wide awake. They could be useful as an aide to staying up late to study. Once your eyes stop tearing, that is.

Meeting people won't be a problem for me. I'm a friendly guy, and folks in the cafeteria will probably gawk and have questions when I start "preparing" my dinner with condiments I pull out of my backpack. I'm used to being part of a team and am totally willing to share. While I expect college to teach me many new things, I will be happy to teach my fellow students the art of scalding their taste buds.

I know the day will come when I finally have a dorm in the Lodges that comes with a kitchen. That's when my friends will learn that I have a gift with marinade. Anything worth cooking has to be prepared the day before. Whether it's Italian food or my famous ribs, if I'm going to be proud of the meal I need to do my prep work in advance. You can't eat meatballs you made that day. They need time to ferment. Like schoolwork, food never comes out quite right if you just throw it together at the last minute.

A Sample Essay



- What did you like and dislike about this essay?
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- Do you think the essay “works”? Why?

Some Do's –



- Think small
- Write what you know
- Get passionate
- Expose yourself
- Be willing to take risks
- Show, don't tell
- Get real

Some Don'ts –



- Join the herd
- Be foolish
- Be vague
- Write a travelogue – 80:20 rule
- Let your parents take over
- Obsess about how to impress

The Into, Through & Beyond Method



- Into - It's the way you lead the reader into the piece – images, examples, context. This lead must exemplify a core characteristic.
- Through - Take the reader through your story. Use the first person. Show, don't tell. Use great summarizing and powerful images at the same time.
- Beyond - Optional but, often required by prompt. Connect to who you are now and who you want to be. Describe impact on you. Provide an ending that evokes key characteristics and conveys moral.

A Sample Essay

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INTRO

THROUGH

BEYOND

Preparing to Write



Getting ready to write takes longer than the actual writing process!

Students should

- Collect a list of all the essays that you will need to write.
- Look for how they overlap, allowing them to write fewer, yet very effective essays.
- Develop a resume.
- Create a list of everything else (not GPA, Classes, Activities or Test Scores) that you want the colleges to know about you.

Remember...



- The package of essays counts....not just one.
- It's the message that is communicated along with the power of the stories and the writing.
- It's the ability to take the reader into, through, and beyond stories quickly and memorably.
- Students should tell stories that belong just to them. The narrow focus is key...

Brainstorming a Topic



Use These Prompts with
Students to Help Identify
a Potential Topic!



*Prompts Taken From Essay Edge

www.essayedge.com

Brainstorming a Topic



- What are your major accomplishments, and why do you consider them accomplishments?
- Have you ever struggled mightily for something and failed? How did you respond?
- Of everything in the world, what would you most like to be doing right now? Where would you most like to be? Who, of everyone living and dead, would you most like to be with?
- What is your strongest, most unwavering personality trait? Do you maintain strong beliefs or adhere to a philosophy? How would your friends characterize you? What would they write about you if they were writing the essay for you?

Brainstorming a Topic



- Consider your favorite books, movies, works of art, etc. Have these influenced your life in a meaningful way? Why are they your favorites?
- Have you ever experienced a moment of epiphany, as if your eyes were opened to something to which you were previously blind?
- What have you done outside of the classroom that demonstrates qualities sought after by universities? Of these, which means the most to you?
- Does any attribute, quality, or skill distinguish you from everyone else? How did you develop this attribute?
- What was the most difficult time in your life, and why? How did your perspective on life change as a result of the difficulty?

Brainstorming a Topic



- What are your most important extracurricular or community activities? What made you join these activities? What made you continue to contribute to them?
- Think of a time when you truly helped someone. What did you do? How did this impact the other person? How did your actions impact you?
- What person that you know do you admire the most? What person in your life has most inspired you?
- What values are most important to you?
- If you could change anything about yourself, what would it be?

Helping Students Select a Topic



- Have you selected a topic that describes something of personal importance in your life? Can use VIVID PERSONAL EXPERIENCES as supporting details?
- Will your topic only repeat information available elsewhere on your application? DO NOT mention your GPA or your test scores.
- Can you offer SUPPORTING PARAGRAPHS to your essay topic? If you cannot easily think of supporting paragraphs with concrete examples, you should probably choose a different topic.
- Can you keep the reader's interest from the first word?

Writing the Essay



- First Draft to Final Draft – Takes Time!
- Answer the Question
- Be Original
- Be Yourself
- Don't Thesaurize Your Essay
- Use Imagery and Clear, Vivid Prose
- Spend Sufficient Time on your Intro

Let's Think Introductions



- Begin with a brief anecdote
- Create a vivid sense of place
- Present a startling statistic
- Begin with a meaningful quote
- Ask a question

Let's Think Conclusions



- Answer the question “So What?”
- Synthesize rather than summarize
- Redirect your readers
- Create new meaning
- Challenge the reader
- Pose questions

Writing the Essay



- Remember – this is a process.
- Spend the most time on the Intro.
- Use transition.
- Conclusions are critical.
- Think into, through, and beyond.
- Give your draft to others.
- Revise, revise, revise.