

Tips to Writing the College Essay

One Magazine checked in with Tracy Miller Geary, Academic Principal of Enrollment Edge International, in October, 2016 to ask her advice on crafting effective and compelling college essays. Tracy guides high school seniors from around the country through the college application essay process and offers the following tips on how to write an essay that will help you stand out from the crowded college application pool.

Realize the importance of the essay

It is the job of each college admissions officer to pick the best candidates for their school. Most college counselors will tell you that the essay is the most important part of the application after GPA and test scores because it is the only place in the entire application process for admission officers to learn who you really are and discover what you are passionate about. In order to connect with the person reading your essay, you'll want to write a compelling story that highlights who you are, an authentic and caring individual. Let them see that you deserve a place in their college community!

Picking a topic

First, pick a topic that interests you personally and is important to you. The essay doesn't have to focus on a monumental event or a life-changing experience. Not everyone can make the winning goal in a soccer tournament! Don't be afraid to write about something small, as long as it can convey who you are and what you value. Your topic might be something that others also experienced, but make sure to have your own personal take on how it affected you. One of the best essays I ever read involved a student's experience making soup with her young niece.

I advise picking a topic before choosing a prompt because only if the subject is meaningful to you, will you be able to write about that subject in a complete and personal way. Almost any story can be framed in a way that responds to an essay prompt. I suggest writing your first draft without thinking about the word limit. There is time to edit your essay later; the first draft should be all about discovering what you have to say.

Organize what you have to say with key points

Outlining your ideas before you actually start writing the essay is a good way to figure out exactly what you want to say. Spend the necessary time to reflect on yourself and your experiences so you know your strengths and weaknesses. Figure out the purpose of your essay, before you write it. Ask yourself, *What message do I want people to take away from my essay?* Knowing the answer to that question before you sit down to write will make your writing genuine, clear and compelling.

Answer the Prompt

This seems like a simple idea, but many students do not heed this advice. An essay, no matter how well-written it is, will not be successful if it doesn't answer the question. A student who submits an essay that doesn't directly answer the prompt will be seen as not taking that particular university seriously. At the very least, the essay will give the impression that the student can't follow directions. Answering the prompt is especially pertinent for those students who are recycling an essay, or taking an essay from one application and reworking it to fit into a new application. Recycling an essay saves time but it only works if you edit the essay so that it answers the question asked in the new prompt. Don't take an essay and stretch it to fit five completely different prompts. If you do, your essay will be awkward and unconvincing. It's also very important to keep to the required word limit. The Common App requires an essay with a minimum of 250 words and a maximum of 650 words. The word counts for essays for other schools range from 100-750 words.

Maintain a positive attitude in your essay

Again, this may seem like an obvious idea, but it is very important. If you have endured difficult circumstances, it is appropriate to share your story. But do not point fingers, whine, or sound like you've given up. It's important to demonstrate perseverance and resilience. An effective essay will talk about how you have dealt with, and hopefully overcome, the obstacles presented. The key is to not focus on the event but on the impact that the event had on you and how you have risen above it.

Use an authentic voice

Admissions officers know that you are a high school senior, and they expect you to write like one. Since the essay is your story, it needs to be told in your voice. If an essay doesn't match the writing style or supersedes the level of writing found on your test essays, many schools will automatically reject a student's application because they suspect plagiarism. Never let someone else write your essay, and never let someone edit your work to the point that it is no longer recognizable as your essay. A strong essay will include concrete, specific details, including dialogue. The old saying "Show, don't tell!" is especially relevant for a college essay. Be sure to avoid slang and inappropriate language.

Revise, revise, revise

Unfortunately, there aren't any shortcuts to crafting a powerful and effective college essay. The best essays take time and many revisions. Everything you read – in the newspaper, online, in a book or a magazine - has been revised many times before you see it. Make sure to also leave yourself plenty of time to proofread your essay. It helps to get feedback on your essay; asking one or two people for feedback is probably enough, but choose the right people, such as a teacher

you trust, a counselor, possibly a parent. Having too many editors dilutes your work. Remember, you want your essay to sound like you!

Make sure at the end that your essay reflects you

If you're not sure your essay is personal enough, place your thumb over the name on the paper. Could you put another name at the top because it could be an essay written by many other students? Ask yourself if the essay is personal to you so that your name is the only name that could be at the top. If you fail the thumb test, you might need to rethink the topic or your approach to it. You want your essay to be unique to you. My last piece of advice is that if you wouldn't want your grandmother to read your essay, it's probably not the right one to send to a prospective college!

Tracy Miller Geary has an extensive background helping students with their writing. She has been a writing tutor at Harvard and is the editor of two of the University's yearly student publications. Besides having been a writing instructor and tutor at MIT, she has been a part of that school's Freshmen Essay Evaluation for the past 15 years. She holds a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Harvard University and has published short fiction in over 30 literary and national magazines and anthologies. For more information please visit www.enrollmentedge.net.