

The Personal Essay



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NOTICE TO STUDENTS:

I realize that this packet is long and comprehensive.
Do not be discouraged or bored. Learn from these pages.

Follow these rules when studying this information:

1. Read with a pen or highlighter in your hand.
2. Underline or highlight **ONLY** the ideas that interest you, that apply to you, or will help you with your essays.
3. Read the packet slowly and over a few hours/days. **DO NOT** skim this material. Let it help you.
4. Write your essay. Reread the suggestions that you have highlighted and apply these principles once again to your essay.
5. **CARE** about this essay. You will surprise yourself at how amazing you have become in your writing.

INTRODUCTION TO WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT ESSAY

(from *Essays that Worked*, Edited by Boykin Curry & Brian Kasbar)

Assume that you are an **admissions officer at Harvard, Duke, or Stanford**, and it is two o'clock in the morning of April 9. Your desk is somewhere beneath a huge stack of papers. **Your eyes are tired and red. Mechanically you open the next application folder, and again you force yourself to read:**

"I am constantly striving to expose myself to every opportunity to become a person with a deep understanding of my own values and of the environment in which I find myself. I have participated in a broad range of activities, and I have endeavored to become ever more versatile and tolerant while at the same time solidifying my own ideals. . . ."

You cannot go on. But you must because the deadline for notifying applicants is just a few days away. The prospect: another long night reading vague, boring, pompous essays. You slowly bow your head and rest it in your hands, wishing for a different job.

Suddenly a gust of wind blows through an open window, upsetting the pile of applications. As four hundred essays flutter around the room, you notice a page with the recipe for cranberry bread.

A recipe? Cranberry bread?

Curious, you pick up the essay and start to read, and you smile:

4 c. flour

2 c. sugar

3 t. baking powder

1 pkg. cranberries

. . . Not only is the following an overview of my personality but also a delicious recipe.

First the flour and sugar need to be sifted together into a large bowl. Flour reminds me of the powder snow that falls in the West. I was born and raised in Pennsylvania where our snow falls more like sugar, granular and icy, and makes us hardy skiers unlike those spoiled by Western snow. Cold weather is also conducive to reading . . .

Finally, a student you would want to meet, someone who dares to express herself creatively, rather than simply reciting the same old litany of high school achievements and adolescent philosophies. finally, an interesting essay!

As you finish the "recipe" and read through the rest of her application, you start to feel much better. Decent grades, good test scores, solid recommendations—you've seen better, but it's certainly respectable. And then **there's this fantastic essay, evidence of an inventive and independent mind.** The essay makes your decision easy. You put her folder into a box marked "Admit," and you look forward to discussing her with the Admissions Committee tomorrow.

This scenario is an exaggeration, of course, but it makes an important point. **Admission officers are very human. They will laugh at a funny joke, and they may even shed a tear if you pull them through a tragedy.** On the other hand, admissions officers will become bored and irritated by essays that are dull and blatantly self-serving.

The essay is the only section where you have total control. Your grades, your scores, your activities—they're history and there is nothing you can do about them. The essay, however, offers a precious opportunity for you to express your individuality and gives you a chance to say, "Hey, *this* is me! I'm creative/witty/insecure/perceptive/enthusiastic/shy/adventurous—and all of the above." **By finding the profound in the mundane, a writer can tell the admissions officer more about his personality than all the teacher references ever could.**

So consider what you do each day, what you want, what you notice. The perfect essay may not pop into your head immediately, and you may have to write quite a few drafts before it clicks. **But writing a good essay can make you think about the Meaning of Life, or about the junk accumulating under your bed.** It can be illuminating, it can be fun, and it might even get you in.

2 Writing the Essay: Sound Advice from an Expert

By Parke Muth, Senior Assistant Dean and Director of International Admission
Office of Undergraduate Admission, University of Virginia (Published in U.S. News and World Reports)

Fast Food. That's what I think of when I try to draw an analogy with the process of reading application essays.

The bad. Ninety percent of the applications I read contain what I call McEssays - **usually five-paragraph essays that consist primarily of abstractions and unsupported generalization.** They are technically correct in that they are organized and have the correct sentence structure and spelling, but **they are boring.** Sort of like a Big Mac. I have nothing against Big Macs, but the one I eat in Miami is not going to be fundamentally different from the one I eat in Paris or Palm Springs. I'm not going to rave about the quality of a particular Big Mac. The same can be said about the generic essay. **If an essay starts out: "I have been a member of the band and it has taught me leadership, perseverance and hard work," I can almost recite the rest of the essay without reading it.** Each of the three middle paragraphs gives a bit of support, and the final paragraph restates what has already been said. A McEssay is not wrong, but it is not going to be a positive factor in the admission decision. It will not allow a student to stand out.

Far too many students begin the search of what to write about by asking: What does my college want to hear? The thinking goes something like this: **If I can figure out what they are looking for, and if I can make myself look like that, then I'll improve my chances.**

Too often, however students who want to avoid sounding generic with respect to form or content choose exactly the wrong remedy; **they think that bigger topics - or bigger words - are better.** I am not advocating longer essays. I am advocating essays with a sharp focus that allows for detail. **Detail is what differentiates one essay from another, one applicant from another.**

Instead of detail, however, students try to impress us with big words. In trying to make a topic sound intellectual, students resort to the thesaurus and, as a result, end up sounding pretentious or at least insecure. The student assumes that these "impressive" words intensify the experience for a reader. **Before students send off their essay, they should always read it aloud to someone who knows them well; let that person decide if an individual voice comes through.**

The good. A good essay is not good because of the topic but because of the **voice.** A good writer can make any topic interesting, and a weak writer can make even the most dramatic topic a bore.

Students need only to recall the difference between two simple concepts - **SHOWING AND TELLING.** A good essay always shows; a weak essay always tells.

By **SHOWING**, a writer appeals to all of the senses, not just the visual. To show means to provide a feast for the eyes, ears, and skin. But rather than telling a reader what show is, it is much easier to show what showing is.

The student whose essay appears below, an example of **"the good,"** has undertaken the task of describing - that is, of showing, in detail - the deterioration of her father as he gets treated for cancer. I do not know of a single member of our staff who was not deeply affected by this essay. **What is impressive about the essay is the willingness of the writer to carefully notice everything that is happening.** Compare this with the other essay about death. There, even though the writer was saturated with emotions, **he was merely telling us, in abstract terms, what he felt.**

Excerpts from essays to University of Virginia

--**The bad:** From an early age, we accept death as the inevitable, but do not comprehend its actual denotation. Death is the impending future that all people must eventually grasp. In my early teens, my grandfather tragically perished. As a youth who did not identify with such a cataclysm, I was saturated with various emotions. Initially, I was grieved by the loss of a loved one and could not understand why this calamity had to befall upon my family. I always considered death to have a devastating effect, but was shocked by the emotional strain it places upon an individual.

--**The good:** The coughing came first, the hacking in the middle of the night. Then there were the multiple doctor visits, each one the same: the little white rooms with magazines where I tried not to stare at the bald, gaunt woman across from me. One of the white coats finally said something, steadily, forecasting an 80 percent change of rain. The list of second opinions grew too long to count, looking for someone to say the right thing. Finally, there was relief in hearing the name of a kinder killer: lymphoma.

COLLEGE ESSAY WRITING HINTS FROM TIM AVERILL:

1. You might want to review the following texts:
 Hayden, Thomas C. *Handbook for College Admissions*
 Moll, Richard. *Playing the Private College Admissions Game*
 Curry and Kasbar. *Essays that Worked*
2. Whatever other advice you get, **be yourself.**
3. **Respond to the topic suggested and stay within the length recommended.** Imagine yourself as the admissions officer.
4. Use the essay to **elaborate on something which is not otherwise evident** in your application (i.e., a talent, interest, political view, or achievement).
5. **Address your weaknesses** by making them **implicit strengths.**
6. **Write a different essay for each school.** They are looking for "M&M" (Match and Merit)
7. Generally speaking, the admissions office is looking for evidence of the following:
 a) **ability** b) **motivation** c) **creativity** d) **self-discipline** and e) **growth potential.**
8. **Don't procrastinate.** Write this essay as though a small part of your life depended on it.
9. **Don't be too grave, too serious**
10. **Write it or type it yourself.** Don't end up as a packaged product. Admissions officers can tell!

A tip from a college professor: "None of the admission factors by themselves tell much about this kid whose application is in front of me, but together they might give me an impression. Something in the essay must tell the admissions officers about "you." It might be the content, it might be the style, it might be the tone, it might be the attention to detail. If you are a creative person, write a creative essay. If you have a sense of humor, use it! (Be sure to show your serious side as well, though.) If you are a person with a strong sense of justice, show them that.

"The reason why colleges give specific essay topics isn't because they think it's a magic topic. It's because they know that **students have a difficult time writing about themselves; kids think it's immodest at best, egotistic at worst.** So they provide a devious topic, figuring that they'll get a sense of "you" when you write about a person you admire.

"Another reason for them providing these essay topics is that few people are good at coming up with topics on their own—especially at the age of 18. Colleges have no problem with a student writing an essay on ANY topic; most college applications have this option. The trick is caring enough about something to want to write about it. Garrison Keillor gives excellent advice: to tell a story you must care enough about that story to want to tell it right. That's my charge to you: care enough about it to want to tell it "right." Because if you want to make me laugh, or if you want me to share with you the experience of hitting the winning home run, or the despair of losing a favorite pair of sneakers, then you'll be telling "me" about "you"—and that all that colleges want."

According to the Educational Testing Service, colleges are looking for the following attributes in you:

- Initiative
- motivation
- self-discipline
- persistence
- ability to overcome hardships
- energy
- intellectual curiosity
- creativity
- other special talents—dance, debate, music

IN YOUR ESSAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS PAY SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE POWER OF:

- **Detail—SHOW DON'T TELL**
- **Honesty in you writing**

Personal Essay: Tips for Writing Your Essay

Mr. Balla

1. Read the prompt carefully and give them what they ask for. If you don't actually answer the prompt, how can the person reading your essay trust you to complete the much more complicated tasks in college?
2. Do any necessary background research before you begin writing. For example, if the prompt asks you to explain why you wish to attend a particular university, find out what that university offers.
3. Think about why you want to attend that particular institution. Try and write down at least a couple of reasons: you may be able to refer them in your essay.
4. Write a rough draft that you can put aside for at least a few days. The revision process is extremely important, and if you write the essay and then walk away from it for a while, your ability to revise your work will be enhanced.
5. Revise, revise, revisell! Look at your draft and focus on the most concrete and memorable portions and develop those. Remove the clichés and platitudes ("I discovered that you only live once.") Take out parts that may alienate your audience. For example, saying that anyone who chooses to smoke is an idiot may make sense to you, but if the person reading your application smokes, they may not respond warmly to your comment.
6. Take into consideration the following advice from the UNC Writing Center:
 - Don't waste space with information you have provided in the rest of the application. Every sentence should be effective and directly related to the rest of the essay. Don't ramble or use 15 words to express something you could say in 8.
 - Do assure your audience that you understand and look forward to the challenges of the program and the field, not just the benefits.
 - Do assure your audience that you understand exactly the nature of the work in the field and that you are prepared for it, psychologically and morally, as well as educationally.
 - Don't overstate your case for what you want to do, being so specific about your future goals that you come off as presumptuous or naïve ("I want to become a dentist so I can train in wisdom tooth extraction, taking 13 rather than 15 minutes per tooth.") You may change—show that such a change won't devastate you.
 - Do assure your audience that you care about their time by writing a clear, organized, concise essay.
 - If you have any information about yourself that needs to be explained (weak grades or unusual coursework for your program), include it in your essay and be straightforward about it. Your audience will be more impressed with your having learned from setbacks than your failure to address those issues.
 - And one more time, avoid clichés at all costs. Every doctor wants to help save lives, every lawyer wants to work for justice. Your reader has read these general clichés a million times.
7. Use your own voice! Remember this is your chance to "introduce" yourself. The writing should reflect your voice, your perspective, your thoughts and emotions. You are not talking with your best friend; you're talking to an adult who is trying to see if you are someone who will be a positive presence on campus.
8. Make sure that your writing, while it may be dramatic, does not drift into sappy melodrama.
9. Creativity and risks: Make sure that if you take a risk that it is a risk that doesn't sound careless or immature. Risks can set you apart from other applicants, but they must be crafted with great care.
10. Enlist a number of people to read your "final" draft - but be prepared to use the input you receive to make some last careful adjustments. Your eyes have passed over this text so many times that you have probably lost perspective. Fresh eyes can help.
11. One last proof. Yes, look at it one more time for any errors. This essay is truly your chance to shine; don't obscure your wonderful-ness with small mistakes that make you appear careless.

This may seem like a lot of work...because it is! But aren't you worth the effort?

Writing the Personal Statement

This resource was written by Purdue OWL.

The personal statement, your opportunity to sell yourself in the application process, generally falls into one of two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement:

This allows you maximum freedom in terms of what you write and is the type of statement often prepared for standard medical or law school application forms.

2. The response to very specific questions:

Often, business and graduate school applications ask specific questions, and your statement should respond specifically to the question being asked. Some business school applications favor multiple essays, typically asking for responses to three or more questions.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU WRITE:

- What's **special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you** or your life story?
- What **details of your life** (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- **When did you become interested in this field** and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- **How have you learned about this field**—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked during your high school years, **what have you learned** (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and **how has that work contributed to your growth?**
- **What are your career goals?**
- Are there any **gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain** (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to **overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships** (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What **personal characteristics** (for example, integrity, compassion, persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? **Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?**
- **What skills** (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) **do you possess?**
- **What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?**

GENERAL ADVICE

Answer the questions that are asked

- If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar.
- Don't be tempted to use the same statement for all applications. It is important to answer each question being asked, and if slightly different answers are needed, you should write separate statements. In every case, be sure your answer fits the question being asked.

Tell a story

- Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. **One of the worst things you can do is to bore the admissions committee.** If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you'll be putting yourself ahead of the pack. **If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable.**

6 Be specific

- **Don't, for example, state that you would make an excellent doctor unless you can back it up with specific reasons.** Your desire to become a lawyer, engineer, or whatever should be logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.

Find an angle

- If you're like most people, your life story lacks drama, so **figuring out a way to make it interesting** becomes the big challenge. Finding an angle or a "hook" is vital.

Concentrate on your opening paragraph

- **The lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important.** It is here that you grab the reader's attention or lose it. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.

Tell what you know

- The middle section of your essay might **detail** your interest and experience in your particular field, as well as some of your knowledge of the field. Too many people graduate with little or no knowledge of the nuts and bolts of the profession or field they hope to enter. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field and use the language professionals use in conveying this information. Refer to experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other source of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it. Since you will have to select what you include in your statement, the choices you make are often an indication of your judgment.

Don't include some subjects

- There are certain things best left out of personal statements. For example, references to experiences or accomplishments in high school are generally not a good idea. **Don't mention potentially controversial subjects** (for example, controversial religious or political issues).

Do some research, if needed

- If a school wants to know why you're applying to it rather than another school, **do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs.** If the school setting would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention.

Write well and correctly

- Be meticulous. **Type and proofread your essay very carefully.** Many admissions officers say that good written skills and command of correct use of language are important to them as they read these statements. Express yourself clearly and concisely. **Adhere to stated word limits.**

Avoid clichés

- A medical school applicant who writes that he is good at science and **wants to help other people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from often-repeated or tired statements.**

PERSONAL STATEMENT: TOP 10 RULES AND PITFALLS

Owl Purdue Online Writing Lab

Writing the Personal Statement: Top 10 Rules

1. **Strive for depth rather than breadth.** Narrow focus to one or two key themes, ideas or experiences
2. Try to tell the reader **something that no other applicant will be able to say**
3. Provide the reader with **insight into what drives you**
4. **BE YOURSELF**, not the 'ideal' applicant
5. Get **creative and imaginative in the opening remarks**, but make sure it's something that no one else could write
6. Address **the school's unique features** that interest you
7. **Focus on the affirmative** in the personal statement; consider an addendum to explain deficiencies or blemishes
8. **EVALUATE EXPERIENCES, rather than describe them**
9. **Proofread carefully** for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage, and style
10. Use **readable fonts**, typeface, and conventional spacing and margins

Writing the Personal Statement: Top 10 Pitfalls

1. Do not submit an expository resume; **avoid repeating information found elsewhere on the application**
2. Do not **complain or whine** about the "system" or circumstances in your life
3. Do not **preach** to your reader. You can express opinions, but **do not come across as fanatical or extreme**
4. Do not talk about **money** as a motivator
5. Do not discuss **your minority status or disadvantaged background** unless you have a compelling and unique story that relates to it
6. Do not remind the school of its rankings or **tell them how good they are**
7. **Do not use boring clichéd intros or conclusions**, such as:
 - a. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is..."
 - b. "This question asks me to discuss..."
 - c. "I would like to thank the admissions committee for considering my application."
 - d. "It is my sincere hope that you will grant me the opportunity to attend your fine school."
 - e. "In sum, there are three reasons why you should admit me..."
8. **Do not use unconventional and gimmicky formats** and packages
9. **Do not submit supplemental materials** unless they are requested
10. **Do not get the name of the school wrong**
11. **Do not incorporate technical language or very uncommon words**

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6 TIPS FOR WRITING GREAT PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Many college applications require a letter of intent or personal statement. Personal statements are one of the most important parts of the application and sometimes the deciding factor for admission. Personal statements give a better understanding of who you are, beyond the "fill-in-the-blank" application.

Several admissions offices for universities offer important advice for you to consider:

1. Be yourself

The Columbia Graduate School for Journalism encourages students to write about family, education, talents or passions. **They want to hear about significant places or events in your life; about books you have read, people you have met or work you've done that has shaped the person you have become.**

Schools want to know about you. It's almost like going on a first date. You want to display your best qualities but be yourself at the same time. **You want the other person to like you, not someone you're pretending to be.**

2. Show diversity

Rayna Reid, a personal statement guru, says **a personal statement is really just a way to make the college fall in love with you.**

"The essay is where you really get a chance to differentiate yourself from the other applicants," she said. **"Explain why they should accept you. What will you contribute?"**

Sean Carpenter, University of Southern California Student Services Associate and undergraduate student, reiterates the importance of differentiating yourself from other applicants. He works in the Annenberg School for Communication admissions office and deals with prospective students daily.

"They want to see how you're different from all other applicants, especially through diversity. **What makes you unique out of all the other applicants?"** Carpenter said, "Tell things that have helped you grow as a person and built your character."

3. Do research and tailor each essay accordingly

Every college is different, so **each personal statement should be different.** Many students try to get away with having a universal essay but admissions departments will notice.

"Do research to give concrete reasons why you're interested in particular program," Carpenter said. "Speak with a faculty member that you're interested in working with or doing research for and mention that in your statement. It would also be beneficial to say what classes you've taken that were relevant to the field of study."

4. Be concise and follow directions

Make sure you read the directions carefully. One of the biggest red flags for an admissions office are students who don't adhere to word limitations. Don't give them a reason to throw out your application. Believe it or not, there is a way to say everything you want in a page or less. If you need some help, ask several faculty members to read over your essay and give you feedback.

5. Go beyond your resume, GPA and test scores

The personal statement is an opportunity to explain any strengths or weaknesses in your application — such as changes in major, low GPA or lack of experience.

For instance, Reid was worried about not having a 4.0 GPA. Since Reid didn't have the perfect GPA, she explained what she did with her time to make up for that fact. Being on the Varsity rowing team and a Teach for America Corp member are great examples of how devoting her time to other things made an impact on her GPA.

6. Tell a story

"Nothing makes someone fall in love like a good story," Reid said. "My sister who currently goes to Princeton even wrote about killing a fly!" **One of the worst things you can do is bore the admission officer. Make yourself memorable by telling a story about something distinctive from a creative or different angle.**

LIST OF TOPICS TO SPARK YOUR THINKING:

Choose responses that you could write about or discuss with a stranger, friend or family member, or a college admissions counselor. Practice **SHOWING** not **TELLING**:

1. Most significant personal event/incident in your life:
2. Another significant personal event/incident from your life:
3. The most personally important spiritual event in your life:
4. The most amusing event in your life:
5. The greatest learning experience/incident in your life:
6. The most important person in your family:
7. The most important person NOT in your family:
8. The most important person in history:
9. The most important change you've made:
10. The most significant historical event:
11. The most important news event:
12. The biggest hope/dream/goal for yourself:
13. The biggest hope or dream for the world:
14. The most important NON-school teacher in your life:
15. The biggest problem you've overcome:
16. The most significant idea you've encountered:
17. The most embarrassing moment in your life:
18. The most important writer:
19. The most important achievement:
20. The most important or significant thing you've done outside the home:
21. The most important change you'd like to see in the world:
22. The most important lesson you've learned:
23. The kindest person you've met:
24. The most important class you've taken:
25. The greatest challenge you have faced:
26. The most influential person in your life:
27. The most important value you hold:
28. The historical person you would most like to spend some time with:
29. The most important or significant book you have read:
30. The best piece of advice you have received:
31. The invention you would most like to develop or see-developed:
32. Your most important non-academic interest:
33. The word that best describes you:
34. What you'd most like to be remembered for from your first 18 years:
35. Your favorite piece of music:
36. The most important advice you'd give a high school freshman:
37. The best job you've ever had:
38. The most significant news event during your lifetime:
39. The most important reason for going to college:
40. The most interesting place you've visited:
41. The place you've not been to that you would most like to visit:

NOW CHOOSE AND CIRCLE 3 OF THE ITEMS ABOVE. FOR EACH ONE, ON SEPARATE SHEETS OF PAPER, WRITE A PARAGRAPH OF ABOUT 100 WORDS.

- This will help you explore each topic for depth, detail, and honesty.
- Practice using strong nouns and powerful verbs in your writing.

Power Verbs:

alludes

analogizes

argues

asserts

augments

bolsters

conveys

connotes

contrasts

creates

deduces

delineates (defines)

demonstrates (proves)

depicts

develops

emphasizes

enhances

establishes

expresses

fosters

illustrates (shows)

implements

initiates

introduces

juxtaposes

permeates

portrays

presents

qualifies

reveals

specifies

transforms

WEAK VERBS:

am, is, are, be, was,

were, has been, had

been, have been,

being, has, had,

have, makes, seems,

appears, uses, and

utilizes, which means

the same thing as

uses.

12 5 horrible essay topics for your college application

By Elizabeth Heaton

So you learned **the importance of teamwork**, even though you lost the big game. That's great. **It's just not a great essay topic.**

Think you have a great, super-unique idea for an essay? You might want to think again. Of the thousands of essays I read when I was an admissions officer at the University of Pennsylvania, very few were particularly distinctive. Of those, even fewer were distinctive in a positive way.

Curious as to which topics you would do well to avoid? Here are the top five.

#5: The most important moment in my life was the big game that my team won (or lost).

Yawn. This is a bad idea because it's boring, and the lessons learned are typically the same regardless of who writes it. The importance of sportsmanship coupled with the joy of being part of a team. How much it meant to win or how much you enjoyed the experience even though you didn't win.

One of the primary **goals of the essay** is to help your application stand out. **Don't blow it by writing about something so common.** Either find a more interesting angle on athletics or find a new topic.

#4: Behold all of my successes, aka The List.

Most applications include a place where you will record all of your activities, honors and awards. **The essay is not that place.**

Instead of trying to cover everything you have ever accomplished within the confines of 500 words, pick one important achievement and focus on that. What sparked your interest in that activity? Why do you do it and what do you enjoy most about it? Does it relate to your future goals and, if so, in what way?

#3: One night I volunteered at a soup kitchen and it changed my life.

Otherwise known as the essay where you tell the admissions people what a great person you are. With three exceptions — yes, three — every single essay I have read about volunteer work came to one of the following conclusions: I never realized how much I had until I met people who didn't have anything; I never realized anyone could be happy without the things I take for granted; or a combination of the previous two.

You might think that admissions officers want to hear about what a great person you are, but **in reality they want to hear about the person you are. Writing about a passion or true interest will always result in a more genuine and impactful essay.**

#2: I am a can of seltzer.

This topic probably seems much more unique than the soup kitchen essay. Not everyone is comparing themselves to a bottle of soda — I'm fizzy! — right? Well, there's a good reason for that: It's an awful idea.

Admissions officers respond to authenticity. Focus on what's real rather than on a "creative" idea that amounts to a gimmick. If you can find a more personal story, one that shares something important about who you are, **your readers will feel like they know you much better** when they're done.

#1: Here I am writing my college essay (which, did you know, is really hard?!), and there you are, reading it.

You may be under the impression that this topic will show off your intellectually witty side. It won't. At best, you'll look like you started to write the essay the night before it was due. At worst, you'll come off as a **self-involved showoff** without anything interesting to say.

Showcase your wit and intellect by writing about an absorbing academic or thought provoking experience. Instead of seeming pretentious, you will come across as an engaged learner who will likely make the most of the college experience.

The essay is the primary chance you have in the application process to share something important about yourself. **Make the most of the opportunity by spending as much time thinking about what to write as you do actually writing it.**

Elizabeth Heaton is a senior director of educational consulting at College Coach, the nation's leading provider of educational advisory services.

Advice from Admissions Representatives

Lee Cunningham Director of Admissions and Aid The University of Chicago Graduate School of Business

The mistake people make most often is not to look at what the questions are asking. Some people prepare generic statements because they're applying to more than one school and it's a lot of work to do a personal essay for each school. On the other hand, generic statements detract from the applicant when we realize that we're one of six schools and the applicant is saying the same thing to each and every school despite the fact that there are critical differences between the kinds of schools they may be applying to. They don't take the time. **They underestimate the kind of attentions that is paid to these essays.** Take a look at what the essay asks and deal with those issues articulately and honestly.

At least 2, and sometimes 3, people read each essay. I read them to make the final decision. Our process works so that each person who reads the application does a written evaluation of what he or she has read and **the written evaluations are not seen by the other reader.**

Steven DeKrey Director of Admissions and Financial Aid J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management (Northwestern University)

We're looking for a well-written, detailed essay that responds directly to the question. The questions are about extracurricular activities, motivation, challenges, commitment to the school that kind of thing. We see a variety and that's fine. Our approach is very individualized. The way the applicant devises the answer, determines the length, develops the response, is all part of the answer. The level of effort applicants put into essays varies considerably, which sends messages to the admissions committee as well. **Over-involved, elaborate essays send one message, while very brief and superficial essays send another message.**

Trying to second-guess what we are looking for is a common mistake—which we can sense.

We can tell when applicants use answers to other schools' questions for our essays; we're sensitive to this. Poorly written essays are a bad reflection on the applicant.

Don't over-elaborate; we're reading a lot of these kinds of essays. Also, don't be too brief or superficial. We like to have major ideas presented well.

Beth O'Neil Director of Admissions and Financial Aid University of California at Berkeley School of Law

We're trying to gauge the potential for a student's success in law school, and we determine that, principally, on the basis of what the student has done in the past. **The personal statement carries the responsibility of presenting the student's life experiences.**

Applicants make a mistake by doing a lot of speculation about what they're going to do in the future rather than telling us about what they've done in the past. It is our job to speculate, and we are experienced at that.

Applicants also tend to **state** and not **evaluate**. **They give a recitation of their experience but no evaluation of what effect that particular experience had on them,** no assessment of what certain experiences meant.

They also **fail to explain errors or weaknesses in their background.** Even though we might wish to admit a student, sometimes we can't in view of a weakness that they haven't made any effort to explain. For example, perhaps they haven't told us that they were ill on the day that they took the LSAT or had an automobile accident on the way. Such things are legitimate reasons for poor performance. I mean, we understand that life is tough sometimes. **We need to know what happened, for example, to cause a sudden drop in the GPA.**

Another mistake is that **everyone tries to make himself or herself the perfect applicant** who, of course, does not exist and is not nearly as interesting as a real human being.

Between 1 and 5 people read each application.

Dr. Daniel R. Alonso Associate Dean for Admissions Cornell University Medical College

We look for some originality because nine out of ten essays leave you with a big yawn. "I like science, I like to help people and that's why I want to be a doctor." The common, uninteresting, and unoriginal statement is one that recounts the applicant's academic pursuits and basically repeats what is elsewhere in the application. You look for something different, something that will pique your interest and provide some very unique insight that will make you pay some notice to this person who is among so many other qualified applicants. **If you're screening 5,500 applications over a four- or six-month period, you want to see something that's really interesting.**

I would simply say: **Do it yourself, be careful, edit it, go through as many drafts as necessary.** And more important than anything: **BE YOURSELF.** Really show your personality. **Tell us why you are unique,** why we should admit you. The premise is that 9 out of 10 people who apply to medical school are very qualified. Don't under any circumstances insert handwritten work or an unfinished piece of writing. Do a professional job. I would consider it a mistake to attempt to cram in too much information, too many words. Use the space as judiciously as possible. **Don't submit additional pages or use only 1/20th of the space provided.**

Michael D. Rappaport Assistant Dean of Admissions UCLA School of Law

Applicants should take the time to look at what the law school is asking them to write about. At UCLA, we say, "we know you have lots of extracurricular activities—we want to know how you differ, what makes you unique? What can you bring to the first year class that's going to make you distinctive from the other 99 people who are already there?" The fact that you were active in your fraternity or sorority is really not going to do it. What we're looking for is somebody who, in their personal statement, stands out as being so unusual, so diverse, that they're extremely attractive as a law student for the first-year class. Maybe what's going to make them distinctive is the fact they spent six months living in a log cabin in Alaska. You try to give the law school some justification for admitting you. With a lot of people, there's nothing that's going to make them distinctive. If that's the case, they've got to recognize that, indeed, the essay is not going to make that much difference here at UCLA.

We're also asking if there's any reason their LSAT or grades are not predictive. You'd be amazed at the number of people who completely ignore this—they don't take advantage of the opportunity.

Most law schools operate fairly similarly. There's a certain group of applicants whose grades and LSAT scores are so high that the presumption is that the applicants are going to be admitted unless they do something terribly stupid to keep themselves out. I have seen applicants whose personal statement has done that, but it's extremely rare. At the other extreme is another group of applicants who, no matter what they write, are not going to get in. The applicant has to realize, first of all, where he or she stands. If you have a straight-A grade point average and a perfect LSAT score, you don't have to spend a lot of time worrying about your personal statement. On the other hand, **if you know you're in the borderline area, that's where the personal statement becomes very, very important.**

The applicant should take the time to read the application to see what the schools are asking for. Sometimes the school will ask for a general description of why you want to go to law school, or why they should admit you, something of that nature. In such case **you can be fairly sure that the school is just interested in the essay to see how well you write. So what you say isn't as important as how you say it.** Make sure the essay is **grammatically and technically correct and well written.** Avoid sloppy essays, coffee stained essays, or ones that are handwritten so you can't read them. You'd be amazed at what we get!

John Herweg Chairman, Committee on Admissions Washington University School of Medicine

We are looking for a **clear statement** that indicates that the applicant can use **the English language in a meaningful and effective fashion.** We frankly **look at spelling as well as typing** (for errors both in grammar and composition).

We also want applicants to **personalize the statement,** to tell us something about themselves that they think is worthy of sharing with us, **something that makes them unique, different,** and the type of medical student and future physician that we're all looking for. What they have done in working with individuals—whether it's serving as a checker or bagger at a grocery store or working with handicapped individuals or tutoring inner city kids—that **shows they can relate to people** and have they done it in an effective fashion? What the applicant should do in all respects is to depict why he or she is a unique individual and should be sought after. **Of course, if they start every sentence on a whole page with "I," it gets to be a little bit too much.**

Bean Soup for the Soul by Jennifer Chapski

I met the Bean Counters in preschool.

They introduced me to the Bean Tray.

It was a simple concept. On the Bean Tray were two bowls, one filled with black beans, the other with white. Each day, we took turns at the Bean Tray Table. It was here that we learned to count--we counted beans. I, however, was a bright child. The envy of my peers, I could count to 100 effortlessly at the tender age of three. I thus deemed bean counting tedious and unnecessary.

I clearly articulated this point to my teachers; nevertheless, I was assigned the obligatory fifteen minutes--eternity to a three-year-old--with the Bean Tray. I had no intention of displeasing my teachers, so I counted 100 beans. I then counted the 100 beans backwards as I returned them to their designated bowls. That showed I knew how to count but left me with about ten minutes. I was bored, but I knew I would not be permitted to leave the Bean Tray. So, I decided to amuse myself by pretending to be a cook. I unknowingly proceeded to do the forbidden: I mixed the black and white beans together to make bean soup.

My teacher soon discovered my transgression, and I was duly punished. I had to separate the black and white beans I had mixed, picking each individual bean out of the giant Bean Bowl. I'd broken a cardinal rule: beans were for counting, not making soup.

But, in the end, all was not lost. They never made me count beans again.

Bean Counter Theorem #1: Beans are that which cannot be divided for any purpose other than existing as beans. The bean is complete unto itself and thus allows for no division or opposition.

As the years progressed, I encountered several variants of the Bean Counter Theorem, for, as I have found, Bean Counters prevail in every aspect of life.

At my elementary school, there was no institution more intrinsic, more indispensable to daily existence than The Line. If the children were restricted to the rigid confines of a perfectly straight line, teachers reasoned, childlike exuberance would be suppressed, thus minimizing disorder. As a result, everything we did was done in lines.

When the bell rang in the morning and school began, we were not allowed to simply gather at the classroom door; we had to line up before we went inside. Likewise, when the bell rang for recess, we could not just leave; we had to line up first. There was a boys' line and a girls' line, and whichever line was the straightest and quietest got to go outside first. Whenever the class walked anywhere, even if we were just changing classes, we had to be in lines. If the lines were not straight, the class was reprimanded; God help the unfortunate child who fell Out of formation.

The irony of it all was that the submissive obedience mandated by The Line simply made the children want to rebel, which defeated The Line's very purpose. The control the teachers were trying to achieve via The Line was at cross purposes with the natural energy of children.

A common scenario when dealing with Bean Counters.

Bean Counter Axiom #49: Disorder--marked by the loss of control over one's environment--is not to be tolerated. As the natural tendency of order is toward disorder, it is imperative that unleashed energy be corralled and remolded into an orderly state.

Bean Counters continued to affect my life throughout junior high as well. In seventh grade, I began to become bored with school. My teacher had a tendency to reduce complexities to formulas, making the marvelous into the mundane. I wasn't being encouraged to question, to challenge, to think. And I was a little suspicious.

So I started reading the encyclopedia.

It began unintentionally. I was thumbing through volume 21 of World Book looking for information on West Virginia for a report. Suddenly, I realized there were lots of interesting things that began with W. I read the entire article on Frank Lloyd Wright and immediately had an ardent (albeit short-lived) desire to be an architect. I read about whales (and Wales). Warsaw, Poland. Watergate. Andy Warhol. The Whiskey Rebellion of 1794. I even read the inordinately long (twelve pages) article on wheat. About two hours had passed before I finally found West Virginia and wrote my report. Reading the encyclopedia soon became a daily activity. I was learning interesting things they never taught me in school.

Bean Counter Postulate #12: The shortest distance between the end and beginning of an essay is a straight line, which means you should ignore all the curious little diversions in between (like the difference between a blue and a humpbacked whale).

More recently, I've had to deal with yet another type of Bean Counter. As a volunteer for the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation, I lobby state legislators for passage of March of Dimes-sponsored bills. I am trying to be a voice for people who are less fortunate than I. Yet, the first time I lobbied, I discovered I faced opposition. A legislator told me that what I was trying to achieve was a good idea, but it would cost far too much money and was therefore impractical. This struck me as incredibly illogical. What's more important, money or the life of a child?

Typical Bean Counter reasoning. He was only thinking of the beans.

Bean Counter Corollary #63: Do you promise to support the bean, the whole bean, and nothing but the bean, and forswear to use the bean for any purpose other than propagation of the bean?

As I approach college life, I look back to see the pervasiveness of Bean Counters and their philosophies. They permeate politics, seep into social issues, and clutter up the classroom. And I have tired of them. What I desire, where I aim to spend my college years, is that environment that sees beyond the bottom line of the bean, that is not threatened by the curious and the creative, that understands--as with encyclopedias and soups--that the complexity of our existence is rarely reducible to the bean, or the formulations of the Bean Counters.

Because I am not a bean counter. I make soup.

SAMPLE ESSAYS TO STUDY

“The Lost Game” by Stephanie A. Stuart, who attended a small college preparatory high school in Monterey, California; printed in *50 Successful Harvard Application Essays, 2010*.

When I was little my father used to play a game with me driving home. Its main substance was something like this: he would say, oh no, I seem to be lost; how shall we get home? And then he would ask, which way? Gleefully, I would crane my neck above the seat; according to the game, his befuddlement was hopeless, and I alone as navigator could bring us home. No doubt I seemed contrary as I directed him further and further down back streets, but my secret incentive was exploration. As a small child there is very little one can control in one’s world; to have control over an entire grown-up—not to mention a whole car—was tremendously appealing. The real allure, though, was in going the “wrong” way—as soon as we turned left where we usually turned right, the world was so brand new it might have only appeared the moment we rounded the corner. My heart would beat before my throat as I gave the direction to turn, stretching my neck from my place in the backseat, eager and afraid: Suppose I did really get us lost? The secret desire to discover always won out over the fear, but I can still recall the flutter of my heart on the inside of my ribs as I navigated the roundabout connections which were as mysterious as the Northwest Passage, lone link between the cull-de-sacs.

Exploration was a quest I took to heart; alone, I would set out on expeditions into our back yard, or down the street, creating a mental map concentric to our doorstep. Discovery bloomed magical for me; marked on the map were the locations of abandoned tree houses, bell-blue flowers and plants with flat powdery leaves the size of silver dollars.

The other night it fell to my brother and me to return a movie. After we left it on the counter, though, our sense of adventure got the better of us. Oh dear, I said, I seemed to be lost. Where shall I go? Eager to discover the town which smoldered at one o’clock under the orange and violet of sodium street lamps, he chose the road less traveled, at least by our wheels.

We wound into the pine forest in the dead of night; moonlight fell eerie across our laps, striated by tree trunks. I crested a hill slowly: Monterey spread in a lighted grid below us, down to the darkening sea.

Above, the Milky Way spring apart and arched like a dance. I angled my car for a moment to Gatsby’s tuning fork, that pure, enticing tone that echoes from the spheres. Think, remember, I wished upon him, what it is to explore, and the explorer’s incentive: discovery.

“Which way?” I asked him, and he grinned slowly, moonlight glinting far-off mischief in his eyes. The streets spread orthogonal before us: the pure realm of possibility opened up from them.

“Straight ahead,” he said, and I smiled.

ANALYSIS OF THIS ESSAY BY AN EDITOR FROM THE HARVARD CRIMSON NEWSPAPER:

Stephanie’s essay falls into the life experiences category. However, rather than focusing on a single life-changing experience, Stephanie shows her approach toward personal discovery by relating the story of riding in a car and changing the standard directions as a means of stumbling upon unexplored worlds. The essay is well-controlled; at no point does she stray toward overstating the significance of these individual events, but deftly uses them as a tool to illustrate her adventure-seeking attitude toward life and her unwillingness to be satisfied with the routine.

The essay’s greatest asset is the sense of personal development Stephanie conveys. What begins as a cute story of her childhood is used wonderfully to highlight her personal development as she writes of a tent in her life: “Think, remember . . . what it is to explore, and the explorer’s incentive: discovery.” Stephanie avoids list her accomplishments in a résumé put into sentence form, but still captures important aspects of her identity, namely her inquisitiveness. The essay is well-paced and calm, with a solid development from beginning to end. Stephanie describes sensory aspects of her story [“flat, powdery leaves the size of silver dollars”] with great word choice without overdoing it. It is clear that every word in the essay was carefully chosen to accurately and succinctly describe her subject. Not only does her essay successfully paint a picture of her as a curious little child, it shows that the same inquisitiveness she exhibited then she still possesses, now couples with more responsibility, as she drives her brother and encourages his inquisitiveness.

The biggest risk in this essay is that it does not adequately showcase her accomplishments, normally a standard part of a college essay. While it worked for her, this has much to do with the extraordinary level of care she took in crafting the essay, her diligence shows, and the essay is an insightful, well-written, and well-paced piece of work.

**THREE ESSAYS from *Essays That Worked:*
50 Essays from Successful Applications to the Nation's Top Colleges, 1990.**

Sample College Admission Essay:

Prompt: *Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.*

I wish I had thrown the television out the window. Maybe I'd have ended up on the 10 o'clock news: '13-YEAR-OLD HOSPITAL PATIENT THROWS TELEVISION OUT WINDOW AFTER HEARING CANCER DIAGNOSIS.' But instead, I opted to cry.

I watched the nurse gown up as though she worked in a nuclear waste plant, carefully hanging my first dose of chemotherapy on the pole. The soft hum of my IV filled the room as the neon fluid rhythmically dripped through my bloodstream. The building nausea drove me to tears, and my stomach felt like it was about to flip inside-out.

My first chemo-induced vomit lacked the grace that I wanted it to have; Celine Dion wasn't playing in the background, the vomit wasn't one swift regurgitation, and it definitely didn't happen in slow-mo. Instead, the words "I feel like I'm going to throw up" escaped my mouth seconds before the vomit hit the floor. I stared at the dark-colored discharge, pitying myself because I knew this was only the beginning.

I convinced myself that if I died at that very instant, it would be a gutless way to go, that I would be giving up before exhausting my options, that I would be forever remembered as "the one who lost her battle to cancer." I didn't want to be the somber topic that brought a lump to everyone's throat. I didn't want to be the one pitied for surrendering to death.

One afternoon, two years later, I heard my father's cellphone ring as I listened intently from upstairs; it was my nurse calling. We were expecting the results from the day's tests to reconfirm our expected remission status. "You're grossly normal!" he shouted up the stairs. I breathed a sigh of relief.

A year after that wonderful day, I attended Camp Okizu, a support program for young oncology patients. One of the camp activities included a rope course where campers could climb 30 foot rope ladders before free-falling. When I reached the top of the ladder, the dizzying height terrified me, and I considered climbing back down.

But beating cancer changes the impact fear can have; once you've faced the horrors of cancer, nothing else compares. It isn't a sense of invincibility – quite the opposite, in fact – it's the certain knowledge that you're not invincible, that life is not endless, and that missed opportunities may never come again.

I jumped, felt the wind whistle through my hair, watched the earth rush toward me, and felt weightless and free.

I sometimes lie awake at night, worrying about the long-term damage of the chemo or the return of the disease itself, but I don't let fear define me. I don't have the luxury of fear because I cherish the value of the here and now. If I want something, I will go for it because failure will always be better than never having had the chance to try.

Maeve O'Connor:

Last Thursday was my father's birthday. I was standing on the sideline at my soccer game, shivering in the cold October drizzle, when suddenly I remembered. He would have been 53.

When I got home that day, Mom was in her room, sorting through some of my father's old sketch books. She had remembered too. I told her I thought we should spend the evening doing something Dad would have liked to do, and she smiled and said that was a wonderful idea. We selected a symphony by Beethoven from the stacks of records in the music room, and then the five of us gathered close around the small kitchen table for dinner. We ate by candlelight, laughing as we remembered.

No one had made a birthday cake, so when we had finished, we went to Brigham's for ice cream. My father had loved to take us there on special occasions. I would have liked a dish of mocha almond, but I ordered chocolate chip with jimmies, just like I used to every time Dad took us to Brigham's when I was small.

It is cold out today, and I'm wearing my father's Irish sweater. He used to wear this sweater all the time on winter weekends. It has big holes in the shoulders that he never bothered to sew, but it's thick and warm, and our old house is drafty. In the past year or so, one of the holes has stretched so far that I'm afraid the entire sleeve will come off, but I don't want to mend it. I love the holes.

Barry Kaye: (Question: *What is the best piece of advice you've ever received?*)

"Move your ass!" yelled a man as a car was bearing down on a five-year-old boy who was about to cross the street. That boy was me, and needless to say, I took his advice and moved. As far as I'm concerned, that was the best piece of advice I've ever been given, for had I not received it, I would not be here today to say so.

The second best piece of advice I ever received was from my uncle, who said, "Barry, go to Medical School."

If I am not accepted to the University of Pennsylvania solely on the basis of this truthful answer, so be it. If I had not taken the man's advice, I would have gotten to Medical School anyway. As a cadaver.