



Writing the Personal Essay

TIPS, TRICKS, AND GETTING
STARTED

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The Place of the Essay



Holistic Review



Quantitative elements

GPA
Test Scores
Rigor of Curriculum



Qualitative elements

Activities
Counselor and teacher recs
Supplements
Interview
Demonstrated interest
Family/Legacy
Personal Essay

“We are looking for signs of life – a sense of humor, intellectual curiosity, interesting experiences or perspectives.”

-Dean of Admission

Sarah Lawrence College



“The essay can be a powerful “tipper” in close cases.”

-Dean of Admission

Bates College



How we Read the Essay

- We *do* read everything
- We always read supportively
- Some grammar and spelling issues may be overlooked
- We make notes on both content and style
 - We want to see that you have the ability to express yourself on the page, but we're more interested in who you are!
- We read a lot of essays
- We *are* human beings

Goals of the Essay

- To highlight who you are as a person
- To speak in your voice to the admissions office
- To put your application in context
- To show us that you can think critically
- To write something only you could write
- To entertain!

Topics that Occasionally Backfire

- Topics that may come off as clichéd
 - Sports injuries
 - Service trips to foreign countries
 - Vacations (this may simply highlight privilege)
 - Tragedy
- Funny topics - if you....aren't.
- Performing arts experiences
- Spiritual beliefs
- Any topic that leaves you out of the narrative
- COVID-19

Tips on Topic Selection

- Montage Essay
 - Elastic
 - Uncommon
- Narrative Essay
 - Difficult or compelling challenges
 - Insight (or “so what?”)
- It’s okay for your topic to change
- All topics are doable, but some are much harder!



The Good, the Bad, and the Boring

Examples

Harry Bauld, *On Writing the College Application
Essay* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 41,
130-132.

The Good

“I was born on October 22, 1960. There is nothing remarkable about this except that I spent the Sixties in a state of semiconsciousness and missed out on the Beatles. These days, though, a beginning like that seems somehow depressing, and I am not consoled by the fact that there were probably millions of others who had the misfortune to be born at the tail end of the baby boom. I don’t think I can ever forgive my parents for not acting sooner.”

The Boring

“The aspect of college that I’m anticipating the most is the chance to continue to refine my interpersonal skills. In high school, I feel like I have dedicated myself to academics and extracurriculars, but more especially I have enjoyed the contact with my peers in more informal settings such as the cafeteria or the moments between classes, when friends and acquaintances gather to talk about many subjects and ease the tensions of the school day...”

The Boring (cont'd)

“In all my endeavors, I have discovered that knowing how to interact with many different varieties of people is invaluable. College, with its diverse social settings...promises to provide the broad experience that gives education its special flavor. Although through my interests in psychology, I plan to benefit academically from whatever college I attend, I am just as eager to benefit from the people I will meet in the course of four years.”

A Note on Supplements

- Provided by the specific institution
- Further distinguish you as an applicant
- Focus on the relationship between you and the college
- Be descriptive, but concisely answer the question.
- Come in different flavors
 - The “Why” supplement
 - The “personal background” supplement
 - The “quirky” supplement
 - The “make your own” supplement

Keep the number of advisors to a minimum

Don't put the name of the college or university in your essay

Follow the prompt

Spellcheck AND proofread

Ask each college or university how the essay is used

Don't wait until the last minute

Use the present tense – avoid the passive voice

Don't overwrite

Read it aloud

Don't re-hash your activities

Use every part of the application to tell us something new

Final Takeaways



Questions
