

10 Tips for Writing the College Application Essay

By Lynn F. Jacobs and Jeremy S. Hyman Sept. 15, 2010

No subject is more fraught with anxiety for the high school senior than the essay on the college application. Whether it is as bizarre as the University of Chicago's "How do you feel about Wednesday?"; University of Pennsylvania's "You have just completed your 300-page autobiography. Please submit page 217."; or Tufts University's "Are We Alone?"—or whether it is a more mundane question about a formative experience you've had in your life, or about some controversial social or political issue, students tremble at the very thought of writing the essay and being judged on it.

We wondered what tips could be offered to ease the pain. For advice, we turned to visiting blogger Jonathan Reider, director of college counseling at San Francisco University High School, who before that was the senior associate director of admissions (and humanities instructor) at Stanford University. He should know; he's been on both sides of the high school/college door. Here are his 10 best tips.

- 1. Be concise.** Even though the Common Application main essay has only a suggested minimum of 250 words, and no upper limit, every admissions officer has a big stack to read every day; he or she expects to spend only a couple of minutes on the essay. If you go over 700 words, you are straining their patience, which no one should want to do.
- 2. Be honest.** Don't embellish your achievements, titles, and offices. It's just fine to be the copy editor of the newspaper or the treasurer of the Green Club, instead of the president. Not everyone has to be the star at everything. You will feel better if you don't strain to inflate yourself.
- 3. Be an individual.** In writing the essay, ask yourself, "How can I distinguish myself from those thousands of others applying to College X whom I don't know—and even the ones I do know?" It's not in your activities or interests. If you're going straight from high school to college, you're just a teenager, doing teenage things. It is your mind and how it works that are distinctive. How do you think? Sure, that's hard to explain, but that's the key to the whole exercise.
- 4. Be coherent.** Obviously, you don't want to babble, but I mean write about just one subject at a time. Don't try to cover everything in an essay. Doing so can make you sound busy, but at the same time, scattered and superficial. The whole application is a series of snapshots of what you do. It is inevitably incomplete. The colleges expect this. Go along with them.
- 5. Be accurate.** I don't mean just use spell check (that goes without saying). Attend to the other mechanics of good writing, including conventional punctuation in the use of commas, semi-colons, etc. If you are writing about Dickens, don't say he wrote Wuthering Heights. If you write about Nietzsche, spell his name right.

6. Be vivid. A good essay is often compared to a story: In many cases it's an anecdote of an important moment. Provide some details to help the reader see the setting. Use the names (or invent them) for the other people in the story, including your brother, teacher, or coach. This makes it all more human and humane. It also shows the reader that you are thinking about his or her appreciation of your writing, which is something you'll surely want to do.

7. Be likable. Colleges see themselves as communities, where people have to get along with others, in dorms, classes, etc. Are you someone they would like to have dinner with, hang out with, have in a discussion section? Think, "How can I communicate this without just standing up and saying it, which is corny." Subtlety is good.

8. Be cautious in your use of humor. You never know how someone you don't know is going to respond to you, especially if you offer something humorous. Humor is always in the eye of the beholder. Be funny only if you think you have to. Then think again.

9. Be controversial (if you can). So many kids write bland essays that don't take a stand on anything. It is fine to write about politics, religion, something serious, as long as you are balanced and thoughtful. Don't pretend you have the final truth. And don't just get up on your soapbox and spout off on a sensitive subject; instead, give reasons and arguments for your view and consider other perspectives (if appropriate). Colleges are places for the discussion of ideas, and admissions officers look for diversity of mind.

10. Be smart. Colleges are intellectual places, a fact they almost always keep a secret when they talk about their dorms, climbing walls, and how many sports you can play. It is helpful to show your intellectual vitality. What turns your mind on? This is not the same thing as declaring an intended major; what matters is why that subject interests you.