

# **Considerations for Writing your College Application Essays**

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# Topics

- Role of the essay in the application and evaluation
- Your admissions audience and their expectations
- Writing an effective personal narrative
- Tips and strategies
- Sample

# Role of the essay

You *are* your application...



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# Your Application

You *are* your application...



- ✓ **Application Form**
- ✓ **Activities List**
- ✓ **Academic Documents**
- ✓ **School Forms**
- ✓ **Test Scores**
- ✓ **Letters of Recommendation**
- ✓ **Essay and supplements**
- ✓ **Other: Portfolio, Interview, etc.**

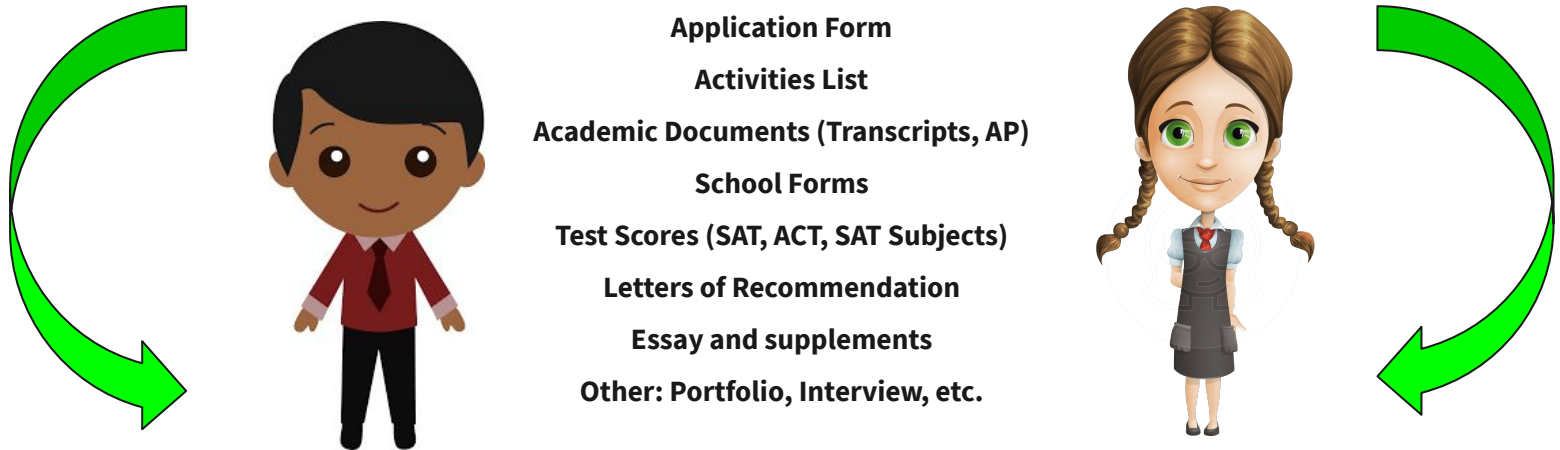
# Holistic Admission

How are you evaluated?



# Holistic Admission

You're seen as a combination of *all* the pieces of your application



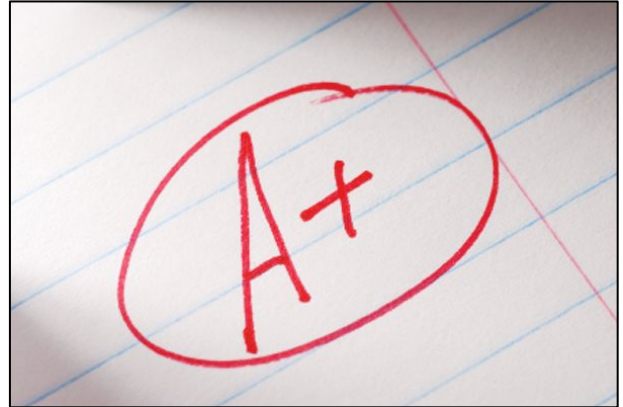
# Holistic Admission

## Two Key Questions:

- 1) Will you be academically successful in our school or program?
- 2) Are you a good fit?

# Question 1: Will you be academically successful?

- Which application pieces help answer this question?
- How important is this question?





# Question 1: Will you be academically successful?

- Key Pieces: *Quantitative*
  - *transcripts, test scores, strength of curriculum*
- How important is this question?
  - Very important!
  - It depends...
    - Size of the school
    - Selectivity of the school

# A look at Penn

For Freshman applying for Class of 2021

Applicants: 40,413

Accepted: 3,757

Acceptance rate: about 9%

Academically qualified?

\*according to the former Dean of Undergraduate Admissions

# A look at Penn

For Freshman applying Fall 2015

Applicants: 40,413

Accepted: 3,757

Acceptance rate: about 9%

Academically qualified: 85%\*

\*according to the former Dean of Undergraduate Admissions

# What matters?

- How do you move from the 85% of academically qualified applicants to the 9% of accepted ones?
- How do admissions committees decide who gets in?

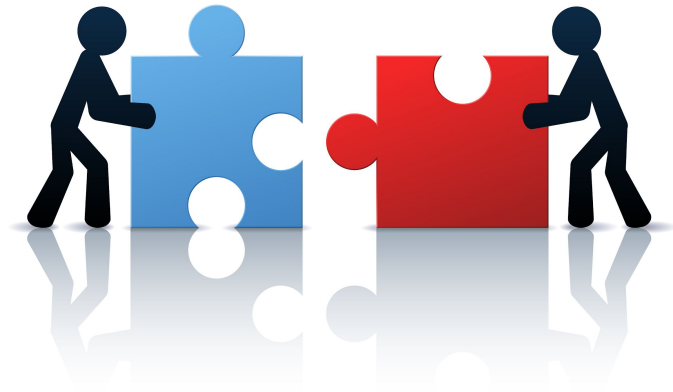
# What matters?

- How do you move from the 85% of academically qualified applicants to the 9% of accepted ones?
- How do admissions committees decide who gets in?

They ask the 2nd key question...



## Question 2: Are you a good fit?



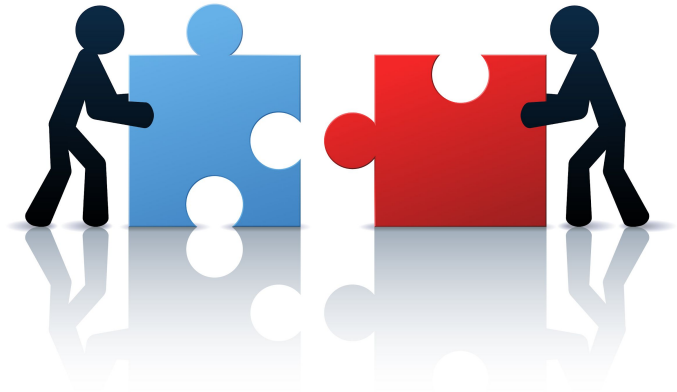
# What is fit?

*Who you are* rather than what you've done:

- Would you be a good roommate?
- Would you be a good person to have in class?
- Would you be a good person to work with on a project?
- What might you do on campus?
- How will you get involved?
- What kind of conversations will you start and contribute to?
- How will you expand knowledge in and out of the classroom?

## Question 2: Are you a good fit?

- Which application pieces help answer this question?
- How important is this question?





# Are you a good fit?

- Key Pieces: *Qualitative*
  - Activities list, letters of recommendation, essays
- How important is this question?
  - May be very important!
  - It depends...
    - Size
    - Selectivity

# A look at Penn State

## First-Year Application Evaluation

*The high school record, particularly **your grade-point average (GPA)** and **class rank** (if applicable), accounts for approximately **two-thirds of the decision...** The **remaining one-third** is based on other factors, including **standardized test scores**, the personal statement, and activities list. The **optional personal statement and activities list** are sometimes considered for **students whose applications require additional review.***

Which key question is more important?

# Importance of the Essay?

It depends!

- For small schools and selective schools:
  - *Fit is a huge consideration*

*The essay becomes an important tool to move you from **qualified** to **accepted***

# Writing a good essay...

Step 1: Understand its importance. *Is it important for you?*

Step 2: Understand your audience.

# Understand your Audience

When you write, whether you realize it or not, you are writing for an audience...

We can think about audience in 2 ways:

1. Real Audience
2. Intended Audience



# Understand your Audience

- Real Audience: The actual audience who is reading your essay and perceiving your message
- Intended Audience: The audience you imagine when you write

# Understand your audience

Who do you imagine is reading your essay?



# Intended Audience:





# Real Audience



[Inside Tufts Admissions](#) (4:34)

# Real Audience

Who they are:

- People persons
- Often young recent graduates
- Eager to get to know you!



**ACCEPT**

# What are they looking for?

- To learn *who you are*
  - Different from *what you've done*
- To hear *your voice*
- To find what makes you *you*... unique and original
- To evaluate your writing, thinking & communication skills
- A good reason to accept you!

# Importance of the Essay

- To show that something about you, or some way that you think or experience life makes you unique, likeable, interesting, and different from the other applicants
- To show that you'd be a good classmate, a good roommate, and productive member of the campus community

# Writing an Effective Essay

- How do you show something like this to an admissions committee?
- How do you make them *know* you, *like* you, and *want* you on their campus?



# Show them...

You're not just going to write in your essay:

*this is why you should admit me...*

You're going to **show** them why through your essay

# Writing across your application

What is the writing requirement?



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What is the writing requirement?

Like most things... **It depends!**





# Writing across your application

What is the writing requirement?

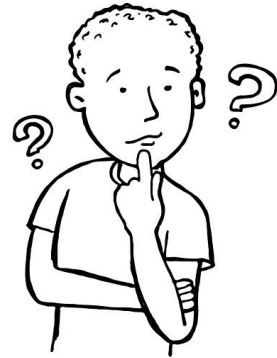
Like most things... **It depends!**

## Main Essay

- Personal narrative
- 500-650 words
- Can be used for multiple applications

## Supplements

- Shorter responses
- 100-300 words
- Unique to each school



# Common App Topics 2019-2020

1. A *background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful* to you
2. A *lesson you've taken from an obstacle* that was fundamental to later success.
3. A time when you *questioned or challenged a belief or idea*.
4. Describe *a problem you've solved or you'd like to solve*.
5. Discuss *an accomplishment, event, or realization* that sparked a period of *personal growth*
6. Describe *a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time*
7. *Any topic of your choice!*

*Recommended word count: 500-650*

*Full prompts here:* <https://www.commonapp.org/whats-appening/application-updates/2019-2020-common-app-essay-prompts>

# Coalition Topics 2019-2020

1. A story from your life that ***demonstrates or shaped your character***
2. A time when you made ***a meaningful contribution to others*** in which the greater good was your focus.
3. A time you had a ***long-cherished or accepted belief challenged***
4. ***Advice you'd give a younger sibling or friend*** about being a ***teenager*** now.
5. ***Topic of your choice.***

***Recommended word count: 500-550***

Full prompts here: <http://www.coalitionforcollegeaccess.org/essays.html>

# How to write your main essay

- Remember your purpose...
- Get the admissions committee to get to know you and like you and want you on their campus
- Show them... don't tell them

# Personal Narrative



# Personal Narrative

A definition:

*A true **story** about something that happened to you that makes a larger **point** for the reader*

# Personal Narrative

Two components:

1. Tell a **story**
2. Make a **point**



# Personal Narrative

## The Layers:

**Plot:** *what happened*

**Perspective:** *your thoughts and insights about what happened*





# Plot vs. Perspective

Which part of the narrative teaches your audience more about you?

- **Plot:** what happened
- **Perspective:** your thoughts on what happened

# Tip:

- Don't waste your time trying to think of a unique “story” to tell in your essay (there aren't any).
- Instead share a unique **perspective**!
- Admissions committees are only minorly interested in **what happened** to you (plot), but majorly interested in **how** and **why** it happened (perspective)!

# Weaving plot & perspective

- The way you weave together **plot** and **perspective** is a *creative process* and can be done in many ways when you choose a structure for your essay

# Structure

- How should you structure a narrative?
- What should it look like?
- What shouldn't it look like?

# Structure:

- NOT a pre-set form
- NOT an academic structure (5 paragraphs)
  - Remember: This is a *creative* process
- Structure = shape and pattern of your essay

# Narrative Shapes & Patterns

- *Be creative! No preset form*
- *Sometimes a chronological structure works...*
- *Often students abandon this for a more creative form*
- *Consider:*
  - *Flashback*
  - *Compare/contrast*
  - *Extended Metaphor*
  - *Descriptive*
  - *Hybrid*

# Personal Narrative Strategies

## 1) Create good substance:

- This is the quality of your content
- Choose a topic that is actually important to you
  - You've learned something from it
  - The admissions committee can learn something about you
- Connect to themes the audience can relate to
  - Ex: Not just about volunteering; also about *friendship*, *humility* and *compassion*

# Personal Narrative Strategies

Create good substance...

- Choose *specific* details
- Reveal *specific* insights

*Key advice: Be specific!*



# Strategy: Be Specific

## Specific Details

**Question: What makes your story unique to you?**

- Ex: A walk to school
  - Many students walk to school--not a good “story”
  - But, I can learn a lot about you from *your* walk to school.
  - Only you walk to school down your street, in your brown boots, with your brother and your neighbor, listening to your favorite podcast (specific details)

# Strategy: Be Specific

**Specific details** start with good specific thinking!

- It's not a writing thing
- It's a thinking thing



*Think, think, think.*

# Strategy: Be Specific

- Specific insights:
  - What were you thinking?
  - What did you learn?
  - What was it like?
  - Show evidence you're a “thinking” person!

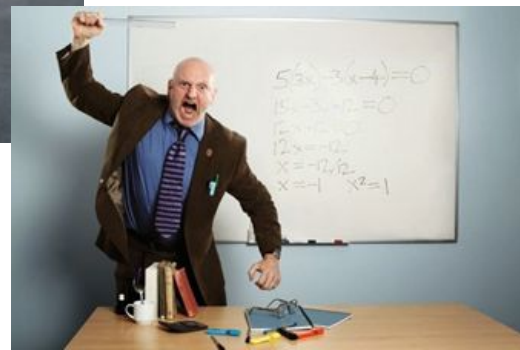
# Personal narrative strategies

- **Be specific!**
  - Specific details
  - Specific insights
- *“Show don’t tell”*

# Showing vs. Telling

Ex: The teacher was angry

# The teacher was angry...



# Telling

Tell the person next to you about a holiday dinner with your family (i.e. Thanksgiving)

2 minutes

# Showing

*Show* your partner a holiday dinner with your family

What does it look like? Sound like? Taste like? Smell like? Feel like?





**Next tip: Be aware of clichés**

# Be aware of clichés

- Something overused or overdone to the point of being annoying
- How are clichés an issue in the application essay?

# Clichés traps!

- Cliché topics
  - Ex: Sports, family trips, volunteering, music, overcoming obstacles
- Cliché themes
  - Ex: perseverance, friendship, helping others, etc.
- Cliché points
  - Ex: I'm unique, I'm better/more unique than my peers, I want to contribute to the world, I've grown!
- Cliché hooks
  - Ex: famous quotes

# What to do about clichés?

# Defeat Clichés

- *Be specific*
- *Show don't tell*--make your story unique to you
- Look for *uncommon* connections
- Have a good hook!

# Have a good hook!

## Consider:

- Action
- Dialogue
- Vivid description
- Surprising statement

## Avoid:

- Time expressions
- Background information
- Famous quotes
- overgeneralizations

# Review:

## Considerations for writing an effective essay:

- Remember your purpose: demonstrate *who you are (fit)*
- Remember your **real** audience
- Find a topic that has **substance** (positive, personal, and important)
- **Show** don't **tell** your story
- Consider a creative structure
- Avoid cliches
- Have a good hook

**One last tip...**



# One last tip...

Don't take a bad selfie...



# “Bad Selfie”

- You think you’re demonstrating something positive about yourself but you’re really demonstrating something negative
- Examples:
  - You’re very dramatic
  - You’re arrogant
  - You’re privileged
  - You’re immature/naive
  - You’re lazy or unmotivated
  - Many, many, other negative qualities



# There are good selfies, too!

- When you demonstrate a positive quality or give a positive impression about yourself to your audience
- Examples:
  - Maturity
  - Learning from mistakes
  - Intellectual curiosity
  - Leadership
  - Compassion
  - Initiative
  - Many many others...

# Sample Essay

**Prompt: 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?**

## *The Pteronarcophobic*

My name is *Jane*, and I am pteronarcophobic.

During my junior year in high school, I ran for student council secretary. The students running were required to address a speech to the students. I was a perfectionist, and so I practiced a thousand times before giving my speech; I was ready. As I stepped on the stage and began addressing the students, I thought the difficult part was over. I thought that stepping into the spotlight was enough to make me comfortable, but I was wrong. I was halfway through the speech, portraying all the confidence I had in me, until Pete came gushing his way towards me. No one noticed him; and so, no one was disturbed by him. However, I was terrified. Despite that, I insisted on not showing my weakness to the entire school. I moved steadily from the podium to the other side of the stage. He came for me. My eyes pleaded with my friends to come and save me from this situation. I feared him since our wrongful encounter; a flashback of my seventh birthday barbecue party. I was happily and peacefully eating my burger, and all of a sudden I consumed a piece of him.


As he started closing in, my voice became high and I dashed to leave the stage. I started crying hysterically as my friends embraced me. After a while, our school's director spoke to me and said exactly the things I wanted to hear. I cannot let him control me. I will not let him control me. I stood up straight, determined to finish what I had started. I headed back to the stage with puffy eyes and continued the speech as if nothing had happened. The students' laughter filled the auditorium, and there was Pete ready for me. I was neither scared nor afraid. I was confident. I was ready for him. As he began dashing towards me, I shooed him off. He was persistent but I had it in me to stop this. I continued my speech until the end, batting him away when necessary. I was pleased that I was able to defy my greatest tangible fear - the fear of flies. Having any kind of fear will enslave a person's mind. Pete did not only resemble the fly; he resembled my fear of losing. I did lose the elections, but I gained my freedom. As from now, I am no longer afraid of losing.

My name is Jane, and I *was* pteronarcophobic.

# Discussion Questions

- Is this an effective application essay? (Scale of 1-10)
- Did it follow the tips given in the presentation?
  - What did the author do well?
  - What weaknesses did you notice??
- Any bad selfies?

# Sample feedback

- This is a *terrible* essay 
- Not a real story--created for an “intended” audience.
  - “It’s what they want to hear”
- Maybe a cute story and some good writing but not a good application essay
- “Bad selfie”



# What now?

- Start thinking!
- Main essay prompts are out, you don't need to wait until the Fall
- 30-60% of freshman classes are being filled through early decision programs (Nov. 1 deadline)
  - Give yourself time to write a good essay
- Think through your topics before you write
- Get feedback, but write your own essay



# Questions

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