NAILING THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS ESSAY

1. START EARLY. Planning ahead ensures time to craft a truly unique and appropriate essay. It will also allow for drafts and careful proofreading.

2. DO SOME SOUL SEARCHING. What makes you unique? What can you tell the schools that they won't learn from your application? Consider your strengths and weaknesses. Your essay should enhance your overall application and help you stand out as an individual.

3. DON'T GET STUMPED. If you feel blocked, ask yourself how you might answer the essay question if you were talking to a close friend. Continue to brainstorm about your unique characteristics and life experiences, and build from them.

4. SHOW THEM YOU'RE INTERESTED. If you're asked why you would like to attend a particular school, make sure you've visited the campus, thoroughly researched the Web site, and even talked to current students or admissions counselors. Schools are more likely to admit a student who has made an effort to learn more about them.

5. READ THROUGH AND ANALYZE. Does your essay make sense? Make sure it answers the question or fulfills the topic presented, and that it effectively communicates your main points in a concise, yet powerful, way.

6. IT'S ALL ABOUT YOU. If you are asked to write about a role model or event, don't forget to focus the essay on yourself. How were you changed? How did the person or event influence you? What have you learned?

7. BE A PERSON, NOT A LIST. Play up your strengths, but don't present a list of awards and activities. Consider one or two events or awards of which you are especially proud. Describe your journey, including insights, causes and effects, and steps you took to accomplish each task or goal.

8. RECYCLE. If you can re-use sections from one essay for another college's application essay, then do it. It will save time and allow you to focus on other things. But make sure the topic is still relevant and that the essay you've already written will still strike a chord with the other school.

9. PROOF, PROOF AND PROOF AGAIN. Grammatical errors tell admissions counselors that you're not detail-oriented or don't care enough to read your essay thoroughly. Presentation counts and you want to be sure you make the right impression.

10. GET A SECOND OPINION. Have teachers or counselors read your essay - they can help with proofreading and often know which types of essays have been successful in the past. Consider parents and friends as well, since they know you well and can offer honest feedback.