

Language Arts December eNews 2017: Tell Your Story. Own Your Voice.

Wildcat Seniors, December 1st marks the “early decision” application deadline for many colleges and universities, and “regular decision” deadlines are approaching. The time to finalize one of the most challenging parts of the college application process - writing the essay - is now. Use the personal statement to introduce yourself to the admissions officers at by telling your story and owning your voice.



deadlines,
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DEADLINES!

Step One: Choose a question that is meaningful to you and enables you to tell a story and reflect upon what you’ve learned.

More than 5,000 colleges exist nationally, and many offer students a variety of options when selecting an essay prompt. For example, twenty-seven colleges and universities in Illinois alone accept the “Common Application,” which enables students to “seamlessly submit an application” to a variety of schools in the seven hundred member consortium. The Common Application offers students the opportunity to apply to a number of schools using the same essay.

More than two dozen schools in the Land of Lincoln accept the Common App including Augustana College, Benedictine University, Bradley University, Depaul University, IIT, Illinois Wesleyan, Millikin University, Monmouth College, Northwestern University, The University of Chicago, University of Illinois at Chicago, Western Illinois University and Wheaton College.

The Class of 2018 has seven options on the Common Application, and each allows the graduate to highlight a talent, interest, obstacle, belief, problem, realization, etc. that showcases him or her best. Visit <http://www.commonapp.org/> for more information. Choose the question(s) that frame your experience and illustrate who you are.

Chris Teare, Drew University Admissions Counselor and *Forbes* contributor highlights the power of story. Teare says, *“My advice on essays: Be yourself, sound like a teenager, and tell me the story you’d share if we were in an uber together for a brief ride across my home island of Manhattan. You want me leaving the car wanting to stay in touch with you; I want your voice in my ear as I make my recommendation to our committee.”*

Creative writing professor and author of *Write Your Way In: Crafting an Unforgettable College Admissions Essay*, Rachel Toor concurs: *“Choose a topic you really want to write about. If the subject doesn’t matter to you, it won’t matter to the reader. Write about whatever keeps you up at night. That might be cars or coffee. It might be your favorite book or the Pythagorean Theorem. It might be why you don’t believe in evolution or how you think kale must have hired a PR firm to get people to eat it.”* Toor concludes that the essay should

say, *"This is who I am."*



TELL
ADMISSIONS
SOMETHING THEY
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Step Two: Reveal who you are rather than reviewing, restating, or rehashing. Admissions officers look at each student's application folder comprehensively. This includes high school grades, standardized test scores, extracurriculars, teacher recommendations, etc. Moreover, many schools use admissions rubrics to select candidates. Use the

essay to present something significant and novel about yourself.

The Princeton Review advises that a personal statement should not contradict or repeat any other part of the application. The essay should not list awards received, grades earned, or test scores. The YouTube video "How to Tell a Unique Story to Admissions" also emphasizes the need to share a new narrative. "At the core, your essay should also tell Admission something they don't know. Use these essays as an opportunity to say something that hasn't been said."

Dr. Zina Evans, associate provost at the University of Florida echoes this idea. *"In your essay, tell me something I can't find anywhere else in the application."*

The assistant director for undergraduate admissions at Yale also advises that writers should make the essay matter: *"one of the biggest mistakes that students make on their application essays is to make an embellished resume. . . Don't use the very few words you have to tell us about yourself, only to talk about what you do. . ."* In reality, the essay is *"a way for us to understand why you do the things you do, how those things impact you, how those experiences have shaped your world for you."*

Step Three: Read. Write. Revise. Repeat. Writing a college essay requires commitment and creativity. Invest time researching and reading about your top choice schools and access the resources available online to support you.

Individual colleges and universities often offer "tips" or "advice" to prospective students. Vanderbilt University suggests *"WRITE LIKE YOU SPEAK."* Carleton College advises, *"Don't try to take on too much. Focus on one event, one activity, or one 'most influential person.' Tackling too much tends to make your essay too watered down or disjointed."* The University of Michigan urges, *"We don't want a list of awards and achievements; we'll have those on your application. We want a written snapshot of who you are – right now – and how you got that way. When you see the essay portion on your application, you'll have several choices, or prompts. One will let you tell*

your story in the best way possible. Choose it. Play to your strengths.” Oberlin College counsels, *“Remember, we aren’t looking for perfection. We are looking for the human being behind the roster of activities and grades. Think of the essay as an opportunity rather than an ordeal.”* Consider the

recommendations for the university of your choice. When they tell you what is important to them, believe it.

Khan Academy also offers extensive resources about the college application process and writing an application essay in particular. Videos such as “Writing a Strong College Admissions Essay” and “Taking Your College Essay to the Next Level” feature insights from admissions counselors from a variety of Ivy League admissions counselors from Brown, Yale, the University of Virginia and more. Watch the former [here](#).



Another 21st century resource and potential writing incentive to consider, “reading the essay that got me into. . .” videos, may encourage you to sit down and draft. Googling “reading my college essay” will give you access to home videos from accepted students, as well as a variety of “essays that worked,” which may convince you to tell your own story using your own voice. Consider “Su at SU,” “My Accepted Stanford Essays (and other essay/application advice,” which you can view [here](#). Tyler Su, a 2015 Las Vegas, Nevada, high school graduate candidly shares what she learned about the college application process through her lens as a Stanford University undergraduate. Dozens of other current and former college students also have valuable insights that may enlighten and motivate members of the Class of 2018.

Finally, if you are looking for inspiration closer to home, read the excerpt below from the college application essay of one of Wego’s current seniors. The introduction begins in medias res with an important life event described through an extended metaphor of war and previews its impact on the student.

High pitched shrills coming from my newborn brother jolted me awake. My curiosity lead me down the stairs, closer to the deep rumbling of the battlefield that was spread in front of me. As I peered around the hallway corner, I became paralyzed, and was engulfed with fear at the sight of my brother caught in between my parents’ crossfire. My father raised a white flag as he walked out the door. As a first grader, the climatic ending to my parents’ marriage left a lasting impression for the rest of my life. Nearly half of all marriages in the United States end in divorce, and studies show negative effects on children who live with divorced parents. Some of these outcomes include increased risk in teen pregnancy for females, diminished learning capacity, greater chance of committing crimes, psychological issues, and behavioral problems. As a child of divorced parents, I can testify that I am a contradiction to these statistics. My parents’

divorce has undoubtedly affected my life and the person that I am, but in no way am I a part of the numbers that define and stereotype children of divorced parents. . .

The conclusion of the essay marries repetition and research to communicate the applicant's focus on the future, transforming her loss into strength and shattering stereotypes. Notice the reflection and youthful voice.

. . . Recently, I have discovered my passion for researching the psychology behind the way I feel or subconsciously act. I currently research the ways which my mostly-absent father psychologically dictates certain aspects of my life, so that I can cultivate awareness of behavioral patterns that stunt my personal growth. One prevalent statistic about children with divorced parents is an increase in promiscuous behavior. Because of my research, I am more educated and aware of the warning signs related to this behavior that may arise, like the need to feel wanted. By expanding my knowledge, I can identify and eliminate potential obstacles to my development, and avoid contributing to the stereotypes of children with divorced parents.

I am aware, I am confident, I am educated, I am happy, and I am who I am today because of my journey as a contradiction to the statistics and stereotypes of children with divorced parents. Upon arrival of this new understanding I can minimize the negative effects that divorce is proven to cause on my life. I aspire to become a child psychologist because this career path allow me to powerfully combine my passion for psychology with my personal experiences, helping other children of divorced parents cope. In college, I will prepare for this path, learning to create a legacy: helping others disprove stereotypes and live fulfilling lives.

Dream big, Wildcats! Whether you are an upperclassman or a ninth grader, graduation is closer than it may appear, and opportunities are boundless. Write on.