

The Essay

Where do I begin???

“Structured reflection is important.”

In an excerpt from Business Week, the Director of Admissions for Stanford’s Business School, Derrick Bolton, helps to clarify the direction an essay should take:

Q: More than 5,800 applied to Stanford’s full-time MBA program this year. The school accepted 8%. What set those 8% of applicants apart from those who were rejected or wait-listed?

A: I really struggle with how to articulate this. What it comes down to is that someone who views the application process as an experience that has value in and of itself typically produces the strongest application.

Structured reflection is important. But people—and I’m guilty of this—rarely dedicate time to it. So the application process is a rare opportunity in life. Applicants shouldn’t just go through it with the goal of getting into a school but with the mindset that they want to learn more about themselves—learn more about their values, crystallize their aspirations, and identify the experiences that they need to make an impact on the world. And those experiences may or may not be business school.

That attitude manifests itself through the consonance of the application. By that, I mean that applicants are able to relate their values to their actions or see the connection between their aspirations and their responsibilities. There’s a sense of harmony in the application when we review it. In those cases, the person we get to know in the essays is the person we expect to meet based on their activities, recommendations, and interview. That’s extremely powerful.

The following are excerpts that represent the approach to the essay that Mr. Bolton speaks about, which former applicants agreed to share. For more examples of student essays that worked, visit: <http://www.conncoll.edu/admission/apply/essays-that-worked/>

Not many people’s feet grow five sizes in six months. But mine did. My feet grew fast. I was even on a first-name basis with the Packers, owners of Packer’s Shoes. Their store was dingy, filled floor to ceiling—literally—with shoes. There was hardly a place to sit. Packer’s doesn’t sell snorkeling flippers, but some of the monstrosities they stock would arouse more laughter thumping down school hallways than any ungainly flippers might. Yes, I was an exception to normal podiatry.

Fortunately, though, my feet stopped growing the summer before junior year. I was cleaning out my closet that summer, shin—deep in stained and outgrown pants, ripped t-shirts, and hideous hand-me-downs when I came upon a pair of almost-new shoes from just a year earlier. For fun, I lay one old shoe next to one new shoe. I grinned with fascination and pride as I studied them. My feet had outgrown those shoes while I had outgrown my old, size-eleven *character*.

...Like noticing myself through a pair of almost forgotten sneakers, it’s ironic that when the growth of my feet ended, my own noticeable, personal growth began. It’s likely that I’ll outgrow dozens more new shoes—mindsets, attitudes, convictions. This guarantees that I’ll really *live* before I die and that I won’t need new, bigger shoes to truly grow. But in case I’m wrong, I’ll ask Bill Packer to order me some flippers in which to walk proudly.

It was a warm, sunny day in mid-August, just around noontime. I was sitting in the kitchen of my cousin's house, waiting for the beat up Golanky Floors van to make its less than impressive entrance, when my Aunt walked in the door. We had exchanged the usual cordial hellos and familial small talk when she asked me about my job. I answered her like I answered everyone else: that it was a good summer job that paid well. She then made a remark that would stick with me for a long time: "It's not something you want to do for the rest of your life." Was it?

...I refer to the statement as a question, but it had always been *told* to me, not asked of me. I, in my own head, turned it into a question. *Is* this something I want to do for the rest of my life? I suppose it came easier to me as a question than anyone else in my family. All my relatives were jet setting hard working types, who wanted to take the straightest, cleanest road through life, trying to get somewhere, but never really stopping to smell the flowers and enjoy the scenery. Everyone in my family had always done work that they didn't particularly enjoy so they could potentially enjoy life to some great extent in the future, but somehow managed to judge people's success in life based on their monetary and work-related success. That paradox had always bothered me.

...During the time that I was writing this essay, I managed to answer my own question. Maybe flooring will be my calling. One day, I'll wake up, and put on that sanding machine, and make sweet love to that floor and enjoy every minute of it. The bottom line, one way or not, is that it's up to me to decide what I want to do with the rest of my life. If I want to sand floors, so be it. It doesn't matter what the opinions of my familial constituents are. That statement should have been a question because it will be my decision and my decision only to answer it when I'm ready.

... I never questioned my dislike of the sport. I spent countless afternoons in the freezing gray weather, playing a position against guys twice my weight and nursing my numbed, frostbitten hands back to life. I stood stretching in organized lines before games looking out into the stands at the spectators thinking, "God, they are so lucky that they are not out here." I nervously dismissed the thought as sacrilegious with a feeling of shame.

In the spring of my junior year, I took my parents' suggestion and began to read Ayn Rand's The Fountainhead and I took her ideas of free thinking to heart. It was a novel that totally changed my perspective and caused me to look at my life with new eyes. I realized that my playing football was a sacrifice of my own beliefs. I discovered that I should have been spending my time on productive activities that inspired me and raised my own self esteem rather than seeking the approval of others doing something in which I neither excelled nor enjoyed. Before I finished the book I had made the decision to end my football career.

... My temporary state of isolation and distance from the center of high school life allowed me to make a good number of observations about life in high school that had never been made clear to me before. ... I think Rand would approve of my lack of 'social responsibility.'

Each of these samples show elements of self-reflection, attention to detail, cohesiveness and clarity of voice. Like these samples, there should be a pulse to your essay—allowing the reader to see and understand your experience as you did. This is why the essay is such a challenge, and something to which you need to devote a good deal of time and thought. If you choose to see it as the opportunity that Mr. Bolton describes— an opportunity to learn more about yourself, it can actually be fun. The best part of any college essay is the point at which it becomes less about admission to college and more of a reflection and appreciation of who you're becoming. Appreciating yourself and your own experiences and honestly writing about that is the challenge. Are you up for it?