

College Essay Insights

Brian Zaun, San Diego State University & Allie McManaman, Elon University

A college essay should accomplish a minimum of two goals:

- Demonstrate that you can write at or near a college level
- Provide the admission office with a sense of who you are

Purpose of an Essay



Just BREATHE...

You have a great essay inside you, just waiting to be written!

“The essay is one of the few places where an applicant can be more than the same blanks that everybody else filled in.”

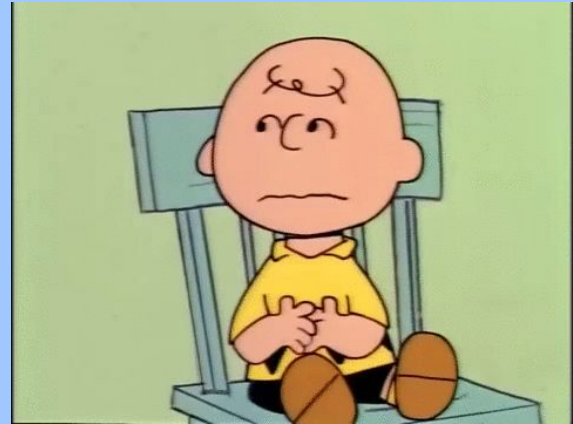
– Mike Sexton, *former Vice President for Enrollment Management, Santa Clara University (CA)*

Admissions Insight #1

- The essay provides admission counselors a glimpse of who you are.
- Admission counselors are HUMAN
- A good essay can help get you admitted.
- You can control the content and we want to hear your voice!
- It can showcase the kind of person you'll be on campus.
- You know how to do this!

Good News

- A great essay alone isn't enough.
- They take time to craft, and they often create stress.



Bad News

Tips and Tricks

Choose a topic that highlights YOU

- Do share your personal story and thoughts. Take a creative approach and highlight areas that aren't covered in other parts of the application. We will see your resume, transcript, and test scores.
- Don't tell us how great our college is. We know! Don't talk about how focus and hard work will help you be successful in college. We know! Don't list what you've been involved in. We can see that in other parts of your application.

Be Creative :)



Focus on depth not breadth

- **Do** focus on one aspect of yourself so the readers can learn more about who you are. Remember that the readers must be able to find your main idea and follow it from beginning to end.
- **Don't** try to cover too many topics. This will make the essay sound like a résumé, which doesn't provide any additional details about you.



Narrow & Personal

More Ernest Hemingway and less William Faulkner

- Don't use "50" words...

"Over the years it has been pointed out to me by my parents, friends, and teachers – and I have even noticed this about myself, as well – that I am not the neatest person in the world."

...when "5" words will DO

"I'm a slob."

Concise Writing



- **Don't** simply state a fact to get an idea across.

“Playing cards has always been an important part of my life.”

- **Do** include specific details, examples, and reasons to develop your ideas. Let the idea unfold through vivid language.

“Grandma says that I have had a deck of cards in my hand since I was two years old.”

Show, Don't Tell!

“Bring me to that date, describe how it felt.”

– Emmanuella Revolus Belzince, *former Coordinator of Postsecondary Projects, Atlanta Public Schools*

Admissions Insight #2

It's your essay!

- Get feedback, but keep your voice
- Don't use clichés, slang, jargon, acronyms, etc.
- Don't be overly formal, unless that is your style or it's required
- Don't use big words to sound "smarter"
- Be honest
- Don't tell the college what you think they want to hear
- Write an essay, not an email or text message

YOUR Voice



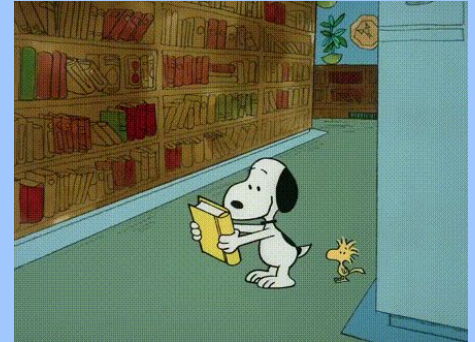
“Presenting yourself as who you are is your best bet in the college admissions process.”

– Jeff Brenzel, *former Dean of Undergraduate Admissions, Yale University*

Admissions Insight #3

- Don't rely on spell check and grammar check only
- Ask a teacher, parent, and friend if the essay sounds like you
- Give people plenty of time
- Get input from different generations, especially if you go the humorous route
- Let your final draft simmer for 2 days before submitting
 - We don't recommend waiting until the day of the deadline to finish your essay

PROOFREAD

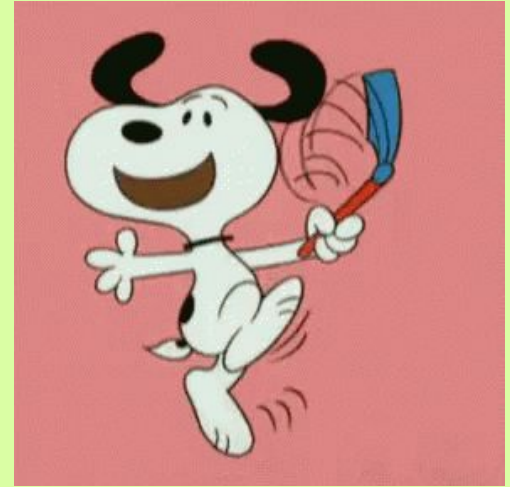


“Everybody has a story that they tell about you. You need to hear those stories, and somewhere in there is the kernel of a really great essay.”

– Marty O'Connell, *former Executive Director, Colleges That Change Lives*

Admissions Insight #4

1. Core Values (showing who you are through what you value)
2. Vulnerability (help the reader feel connected to you)
3. Insight (“so what” moments)
4. Craft (clear structure, language, clearly REVISED)



Four Qualities of a Great Essay

Other Essays & Writing

Colleges ask supplemental questions for a variety of reasons.

- Check for interest, fit, enthusiasm
- Look beyond your academic achievements - looking at how your values match with ours

Do your research on us, be specific, and show us why we are a perfect match :)

Supplemental Essays

Why this College or Why this Major

Rice University, Dartmouth, Baylor, CU Boulder, UMass Amherst, Tulane, University of Michigan, Duke, Texas A&M, Colorado College and more! This is a very common prompt!

The Community Essay

Brown, Cornell, Boston College

The Extracurricular Essay

Harvard, Vanderbilt, UPenn, UT Austin

Diversity & Identity related

University of Virginia, Wake Forest University, Vassar College, Columbia, NYU, George Washington University,

Quirky Prompts

University of Chicago - If you could have a conversation with any animal species, which would you pick and what would you ask them?
Scripps - You have just been invited to host your own podcast. What will you talk about and why did you select that topic?
Elon University - Tell us your top 5

We know that you are human, and that your academics, application, and achievements may be impacted by challenges or other circumstances. This is a place to provide additional context.

- Do include academic explanations due to illness, family emergencies, or school changes
- Do discuss any hardships, special circumstances, or major disruptions
- Do include any complex research projects, major works, or extra honors that could not fit into standard sections
- Don't relist your extracurricular list
- Avoid emotional appeals and minor excuses

You CAN leave this section blank.

The Additional Information Section

Questions?

Brian Zaun

bzaun@sdsu.edu

Allie McManaman

amcmanaman@elon.edu

