

## A Word About College Essay Styles

by Patrick O'Connor, Ph.D. Counselors' Corner Sept. 24, 2025

Students, you amaze me. You love to share your opinions. I know this, because you share them **everywhere**—Chattersnap, Gramphoto, and all the rest of those social media sites I know nothing about, other than you use them because *you love to talk about yourselves*. **Except when it comes to college essays.**

If I asked you for 650 words on your impressions of *Permission to Dance*, you'd go on for weeks. But colleges want 650 words about your favorite place in the world, and you say things like "The library. Gotta love that big dictionary." Permission denied.

Your college wants you to come to campus, talk with them for three hours, eat lunch, and go home. If they did admissions that way, they'd probably get great students—and by the time they were done interviewing everyone, each of those students would be 45 years old.

**So you aren't writing essays—you're having a conversation**, except you're putting what you have to say on paper. That means you'll want to do this:

**Stop guessing.** When a college asks "Name a problem you'd like to solve", there's no one right answer for everybody. Cure cancer? Great. The need for your mother to work three jobs? Absolutely. The squeak in your garage door? That can work, too—as long as it means something to you, and you can convey that meaning. **This isn't Algebra; you get to decide what the answer is, and why it makes sense.** Put it down on paper, put the commas in the right place, and you're good to go.

**Tell a story.** Remember the time you told your best friend about the first concert you went to, or the best pizza you ever ate? **You were on fire at the end of the story, genuinely excited at the chance to share part of your life with them. That's how you should feel once you're done writing a college essay. This isn't a speech you give to thousands of people; it's a story that means something to you, and you're telling it to someone who really wants to hear it.** Save the speech; tell the tale.

**Head or heart?** Some students think the key to a great essay is to pack it with facts that make you sound like a brainiac, while others say the college will only beg you to come if they need a whole box of tissues to get through your essay. Life is a little of both, and so are college essays. **Show the colleges what you think about, and why it means something to you. This will let them know you're past the drama and trauma of teenagehood, and eager to embrace the tasks of becoming a thoughtful, caring adult.**

**Answer the question.** If the college asks "Who do you admire?" and they still don't know your answer once they've read your essay, you've given them one more reason to reject you. Ducking the question may work in Washington, but it doesn't play well in admissions offices. If they want to know, you need to tell them.

**Your goal** is to write an essay that sounds so much like a conversation, they'll be surprised you aren't in the room with them when they're finished reading it. Kind of like Gramphoto. But with words.