

The 3 types of essays: The Good, the Bad and the Risky

By Lee Shulman Bierer, College Admissions Strategies [Tribune News Service](#) August 19, 2020

If they made a movie about nailing the perfect admissions essay, the title might be: “The Good, The Bad and The Risky.”

The Risky

Let’s start with “The Risky.” One of the favorite stories from admissions officers is a response to an open-ended essay prompt: “**Ask yourself a question, and then answer it.**” So here’s what one bold young man chose to write:

Question: Do you play the tuba? Answer: No.

That was it, that was his entire essay! You’ve got to admit that was a gutsy move. He was accepted at that college and several others. Students can’t afford to take that kind of risk unless that’s really part of who they are. There are colleges that actively seek students like that young man: He stepped outside the box and to some, and he hit a home run. For others undoubtedly, he miscalculated, because he may be perceived as being cocky and overconfident. In this case, he had strong credentials and very likely would have been accepted anyway, but I am certain that his pseudo-essay was joyously passed around the admissions office.

The Bad

Common admissions wisdom has advocated that students should avoid the 3 D’s — Death, Divorce and Drugs. The Death Essay is unfortunately more common than we all would like. Don’t think I’m heartless, but it’s very difficult for high school students to say much more than this special person had a tremendous influence and now that they’re gone, they will miss them. These essays can be tremendously powerful, but they need to share the “whys” and the impacts of the loss.

If there is a “typical” divorce essay that colleges receive, it starts with “I was happy until my parents split — now I am unhappy.” Students can take this topic and make it work for them if they talk about how they feel, how it has changed their lives and hopefully what they may have gained through this difficult experience.

Drugs: Some students want to share inappropriate details of their lives. Don’t do it. Even if it’s in the past, drug use sends up a red flag. Parke Muth, former senior assistant dean of admissions at the University of Virginia, has likened college essays to fast food. “**Ninety percent of the applications I read contain what I call McEssays.**” **They don’t do an effective job of setting the student apart from the sea of applicants.**

The Good

- Choose your topic wisely, but even if you choose a topic that other people choose, spend sufficient time brainstorming how to own your interpretation of the topic.
- **Don’t try to write what you think colleges want to read.** They’ve already read that in the first 50 essays they read today. **Find and preserve your own voice.**
- **Focus on the details** when you tell a story. One rule of great writing: “Show, Don’t Tell.”

- Read your essay out loud to several people and ask them if they believe it sounds like you. It will also help you find and fix the clunky parts that need help