

5 common mistakes in college application essays and how to avoid them

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While college essays are not the most important part of your application, they can be a tipping factor. So you want yours to stand out for college admissions officers who have to slog through piles of student submissions.

What makes an essay memorable? I asked Greg Zaiser, Vice President of Admissions and Financial Planning at Elon University for his thoughts. **“The best essays are the ones where I learn something new about the applicant or I learn about their true passion. I like when we get to hear a story that has nothing to do with their resume and more to do with their home life.”** The most memorable essay I’ve ever read was one written by an applicant who described her brother’s special needs. Instead of taking the path I expected, she revealed that he embarrassed her and that she found herself trying to keep her friends from meeting him. Even today, as I write it, I get chills. It was raw, real, completely uncomfortable, and incredibly authentic. Risky? Perhaps. But it stood out because she was “real”. Another essay that I recall being stylistically memorable was the student who used the dents on his truck as a metaphor for his life’s challenges. It personalized the experience in a way that wouldn’t have otherwise worked.”

What are some of the most common blunders students make?

1. Using clichés.

Clichés are phrases and expressions that are so overused that they’ve become annoying. The problem is that they often “feel right” because they concisely communicate a writer’s message. Clichés are a lazy person’s friend –they signal to an admissions officer that the student didn’t care enough to make the phrase original. Some of the biggest college essay cliché offenders are:

- Expanding my horizons
- The big picture
- Less is more
- All walks of life
- There was a glimmer of hope in his eye.
- Never a dull moment
- The writing was on the wall
- Thinking outside the box
- At the end of the day
- When life gives you lemons
- I learned that the only thing to fear is fear itself

When editing your essay, question any comparison or image you've used. Clichés can sneak in when we try to be descriptive. Ask yourself if the phrase is one that you've heard frequently on television or in casual conversation. Forgo the familiar and be creative, but beware: if you use the thesaurus, make sure the word you choose makes sense.

2. **Plagiarizing.** There are so many books and internet resources with “successful essays” that it is often too tempting for lazy students to simply copy and paste someone else's work.

Plagiarizing is the easiest way to guarantee a rejection. Colleges are aware of this unfortunate trend and many now use software to weed out the copy-cats.

Back in the day when students actually typed their essays on typewriters or even hand-wrote their essays and two essays seemed eerily similar, admissions folks would contact the guidance counselors because they wouldn't know which student wrote the original and which student copied. The counselors would then meet with each of the students individually and report their findings back to the college. This typically happened between friends in neighboring towns who somehow didn't think a college would catch on. Today, it is even easier to locate someone else's well-written essay. Colleges and universities still head directly to school guidance counselors for their input. The punishment for acknowledging plagiarizing or lying about it and then admitting it is severe. Colleges take their academic honor codes very seriously.

3. Vague language.

The worst essays to read are the ones that are generic and vague. My mantra to my students: “Err on the side of specificity.” When students don't know what to say, they often write in platitudes that sound meaningless. This is particularly true when students are responding to the “Why this college?” essay. **Colleges are looking for applicants who can articulate specifically why a college represents a good fit for them. So, when students choose to talk about attending football games or being part of Greek life on campus, they really aren't doing anything to set themselves apart from other applicants, and that kind of essay will hurt instead of help.**

4. **Swinging for the bleachers:**

There's such a thing as trying too hard. Some real examples of bad lines from college essays:

- I know that as we age, we tend to forget the bricklayers of our lives.
- I would like to see my own ignorance wither into enlightenment.
- Going to school in your wonderfully gothic setting would be an exciting challenge.
- In the spring, people were literally exploding outside.
- Freedom of speech is the ointment which sets us free.
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5. **Mission Trip, don't go there.**

People often wonder why the mission trip experience isn't a good essay topic. The answer is two-fold:

1) Students may think it's original because it's the first time they traveled anywhere without their parents and it was a big event in their lives, but the truth is that mission trips, as wonderful as they are, are not unique: they don't set a student apart, and thousands upon thousands of students participate in them every summer.

2) There is almost no good way for a 17-year-old student to write about what they learned or how they felt that doesn't sound trite, cliché or already been said by many other students.

And finally: **Remember that drafts are part of the writing game.** Get your thoughts down and then step away. Come back the next day and make it better. And then do it again. Perseverance will serve you well and put you ahead of many others you're competing against.