

“How to Conquer the College Essay”

Rachel Toor, Guest Essay in *The New York Times*, August 7, 2017

Picture this before you plop yourself down in front of your computer to compose your college application essay: A winter-lit room is crammed with admissions professionals and harried faculty members who sit around a big table covered with files. The admissions people, often young and underpaid, buzz with enthusiasm; the professors frequently pause to take off their glasses and rub their eyes.

These exhausted folks, hopped up from eating too many cookies and brownies, have been sitting in committee meetings for days after spending a couple of months reading applications, most of which look pretty similar: baseball = life, or debate = life, or “I went to a developing country and discovered poor people can be happy.”

They wade through long lists of candidates, state by state, region by region. The best applications and the weakest don’t come to committee. It’s the gigantic stack in the middle that warrants discussion.

The truth is, most essays are typical. Many are boring. Some are just plain bad. But occasionally one will make an admissions officer tear down the hallway to find a colleague to whom she can say, “You have to read what this Math Olympiad girl said about ‘Hamlet.’” Your goal is to write an essay that makes someone fall in love with you.

Once you commit the time and emotional energy to get your butt in the chair to write, you face a daunting task — figuring out what to write about. If you’re stuck, you’re in good company. With so much freedom, this is a challenge for most students.

Here’s a tip: Choose a topic you really want to write about. If the subject doesn’t matter to you, it won’t matter to the reader. Write about whatever keeps you up at night. That might be cars, or coffee. It might be your favorite book or the Pythagorean theorem. It might be why you don’t believe in evolution or how you think kale must have hired a PR firm to get people to eat it.

A good topic will be complex. In school, you were probably encouraged to write papers that took a side. That’s fine in academic work when you’re being asked to argue in support of a position, but in a personal essay, you want to express more nuanced thinking and explore your own clashing emotions. In an essay, conflict is good.

For example, “I love my mom. She’s my best friend. We share clothes and watch ‘The Real Housewives’ of three different cities together” does not make for a good essay. “I love my mom even though she makes me clean my room, hates my guinea pig and is crazy about disgusting food like kale” could lead somewhere

While the personal essay has to be personal, a reader can learn a lot about you from whatever you choose to focus on and how you describe it. One of my favorites from when I worked in admissions at

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Duke University started out, “My car and I are a lot alike.” The writer then described a car that smelled like wet dog and went from 0 to 60 in, well, it never quite got to 60.

Another guy wrote about making kimchi with his mom. They would go into the garage and talk, really talk: “Once my mom said to me in a thick Korean accent, ‘Every time you have sex, I want you to make sure and use a condo.’ I instantly burst into laughter and said, ‘Mom, that could get kind of expensive!’” A girl wrote about her feminist mother’s decision to get breast implants.

A car, kimchi, Mom’s upsizing — the writers used these objects as vehicles to get at what they had come to say. They allowed the writer to explore the real subject: This is who I am.

Don’t brag about your achievements. Instead, look at times you’ve struggled or, even better, failed. Failure is essayistic gold. Figure out what you’ve learned. Write about that. Be honest and say the hardest things you can. And remember those exhausted admissions officers sitting around a table in the winter. Jolt them out of their sugar coma and give them something to be excited about.

10 Things Students Should Avoid

REPEATING THE PROMPT Admissions officers know what’s on their applications. Don’t begin, “A time that I failed was when I tried to beat up my little brother and I realized he was bigger than me.” You can start right in: “As I pulled my arm back to throw a punch, it struck me: My brother had gotten big. Bigger than me.”

LEAVE WEBSTER’S OUT OF IT Unless you’re using a word like “prink” (primp) or “demotic” (popular) or “couloir” (deep gorge), you can assume your reader knows the definition of the words you’ve written. You’re better off not starting your essay with “According to Webster’s Dictionary . . .”

THE EPIGRAPH Many essays start with a quote from another writer. When you have a limited amount of space, you don’t want to give precious real estate to someone else’s words.

YOU ARE THERE! When writing about past events, the present tense doesn’t allow for reflection. All you can do is tell the story. This happens, then this happens, then this happens. Some beginning writers think the present tense makes for more exciting reading. You’ll see this is a fallacy if you pay attention to how many suspenseful novels are written in past tense.

SOUND EFFECTS *Ouch! Thwack! Whiz! Whooooosh! Pow!* Are you thinking of comic books? Certainly, good writing can benefit from a little onomatopoeia. *Clunk* is a good one. Or *fizz*. But once you start adding exclamation points, you’re wading into troubled waters. Do not start your essay with a bang!

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ACTIVE BODY PARTS One way to make your reader giggle is to give body parts their own agency. When you write a line like “His hands threw up,” the reader might get a visual image of hands barfing. “My eyes fell to the floor.” Ick.

CLICHÉS THINK YOUR THOUGHTS FOR YOU Here’s one: There is nothing new under the sun. We steal phrases and ideas all the time. George Orwell’s advice: “Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.”

TO BE OR NOT TO BE Get rid of “to be” verbs. Replace “was” in “The essay was written by a student; it was amazing and delightful” and you’ll get: “The student’s essay amazed and delighted me.” We’ve moved from a static description to a sprightlier one and cut the word count almost in half.

WORD PACKAGES Some phrases — free gift, personal beliefs, final outcome, very unique — come in a package we don’t bother to unpack. They’re redundant.

RULES TO IGNORE In English class, you may have to follow a list of rules your teacher says are necessary for good grammar: Don’t use contractions. No sentence fragments. It’s imperative to always avoid split infinitives. Ending on a preposition is the sort of English up with which teachers will not put. And don’t begin a sentence with a conjunction like “and” or “but” or “because.” Pick up a good book. You’ll see that the best authors ignore these fussy, fusty rules.

Rachel Toor is a creative writing professor at Eastern Washington University in Spokane. This essay is adapted from her new book, “Write Your Way In: Crafting an Unforgettable College Admissions Essay.”