

The application essay: Respect it, but don't fear it



THE INS & OUTS OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

TOM
TONNESEN

As I write, high school seniors across Ozaukee County and the country are laboring on their college applications. It can be a very stressful time for students and parents alike, but nothing strikes more fear in the hearts and minds of students than the writing of the essay(s). On a certain level, this is quite understandable, yet hopeful applicants should view such challenges as opportunities to demonstrate their strengths.

Beyond providing some insights and thoughts about how to approach the essay, allow me to say a few words about the role of the essay in admissions decisions. Essentially, colleges make their determinations based upon quantitative and qualitative factors. The former includes GPA, standardized test scores, class rank (if available) and course rigor. The latter includes extracurriculars, honors and awards, letters of recommendation, community service and – last but not least – the essay(s). Generally, the larger and/or less selective the school, the less important is the essay. In fact, a number of large public universities (e.g., the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities) do not even require one. Conversely, the smaller and/or more selective the school, the greater the essay's role. In fact, such schools may have multiple essays, often found in the Common Apps school-specific supplements. At the more selective schools, nearly all the applicants have exemplary quantitative measures; thus the essay and other qualitative factors can make the difference in being “in or out.” Colleges that pay significant attention to both quantitative and qualitative factors are utilizing “holistic” admissions policies, which can also include demographic considerations such as first-generation college student, race/ethnicity and special talents.

Let us now turn to the writing of the essay. First and foremost, think long and hard about the prompt(s). If you are using the Common Application, you have five from which to choose. Which of these prompts provides you with the greatest opportunity to give colleges a “window” into you? (Seek the ideas and opinions of parents, teachers, friends, etc.) Above all, colleges want to know who you really are. What interests you? What motivates you? What lessons in life have you learned? How have you grown and matured? What are your strengths? What qualities must you still work on? What makes you laugh? Cry? Where do you see yourself in the future? You get the idea ... You should strive to have your essay be introspective, i.e., revealing your inner self so that a college will truly know you and want to “buy the product that you are selling.” Is the essay an exercise in self-marketing? Of course it is, but it should be written with a sense of humility and self-examination (and, perhaps, some self-effacing humor), and avoid any appearance of boastfulness. For schools that do not use the Common App, such as those in the UW System, give much thought to the prompt that is provided (such as UW-Madison's “something in

your life you think goes unnoticed”) and strive to incorporate the same criteria just described.

Many students make the mistake of writing an essay that essentially restates information that can already be found in other sections of the application. By all means, do not provide a monotonous summary of your many activities and accomplishments. Also, avoid the “my summer” topic like the plague. You should approach the essay as the opportunity for colleges to learn some trait(s) about you that cannot be found anywhere else in the application. The essay is the place to personalize and distinguish yourself from all others. Do all that you can to choose a topic that is unique and somewhat atypical; avoid boring and predictable. Be wary of a topic that is too broad. I tell my clients, “Make your topic an inch wide and a mile deep, not vice versa.” Do not fear going somewhat “out on a limb” in both your subject matter and your tone. Exercise prudence, of course, but I read recently that the four-letter word colleges most like to see in their prospective students is “risk.” Keep that in mind as you choose your topic and craft your sentences.

As you write, make sure that you maintain a focus on the prompt. Often, students address the prompt in the first few sentences, but by the end of the essay they have pursued so many side paths that the prompt is virtually indistinguishable. Study the prompt carefully and take note of all of its key words. Attempt to provide responses, answers, and reactions to those words as the paragraphs unfold. In your concluding paragraph, strive to loop back to the prompt and your introductory paragraph. Keep in mind that, both explicitly and implicitly, the college is looking at the essay as a way to judge what you will contribute to their campus community. Thus, you would be wise to gain a sense of each school's mission and values, showing how you would be a good “fit.” Be sure to do in-depth research on each school and perhaps try to mention an academic program, student club/activity or some specific offering that you believe will contribute to your growth as both a student and a person. Remember, a reciprocal relationship exists between a college and each of its students. You will provide value to it; it will provide value to you. Try to have your essay show both sides of this equation. (Note: On the Common App, be extremely careful when mentioning a specific school and some aspect of it. If you do so, send the Common App to one school at a time and be sure the correct version of your essay is attached.)

Finally, proofread, proofread, proofread! Write a first draft, give it a rest for a few days and then look at it again with fresh eyes. Also, have others read it and offer feedback and comments. You have just one shot at this. Once you hit the “nuclear” Submit button, the essay is gone in cyberspace with no chance to retrieve it for another look. Never take the essay lightly, but neither should you tremble under its specter. Embrace the challenge. Show them who you are and why you belong.

Tom Tonnesen is the director of College Admissions Pathways (CAPs) and works with students and their families on the entire college search, admissions, test preparation and financial aid processes. He is a member of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). Contact information: tonnesen@caps2college.com; 377-0302 (home/office); (262) 389-4588 (cell); or www.caps2college.com.