Writing Your College Essay

The College Application Essay – “Do’s”

Before responding to the first essay option on the common application, be sure to consider the 5 tips below. Option 1 asks: Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

1. "Evaluate" -- Make Sure Your Response is Analytical

Read the prompt for option #1 carefully -- you need to "evaluate" an experience, achievement, risk or dilemma. Evaluation requires you to think critically and analytically about your topic. The admissions folks are not asking you to "describe" or "summarize" an experience (although you'll need to do this a little). The heart of your essay needs to be a thoughtful discussion of how the experience affected you. Examine how the experience made you grow and change as a person.

2. A "Significant" Experience Can Be Small

Many students shy away from personal essay option 1 because of the word "significant." Many students feel that they are just 18 years old and nothing "significant" has ever happened to them. This isn't true. If you're 18 years old, even if your life has been smooth and comfortable, you've had significant experiences. Think about the first time you challenged authority, the first time you disappointed your parents or the first time you pushed yourself to do something outside of your comfort zone. A significant risk can be choosing to study drawing; it doesn't have to be about rappelling into an icy chasm to rescue a baby polar bear.

3. Don't Brag About an "Achievement"

The admissions team gets a lot of essays from students about the winning goal, the record-breaking run, the brilliant job in the school play, the stunning violin solo or the amazing job they did as team captain. These topics are fine for essay option 1, but you want to be very careful to avoid sounding like a braggart or egoist. The tone of such essays is critical. An essay that says "the team never could have won without me" is going to rub your reader the wrong way. A college doesn't want a community of self-consumed egoists. The best essays have a generosity of spirit and an appreciation of community and team effort.

4. An "Ethical Dilemma" Doesn't need to be Newsworthy

Think broadly about what can be defined as an "ethical dilemma." This topic doesn't need to be about whether or not to support war, abortion or capital punishment. In fact, the huge topics that dominate national debate will often miss the point of the essay question -- the "impact on you." The most difficult ethical dilemmas facing high school students are often about high school. Should you turn in a friend who cheated? Is loyalty to your friends more important than honesty? Should you risk your own comfort or reputation to do what you think is right? Tackling these personal dilemmas in your essay will give the admissions folks a good sense of who you are, and you will be addressing issues that are central to being a good campus citizen.

5. Reveal Your Character

Always keep in mind why colleges require admissions essays. Sure, they want to see that you can write, but the essay isn't always the best tool for that (it's obviously easy to get professional help with grammar and mechanics). The main purpose of the essay is so that the school can learn more about you. It's the only place on the application where you can really demonstrate your character, your personality, your sense of humor and your values. The admissions folks want to find evidence that you will be a contributing member of the campus community. They want to see evidence of a team spirit, humility, self-awareness and introspection. Essay option #1 works well for these goals if you thoughtfully explore the "impact on you."

College Application Essays – “Don’ts”

Supplemental essays for college applications can take all kinds of forms, but the majority of them are actually asking a very similar question: "Why do you want to go to our college?"

The question sounds simple, but college admissions officers see the five mistakes below all too frequently. As you write your supplemental essay for your college applications, be sure to steer clear of these common blunders.

1. Vague Language - The Essay Is Generic and Lacking Detail

If a college asks you why you want to attend, be specific. Far too many supplemental essays resemble this sample essay from Duke University-- the essay says nothing specific about the school in question. Whatever school you are applying to, make sure your essay addresses the particular features of that school that appeal to you.

2. Length - The Essay Is Too Long

Many prompts for the supplemental essay ask you to write a single paragraph or two. Don't go beyond the stated limit. Also realize that a tight and engaging single paragraph is better than two mediocre paragraphs. The admissions officers have thousands of applications to read, and they will appreciate brevity.

3. Lack of Focus -- The Essay Doesn't Answer the Question

If the essay prompt asks you to explain why the college is a good match for your professional interests, don't write an essay about how your friends and brother go to the school. If the prompt asks you how you hope to grow while in college, don't write an essay about how much you want to earn a bachelor's degree. Read the prompt multiple times before writing, and read it again carefully after you've written your essay.

4. Faulty Tone -- You Sound like a Privileged Snob

"I want to go to Williams because my father and brother both attended Williams..." A better reason to attend a college is because the curriculum matches your academic and professional goals. Essays that focus on legacy status or connections with influential people often fail to answer the question well, and they are likely to create a negative impression.

5. Faulty Tone -- You Sound Too Materialistic

The admissions counselors see a lot of essays that are honest to a fault. Sure, most of us go to college because we want to get a degree and earn a good salary. Don't over-emphasize this point in your essay. If your essay states you want to go to Penn because their business majors earn more money than those from other colleges, you won't impress anyone. You'll sound self-interested and materialistic.

Source: www. About.com

Sample Essay – "solid"

I visited 18 colleges over the past year, yet Oberlin is the one place that most spoke to my interests. Early in my college search I learned that I prefer a liberal arts college to a larger university. The collaboration between the faculty and undergraduate students, the sense of community, and the flexible, interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum are all important to me. Also, my high school experience was greatly enriched by the diversity of the student body, and I am impressed by Oberlin's rich history and its current efforts connected to inclusiveness and equality. To say the least, I'd be proud to say I attended the first coeducational college in the country. I plan to major in Environmental Studies at Oberlin. After my campus tour, I took some extra time to visit the Adam Joseph Lewis Center. It's an amazing space and the students I chatted with spoke highly of their professors. I became truly interested in issues of sustainability during my volunteer work in the Hudson River Valley, and everything I've learned about Oberlin makes it seem the ideal place for me to continue exploring and building upon those interests. I am also impressed by Oberlin's Creativity and Leadership Project. I've been a bit of an entrepreneur ever since second grade when I made a dollar producing and performing The Runaway Bunny for my extended family. I'm drawn to a program that supports the move from classroom learning to creative hands-on, real-world applications. Finally, as the rest of my application clearly demonstrates, music is an important part of my life. I've been playing the trumpet since fourth grade, and I hope to continue performing and developing my skills throughout college. What better place than Oberlin to do so? With more performances than days in the year and a large group of talented musicians in the Conservatory of Music, Oberlin is an ideal place for exploring my love of both music and the environment.

Sample Essay – "excellent"

When I sat down to write this essay, I tried, as my high school English teacher always instructed, to imagine the audience for my writing. The more I thought about it, the more I pitied the college admissions screeners who would be reading a thousand essays on diversity. Along with the expected takes on race and ethnicity, how many of those essays would present their authors as outcasts, loners, kids who didn't fit in at his or her school? How could I present myself as someone unique and interesting—strange, even—without falling prey to the cliché of the self-pitying social misfit?

Let me be direct: in some ways, I am the antithesis of what one might picture as a student who contributes to campus diversity. I am white, middle-class, and heterosexual; I have no physical

handicaps or mental challenges apart from a tendency towards sarcasm. But when I receive college brochures picturing smiling, clean-cut teens dressed in the latest from Abercrombie & Fitch and lounging on a blanket in the sun, I think, those people are not like me.

Simply put, I am a Goth. I wear black, lots of it. I have piercings and ear gauges and tattoos. My hair, naturally the same sandy blonde that the rest of my family shares, is dyed jet, sometimes highlighted in streaks of purple or scarlet. I rarely smile, and I don't do sun. If I were inserted into those brochure photographs of typical college students, I would look like a vampire stalking her wholesome prey.

Again, I am imagining my reading audience, and I can almost see my readers' eyes roll. So you're a little weird, kid. How does that contribute to campus diversity? Well, I think I contribute plenty. Diversity goes beyond the physical; race or ethnicity might be the first things one thinks of, but really, it is a question of what makes someone the person that he or she is. Diversity might be considered in terms of economic or geographical background, life experiences, religion, sexual orientation, and even personal interests and general outlook. In this respect, my Goth identity contributes a perspective that is far different from the mainstream. Being Goth isn't just about physical appearance; it's a way of life that, like any other, includes not only individual tastes in music, literature, and popular culture, but also particular beliefs about philosophy, spirituality, and a range of other human issues. 7

To give just one specific example, I am planning to major in Environmental Studies, and while it might seem odd to picture a ghoulishly-dressed girl who adores the natural world, it was my Goth outlook that led me to this academic interest. I read voraciously, and am drawn to subject matter that is somewhat dark; the more I read about humanity's impact on the planet and the near-apocalyptic dangers posed by global climate change, pollution, overpopulation, the manipulation of the food supply and other environmental threats, the more interested I became, and the more determined that I should become involved. I, along with other members of my school's Environmental Club, started a campus recycling program, and lobbied our superintendent to install in all classrooms power strips that are used to easily shut down equipment such as printers and computers at the end of the day, thereby conserving energy and generating significant savings for our school. I was drawn to this dark subject matter of environmental crisis, not to wallow in it or savor the Schadenfreude, but to change it and make the world a better place.

I know Goths look a little funny, as we wear our ebony trench coats in seventy-degree weather. I know we seem a little odd as we gather in shady nooks to discuss the latest episode of True Blood. I know professors may sigh as we swell the enrollments of poetry and art classes. Yes, we're different. And we—I—have a lot to contribute.

Sample essay – "weak"

I believe the Trinity College of Arts and Sciences at Duke is an excellent match for me. I believe college should not be merely a gateway to the work force; it should educate the student in a variety of subjects and prepare him or her for the range of challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in life. I have always been a curious person and enjoy reading all kinds of literature and nonfiction. In high school I excelled in history, English, AP psychology, and other liberal arts subjects. I have not yet decided on a major, but when I do, it will almost certainly be in the liberal arts, such as history or political science. I know that Trinity College is very strong in these areas. But regardless of my major, I want to receive a broad education that spans a variety of areas in the liberal arts, so that I will graduate as not only a viable job prospect, but also as a well-rounded and learned adult who can make diverse and valuable contributions to my community. I believe Duke's Trinity College will help me grow and become that kind of person.