

Admissions Officers Share Essay Writing tips for Your Students

From Links for Counselors

Written by Kim Lifton

Last fall, during the National Association of College Admission Annual Meeting in Salt Lake City, Duke University Dean of Admissions Christoph Guttentag told me he would like students to answer questions, rather than write beautiful prose in a college admissions essay. He and I had been chatting about all the misinformation on the Internet, inside the schools and elsewhere about the essay when he shared this insight.

After I told him I was a journalist before starting this company, he shared that he has an ongoing disagreement with his wife (also a journalist) about the college essay. She thinks college admissions essays should resemble gorgeous prose; Guttentag just wants the students to write the essays themselves – and show some reflection.

“Students are often so focused on writing beautiful pieces of prose that they fail to answer the question and do not write authentic, meaningful personal statements,” he said. “The hook gets in the way; the writing gets in the way.”

I like to talk to college admissions officers like Guttentag to get insight into the essay and its role inside the complex and competitive admissions field. Over the years, I have discovered that whether they work at large, small, public, private or Ivy schools, admissions representatives want the same thing, no matter how they use them. They want reflective stories written by the student, in the voice of a 17-year-old student.

You already know that colleges use essays to find out if a student is compatible with the educational environment on their campus. But it goes deeper than that. They want to know how a student thinks, what they’ve learned, how they’ve grown. Will they add value to the campus? Will they fit

in? The essay provides admissions with additional insight to help them make admissions decision.

Your job is to let your students know they should write college essays that colleges will want to read to help them make an impression on their reader.

Here are some more tips direct from college admissions offices throughout the U.S.

HEATH EINSTEIN, DEAN OF ADMISSION, TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

“Don’t get hung up on the right topic. Most 17-year-olds haven’t scaled Kilimanjaro, so don’t worry about finding an angle that hasn’t been tried before. Write about what you know. If the most meaningful experience to you has been serving as a camp counselor, it doesn’t matter that other students have addressed it. People will try to talk you out of certain ideas, but trust your gut. Ultimately, be yourself, and that will be good enough.”

TAMARA SILER, SENIOR ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF ADMISSION & COORDINATOR OF MINORITY RECRUITMENT, RICE UNIVERSITY

“Sometimes an essay can be the conduit for a student to reveal something to the admission committee that we would never have thought to ask. In terms of selective admission, personal statements are very important in adding needed texture to an application file. Quantitative factors such as transcripts and test scores only tell part of the story; a personal statement can provide context and truly show why a certain student is a better match than other clearly capable applicants.”

CHANDRA MITCHELL, INTERIM DIRECTOR OF FRESHMAN AND INTERNATIONAL ADMISSIONS, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

Admissions is competitive. Having a strong essay that stands out is important. Tell a story from your life, and demonstrate your character. It is your story, and we want you to speak in your own voice. Make it unique to you. If you want to impress us with content, you don't have to use big words."

**SHAWN FELTON, DIRECTOR OF UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS,
CORNELL UNIVERSITY**

"What are we looking for? We are creating a class. We look at numbers, grades and test scores. But there's more to it. We are trying to put a face with all of this information."

**GREGORY SNEED, VICE PRESIDENT FOR ENROLLMENT
MANAGEMENT, DENISON UNIVERSITY**

"Even after reviewing a mediocre transcript or seeing a limited activities list, **I can be swayed to admit** a student who writes an essay who really blows me away. The topic of the essay doesn't need to be mind-blowing (in fact, the most mundane topics are often the most relatable and enjoyable), but if it reveals someone who would be highly valued in our campus community, that could tip the scales."

**LEONARD SATTERWHITE, SENIOR ASSOCIATE DEAN OF ADMISSIONS,
WASHINGTON & LEE UNIVERSITY**

"How authentic is the voice in the writing? What issues does the student tackle in the essay? Is the writing memorable, and does it illuminate vividly the student's personality, perspective and/ or background? Does the writing reveal deep intellect and the potential to be an academic leader at W&L?"

**JAN DEIKE, VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF
ADMISSIONS**

“Sometimes students feel that because they haven’t found the cure for cancer, they have nothing to share. Life is truly lived in the smaller moments, and that can be a powerful essay.”

**ROBERT SPRINGALL, VICE PRESIDENT FOR ENROLLMENT
MANAGEMENT, MUHLENBERG UNIVERSITY**

“At Muhlenberg, we use the essay to get a better sense of the person behind the application. For strong students, it helps us gauge potential fit with one of our honors programs and eligibility for scholarships. For candidates in the middle of the applicant pool, the essay can help us form better impressions of an applicant’s potential to excel at Muhlenberg.”

**KIM BRYANT, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF
ADMISSIONS**

“This is your interview. Let me know who you really are.”