

Writing Your Admission Essay: Seven Great Tips *from Cambridge Essay Service*

1. YOUR ESSAY IS NOT GRADED BY OLYMPIC JUDGES:

College application essays are not graded like Olympics diving or gymnastics matches where you start with a 10 and lose points for every error.

The essays are not read by tyrants with red pencils, they are read by harassed admissions officers who are looking for an impression. That impression is mostly emotional. The reader of your essay is reaching an emotional conclusion about YOU, not an intellectual conclusion about your topic.

And the very best emotional conclusion that reader can reach is: "I really like this kid."

2. MAKE SURE YOU HAVE ONE GREAT IDEA:

This follows from the first point. The reader of your essay is looking through the writing--and reading very fast by the way--to get to the gist of what you have done with the question. If you have repeated any one of the thousand most frequent ideas [wrestling taught me to concentrate; grandma's death taught me to stop and smell the roses; I like to help others in my community, and thus I help myself], you have not aided your cause on iota, no matter how well written, typed, and proofread your essay is. In fact, adding polish to a routine idea often makes it worse and less personal.

3. YOUR GOOD IDEA SHOULD BE A PERSONAL, SMALL IDEA:

Avoid "BIG TOPICS"-- not only the obvious big topics like peace in the Middle East, ecology, civil rights and general human nature--but also the thousand smaller versions of those BIG IDEAS which slip into an essay as a pasted on "moral". Keep your idea personal, contained and original. If you paste on a "moral"--try to make it unexpected, but somehow "right" for you.

LESS SUCCESSFUL IDEA: I was at camp when Uncle Harry died, and finding out about his life from my parents convinced me what a warm and generous man he was.

BETTER VERSION: The first time I confronted my parents in an adult way was when Uncle Harry died. I was at camp, and they didn't tell me about it for two weeks, thinking I would rather stay at camp than go to his funeral.

COMMENT: The better version is about YOU, not Uncle Harry (who isn't applying for admission) and you now have a concrete, limited, and personal story. In telling that story, the details can show the committee who you are: mature, aware and eager to grow. The "real" story of the essay is not about death, Uncle Harry, or even you arguing with your parents. It's about your success in growing up.

4. MYTH # 1: JUST RELAX AND BE YOURSELF:

The application people love to tell you this but the truth is that you have about as much chance of relaxing and being yourself while writing a college application essay as any untrained person would painting a mural or acting in a movie. Painting and acting are things that anyone can "sort of" do but which require practice and training to do well. So is writing. You have to earn relaxation. You'll start to relax when you feel secure. That usually means after you have written several drafts, and someone knowledgeable has guided you through them.

5. MYTH #2: JUST RELAX AND BE YOURSELF:

Who is yourself? We all have several selves. One for our family, one for our friends, one for formal occasions, one for when we are alone. The snapshot taken while fooling around in your basement with a Polaroid is you, and so is the picture of you as the best man in your brother's wedding. Which picture does the admissions committee want to see? It depends. You have to make a strategic decision. You should be a considered and well executed version of one of your better selves. Which self? The self which is best able to get the job done--the self which can present you as unique and passionate about something important.

6. LOVE IS NOT ALL YOU NEED BUT IF YOU GOT IT, GO WITH IT:

Any topic can be handled well, but if all things are equal, choose an upbeat topic. Write about a passion, not a doubt. Teen anxiety and cynicism are pretty tiresome to admissions officers. If you love something, and you can convey that love with detail and conviction, do it. If you are fortunate enough to really love someone in your family, and you can capture that feeling with anecdotes, dialogue, facts, images and stories--write it. If you are rare enough to love a younger sister or brother, and you can explain why, using anecdotes, dialogue, facts, images and stories--and in the same essay tell us something important about you--your chances of getting in anywhere just got a big boost.

7. THE TWO EFFECTIVE AND SIMPLE RHETORICAL DEVICES LEAST USED BY COLLEGE ENTRANCE ESSAY WRITERS:

1. Dialogue:

Weak Version: Mrs. Von Crabbe, my piano teacher, taught me more than just how to play the piano. Her lessons were filled with advice that one could use in life. Even though her English was often just a little off, and her manner seemed odd, she will always be memorable to me.

Better Version: "Alex," Mrs. Von Crabbe would say, "the concert is starting even so before you sit down on the bench." She had told us the first day never to call her Mrs. Von Crabbe Apple "even with my back in the behind." But how could we? We loved and feared her too much.

Comment: Both essays could become weak essays if the only point they made was that Mrs. Von Crabbe was wonderful. The second essay, however, rich in quotation and detailed memory, has the promise of letting the reader "hear" Alex, the writer, and like him. Having the reader like you is probably the best kept secret of college essay writing. No, you are not expected to be able to write as well as the Better Version, most professors can't do that, but remembering to directly quote the key people in your essay will put you on the right path.

2. Facts

Which one of these sentences is better?

A. I live in a suburb outside a big city where half the property is conservation land, and the other half is large plot houses.

B. I live in Lincoln, Massachusetts, a town 15 miles west of Boston, where half the property is conservation land, and the other half is large plot houses.

Comment: Both sentences are OK, but B is better. Readers are nosy, they want to know the name of the town. Do not say "my father works for a big law firm in a big city" as if you were writing a bad version of the Great American Novel and were fearful that any real details might limit the "timelessness and universality" or your masterpiece. Write: "My father works for Arnold & Porter, a large law firm in Washington, D.C." Of course, there's always the possibility of too much detail. "Large law firm" in the sentence above could itself be "a 340 member law firm with branches in 12 cities [and you could name the cities]." There can be too much detail, but that flaw is extremely rare in high school writing.