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Craft an Essay That Will Delight Admissions Officers

By Lynn O'Shaughnessy

If you have a teen who will be applying to colleges soon, make sure to work on admission essays well before the hectic onset of their senior year. Help them improve their essays—a critical admission factor—with some advice from experts.

Getting an early start—say in the summer—is essential for rising high school seniors writing their college essays. When school starts, seniors are going to be overwhelmed with classes, activities, and applying to colleges. Taking advantage of free time when it's available is vital.

Depending on the school, the admission essay can be a critical element in determining whether a student will get in or not. Here are some tips for crafting an essay that will grab admissions officers' attention right away and stand out.

DON'T BORE THE ADMISSIONS READERS WITH A DULL OPENING LINE!

During admission season, admissions reps often have to read dozens of essays a day. It's inevitable that they are going to start blurring together, which is why applicants need to make theirs stand apart.

What follows are examples of the opening essay lines of successful Stanford applicants that the university's admissions reps particularly liked:

- I have old hands.
- I change my name each time I place an order at Starbucks.
- As an Indian-American, I am forever bound to the hyphen.
- Some fathers might disapprove of their children handling noxious chemical in the garage.
- When I was in eighth grade, I couldn't read.
- I've been surfing Lake Michigan since I was three years old.
- Unlike many mathematicians, I live in an irrational world; I feel that my life is defined by a certain amount of irrationalities that bloom too frequently, such as my brief foray in front of 400 people without my pants.

These read much more like the opening line of a best-selling novel off the shelf of Barnes and Noble than the usual stuffy essay, don't they?

Some of the best essay advice I've gotten has come from Parke Muth, a former assistant dean of admissions at the University of Virginia and now an independent college consultant. Here is what he said:

"Most students think of their college essay as a major motion picture. They feel they need to cover the highlights (or, too often, the tragedies) of years of experience. The problem is that to write about a life in 500 words will result in a cinematic long shot. We in admission offices see little tiny figures dancing on the horizon but they are too far away for it to be personal. It is a shadow play that even Plato would be wary of.

I tell students it is not a movie they are making but a Nike ad. The time it takes me to read 500 words is about the time it takes me to watch a Nike ad.

I like Nike ads. Why? It isn't about the fact that they have spent years in research trying to find the best materials. No, it is the close-up and the sweat...

Can I hear, see, touch, taste, and sometimes even smell what the world they live in is like? Not the whole world but a thin slice. Make a moment represent something bigger. The universal is in the particular, as the poets would put it."

COLLEGE ESSAY NO-NO

Parents can feel relieved if English teachers have seniors write their college essays in class. But you shouldn't be!

English teachers know the formulaic rules of writing an English paper, but they often don't know how to craft a compelling and attention-grabbing essay.

Here are two excellent sources that will show students how to write a winning college admission essay:

Essay Hell. This website is the brain child of Janine Robinson, a former reporter with the Miami Herald and Orange County Register. It offers invaluable information for students via its amazing blog. Essay Hell also offers online essay-writing boot camps and other resources.

College Essay Guy. This website belongs to Ethan Sawyer, a nationally recognized college essay expert. Each year he helps thousands of students and college counselors through his blog, online courses and other products.

ESSAY PROMPTS AVAILABILITY

One reason why it's possible for many students to get a jump on their essays is because the essay prompts are released early every year for the Common Application, which more than 800 colleges use.

The Common App offers students seven different essay topics, including the most popular option: "Write about whatever you want."

Any adult can create a practice account to view the online application.

So you and your kid(s) should take a look now, while there is still plenty of time to relax and mull over those 500 precious words.

Lynn O'Shaughnessy is a nationally recognized college expert, higher education journalist, consultant, and speaker.

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