

## Personal Essay

Advice from Jim Montoya, Director of Admissions, Stanford University

- 👉 Essays are usually read twice--If admissions reader recommends on first read--Good Sign!!
- 👉 Stanford uses teacher recommendations and student essays to aid them in making a "good match."
- 👉 Here's the best advice he can give you:
  1. Answer the Question
  2. Consider the audience--(Colleges need to do a better job of letting students know who is reading.)
  3. "Tell a Story"--that only you can tell.
  4. "Tell a Story"--in your own voice.
  5. "Tell a Story"--Be specific rather than general. Be Concrete rather than abstract.

### 👉 What Not To Do:

1. Do not make essay a resume in prose.
  2. Avoid gimmicks
  3. Don't make it too long.
- 👉 What the University of Washington is looking for:
1. Writing Skill
  2. Evidence of Diversity--What can't be told on the application form with the loss of Affirmative Action.
  3. Student has overcome obstacles--Evidence of need--What can't be told on the application form
  4. Activities/Outside Interests

Pfeifer

## ESSAY TIPS

### WHEN YOU WRITE YOUR ESSAY....

- DO start early. Leave plenty of time to revise, reword, and rewrite. You can improve on your presentation.
  - DO read the directions carefully. You will want to answer the question as directly as possible, and you'll want to follow work limits exactly. Express yourself as briefly and as clearly as you can.
  - DO tell the truth about yourself. The admission committee is anonymous to you; you are completely unknown to it. Even if you run into a committee member in the future, he will have no way of connecting your essay (out of the thousands he has read to you).
  - DO focus on an aspect of yourself that will show your best side. You might have to overcome some adversity, worked through a difficult project, or profited from a specific incident. A narrow focus is more interesting than broad-based generalizations.
  - DO feel comfortable in expressing anxieties. Everybody has them, and it's good to know that an applicant can see them and face them.
  - DO tie yourself to the college. Be specific about what this particular school can do for you. Your essay can have different slants for different colleges.
  - DO speak positively. Negatives tend to turn people off.
  - DO write about your greatest assets and achievements. You should be proud of them!
- But...:
- DON'T repeat information given elsewhere on your application. The committee has already seen it--and it looks as though you have nothing better to say.
  - DON'T write on general, impersonal topics--like nuclear arms race or the importance of good management in business. The college wants to know about you.
  - DON'T use the personal statement to excuse your shortcomings. It would give them additional attention.
  - DON'T use clichés.
  - DON'T go to extremes: too witty, too opinionated, or too "intellectual."
- REMEMBER...
- The personal statement is YOURS. If it looks like Madison Avenue, the admission committee will probably assume that it is your mother's or your father's or their secretaries' work.
- A "gimmick" essay rarely goes anywhere. The committee may be amused but unimpressed with your candidacy.

Write a serious essay, from the bottom of your heart, in the most mature manner possible.

## SEVEN GREAT AND UNEXPECTED TIPS ABOUT COLLEGE ENTRANCE ESSAYS

### 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 one 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 passed 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" of 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.

## QUESTIONS FOR THE WRITER

### Choosing the Subject:

1. Find something you can connect with (any experience with the subject?)
2. Has a close relative or friend had experience with the subject?
3. Can you draw on specific details in relation to this subject?

### Detecting Signs of Egocentricity (a form of ignorance: ignoring the audience):

Check for the following:

1. Using jargon, slang, or special terms that your audience would not know
2. Assuming the writer's point of view is universally shared
3. Withholding basic information that the writer takes for granted, but which could only be known by the writer or someone with the same background or experience
4. Assuming that the audience already knows what the writer is talking about - hence no elaboration is needed

### Considering the Intended Audience:

Areas the Writer Should Consider:

1. The audience in its environment (Who is the intended audience?)
  - age, social, economic background
  - cultural and educational background
  - values and concerns (learning, society, spirituality, etc.)
2. The writer's subject in relation to the audience
  - current level of knowledge about the subject
3. The writer's relationship to the audience (Is the writer's stance clear?)
  - audience's stance toward the writer (positive, negative, neutral?)
  - any shared interests, beliefs, goals?
  - What is the audience's purpose in reading the writer's work? What do they expect?
4. The writer's product in relation to the audience and its expectations
  - Tone?
  - Word choice and level of formality?

R. Pfeifer

programs that take students into the home of a foreign family to live. But wherever they are, 99 percent of the travelers seem determined to ignore the small and homely (but significant) details around them in favor of sweeping banalities: "I had to adjust to a whole new way of life. The first thing I noticed was the food, which was very different, as were all the customs; my adopted family's habits were quite different from anything I was used to, but, by the end of my stay, I had come to accept them. I realized that neither I nor they were wrong, but simply different." These essays, as you may be able to guess by now, are *not* very different. It seems that all writers of The Trip "eventually got used to all the cultural differences" and "finally felt like part of the family." But where are the colors and textures and flavors of something seen and experienced fresh?

These travels, of course, "broadened my horizons" and "gave me a new perspective on my native land, the United States." Often, applicants report that living in a foreign country, whose language they had been studying in school, "increased my fluency and facility immensely." Surprise!

Also well trampled are the Trip paths leading to vague forms of self-discovery in far-flung ancestral homelands. "I got a very religious feeling from the Sistine Chapel and I was proud to be an Italian." These essays usually show the strong influence of the brochures and airplane travel magazines from which they were lifted. At the end of the Ancestral Trip, writers swell with pride and platitudes at having "learned more than I ever could in history class about my cultural heritage."

Even wilderness trips, like Outward Bound, can somehow get boiled down into this soggy formula. "On my trip to the Grand Tetons, I learned to work with people and stretch my abilities to the utmost." Change the first phrase to "In my work as a terrorist," and the sentiment still holds.

2. *My Favorite Things*. This "list" essay (most lists are bad) is usually written in a hand which dots its *i*'s with little circles and often takes off from an opening something like, "Things I am for: puppy dogs, freedom, big soft pillows, and Mrs. Field's cookies. Things I am against: nuclear war, pimples, racial discrimination,

### 3 Danger: Sleepy Prose Ahead (or, The Sandman Cometh)

Now you've gotten a glimpse of the road your application will travel and had a peek at your reading audience. You've seen the piles of folders that fill up their houses and their lives like big clumps of fallen leaves over a sewer, a blockage that naturally begins to affect the flow of minor details like eating and sleeping. You know that when they're poring bug-eyed over twenty or thirty or forty applications a day, they're liable to let sleeping essays lie. And *your* application may be in that stack—it may be number thirty-eight. Your first job, then, is this: prevent them from falling asleep.

Go back to the writer's questions: What kind of piece is it? The word essay comes from the French word that means "attempt." It's a short piece not intended to exhaust the subject—or the reader. Even among essays, the college essay is a form all its own, with conventions and clichés that admissions officers like Henry Haggard, lying catatonic at midnight on couches all across the country, know only too well. You, as a practitioner of the form, should know them too, and steer clear. (Admissions officers may be tired, but it's hardly your responsibility to *help* them catch up on sleep.) Let's rummage into Henry Haggard's bag for some of the most common snooze potions whipped up by seniors. We don't have to dig very deep:

1. *The Trip*. This is the one about the visit to Europe, Israel, Kansas, or other exotic land. Applicants make The Trip in the company of family, peers, or even alone in one of the many

spinach." Written by males and females alike, it is the unmistakable sign of what is called, in admissions lingo, the Fluffball.

3. *Miss America*. The Big Issue questions, like "Please comment on an issue of national or international concern," lead a lot of people into this trap. "I think World Peace is the most important issue facing us today . . ." and so on like a beauty queen. Equally flimsy stuff pops up about almost any front-page issue—apartheid, Nicaragua, nukes.

At best these pieces sound like the small-town editorials of outraged old ladies. The arguments, no matter how powerfully right you feel, no matter how seriously you study the topic in school or debate it across the dinner table, are plagiaristic and generic. Admissions committees do not want to know how slavishly you can regurgitate views of parents, teachers, or national news magazines.

4. *Jock*. This is not a topic as much as a whole way of thinking, so it is certainly not confined to essays by big-necked boys who breathe through their mouths. It seems to have spread like mildew into writing on every activity students pursue and is by far the most common approach among earnest and intelligent students trying too hard to impress an admissions committee. Musicians, actors, lab interns, yearbook editors, club officers—students from every walk of high school life have succumbed to the questionable charms of the Jock essay, flocking like doomed ducks to a wooden decoy. Still, though, scholar-athletes sound its most familiar and resonant note: "Through wrestling I have learned to set goals, to go all out, and to work with people." Now *that's* a frightening prospect.

Anyone can (and too many do) fill in this formula: Through blank (piano playing, spider collecting, touch typing) I have learned Noble Value A, High Platitude B, and Great Lesson C. The result affects an admissions officer like Valium and doesn't show anything about you, except that you may have succeeded in spending seventeen happy, thought-free years.

5. *My Room*. A common variation on number two. "I don't know what to tell you about myself, so I guess I'll describe my

room. That just about says it all." This opening is followed by a highlighted tour up and down the room's Himalayas of records, baseball gloves, and miscellaneous junk, accompanied by some self-conscious (and very old) jokes about messes and cleanliness: "Anyway, a clean desk is the sign of an empty mind." So is this essay.

6. *Three D's*. Another recipe that tries to tell readers what to think of you. "I honestly believe that I have the discipline and determination and diversity of interests to succeed at whatever I do." Maybe. But probably not at the college that receives an essay beginning with that line, because those three D's equal one more: *dull*.

7. *Tales of My Success* (or, *The Time I Won My Town the Race*). A particularly deadly Jock/Three D combination. "But, finally, when I crossed the finish line first and received the congratulations of my teammates, I realized all the hard work had been worth it." Why must all stories of sports, elections, and other "challenges" (there's another cliché for you) end on a note of Napoleonic triumph? Or, if not triumph, then the righteous tone of the principled crusader who stood for what was right but, alas, went down to defeat.

8. *Pet Death*. Maudlin descriptions of animal demise, always written by the Fluffball. "As I watched Buttons's life ebb away, I came to value the important things in this world."

9. *Selling and Telling—Autobiography*. Trying to say anything meaningful about a whole life in five hundred words can reduce any writer to absurdity. But if your essay begins, "Hello, my name's . . ." your application is going into the pile with the old potato chips. If you've gotten anything out of this book so far, you probably won't make such a simple gaffe, though every year a surprising number of perfectly capable students do.

Most of the other autobiographical strategies are only slightly better. "I am a very unique person with many interests and abilities and goals," is one dreary classic. Would you want to read three hundred of those?

The Family Salute is another. "I come from a close-knit

family. I have a very close relationship with my parents and siblings"—not sisters and brothers, notice—"and my eighty-three-year-old grandmother and I are especially close." The writer's parents may have been close for years (once, at least, they were very close) and are probably standing close behind her as she writes her essay. But admissions officers do not get close to the writer, her eyes and ears and mind and heart.

One more word about the pitfalls of the autobiography. I knew an admissions officer who used to pick up his pencil when he noticed too many sentences beginning with a capital *I*. Then he'd start circling them. When the total number of circles got too high for him to bear, he simply recommended a reject and went on to the next file.

Henry Haggards nationwide are snoring like polar bears over all these essays because students writing them are still asking, "What do they want on those college essays?" The point is, you can't force the committee into liking you. You can't tell them what to think. Admissions officers are unusually well equipped with a device Ernest Hemingway prescribed for writers: "a built-in shock-proof shit detector." They're awfully hard to snow with strategies of any kind—no one hates the hard sell more than an admissions officer.

By now, you may be thinking I've blown all your ideas out of the water. Hang on. There are ways to get them to like you without a lot of advertising talk and salesmanship, without signing yourself a sampling of virtues you think sound good, without empty take-no-chances rhetoric. In fact, getting rid of all those things improves your prospects immediately.

How do you do it? What's left to write about?  
Everything.

## WRITING

Jean K. Ahrens (question 1a.)

There's a modest garage in Ely, Minnesota, where a spare old man works with wonderful rough hands to create art for a lucky few. Out of his shop come streamlined forms, only seven a year. Each is handcrafted: unique in its quirks and characteristics. As with every artist his passion is for his work, but he shapes pieces never seen on museum walls. His weathered hands build wood and canvas canoes.

I move by canoe. We guide each other through untamed wilderness to lands as yet unseen by my eyes. Many of my summers have been spent navigating the wilds, secure in the hull of a canoe. Stories of amazing adventure and tireless traveling could be told, and they sparkle in my thoughts. But, there is so much more to my love of canoes than the tales of the trail. It's the feeling in my heart when I pick up the paddle and silently move through the water. The swinging rhythm of paddling has become second nature to me: an action as routine as breathing. A favorite author, Sigurd Olson, wrote, "The movement of a canoe is like a reed in the wind. Silence is a part of it, and the sounds of lapping water, bird songs, and wind in the trees. It is a part of the medium through which it floats, the sky, the water, the shores. A man is part of his canoe and therefore part of all it knows." Canoes reflect my image: both quiet, steady, and strong, yet extremely fragile. By this I mean, we can stand the test of time, but are easily damaged when not respected. The misuse of canoes can lead to minor scratches, fractured ribs, or water permeable holes. Through experience, I've learned the importance of respect for canoes, for myself, and for others. It is hard for me to understand how people can disregard other's opinions solely because they differ from one's own. I believe that everyone has the right to speak their mind and have people listen. Canoes respond willingly to my thoughts and direction; it remains my responsibility to respect their limitations. 4.

Jean K. Ahrens (question 1a. cont.)

Canoes give me hunger for movement. Slipping through the water, the balanced contours inspire journeys far beyond the physical aspects of travel. My heart and soul change with the surroundings. When rhythm is established, I take the chance to think about myself: who I am, where I am going, who I want to be. These times of introspection lent the frame for my personality. They built me into the traveler I am today. I love journeying from place to place, seeing new sights and experiencing the adventures that come with them. But, traveling within the familiar is also important to me. There have been many challenging waters in my journeys, but I am learning to weather them out. I am a sojourner in my life, determined to live it to the fullest.

The beauty of canoes has done more than give me life experiences; I am a different person because of them. More aware of how I treat possessions and people, I grow increasingly introspective, thoughtful, stronger and confident. Most importantly, I am inspired to accept life's adventures and everything that may happen. My artist friend's incredible creation of wood and canvas challenges me to further explore the unseen lands.

Julie Froese

Mrs. Pfeifer

English AP 7

October 27, 1997

#### An Appliance's World

I am a refrigerator. I am an upright appliance that nervously hums of uncertainty. My door, when closed, prominently displays accomplishments that I hope everyone who passes by would see. The magnets, people's general perception of me, cover the multitude of pictures that display, oftentimes, insincere happiness. There are random drawings on my front that exhibit my seemingly lost talent in the area of art. Hidden behind the door, only offered to those brave enough to crack the vacuum seal, lies the food of my true personality. The grazers pick and choose those that appeal to their current appetite. Some foods are neglected because people cannot eat everything all at once. Some edibles seem to appeal to every hungry visitor.

The dark yellow, square-shaped cheese sense of humor sits proudly on my top shelf attracting most because of its easy access. Others find the sack of honesty pears, though not the favorite of the majority, they are refreshing, juicy treasures that sustain the famished. Less notable are my carton of love eggs that are available only to people who are willing to take the time to cook them. Some seekers avoid them altogether because of their fragility and messy contents. A loyalty can of soda finds itself on my middle shelf. Quenching the thirst of anyone who opens it is the loyalty soda's allure. Hidden from everyone but the deepest diggers is the casserole of obsession. It remains in the back of my bottom shelf, seldom discovered but so undesirable that even the hungriest hunter is prone to reject it because of its unpleasant odor and appearance. Also out of sight is the sour milk of loneliness, which is the result of its own being

Closing my large door and opening my heart freezer door remains another experience for the incomprehensibly courageous scavenger. Inside lies the frozen mead of embarrassing moments that only my family would recognize, if they, to my dismay, remembered that it was there. More unrecognizable and out of complete view is my spaghetti sauce of secrets, that only I know about and even the most starving individual will not uncover. Stepping away from me and pondering my contents, people can make the decision to take what I offer or they can choose to search the cupboard to find something more to their own personal liking. I can live with that. I cannot change what is inside of me but I hope to have the opportunity to share some of it. My light will not turn on until a searcher decides to pull me open anyway.



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28 (M 2187 CENTRAL) May 1999

# Riding

by Mari Waterman, Spokane, WA

*Describe your life experiences, including such things as growing up in an unusual environment or overcoming personal and educational barriers.*

I see emerald pastures broken only by pristine white fences and gleaming ivory, chestnut and bay figures grazing. The indoor arena towers in the distance, but my eye is distracted by the figure who abruptly flies into motion, inspiring others to join in a swirling mass of horseflesh. Wait ... only in a dream does this scene belong to me.

Reality is utilitarian gray wire topped by box wire to enclose long, dirt extensions jetting from homely stalls. My riding equipment hangs in a separate but equally dilapidated building some distance from the horses. While one horse's momentum often carries the others into sudden dashes down the fence line, their muddy, unruly coats do not meld into one body. Instead five distinct blurs vainly rush toward freedom divided by hard twisted metal. This stark world is my second home. Untouched by pretension, I thrive and challenge myself in this environment.

In some circles horseback riding constitutes the finishing touches on a social butterfly's education. Sandwiched between tea and the evening's social obligation, riding affords dainty excellence, not to mention exclusivity because of the price tag. I challenge this stereotype. My barn gives me an excuse

to get dirty, sweaty and constantly push myself to reach higher goals.

Nonconformity also exists in my whole relationship with my horse. I do not regard him as an object to advance myself socially; he is my teacher, my student and my cohort. Teachers who truly touch the soul in tandem with teaching influence students the most. Thus, while I do not discount the influence of my credentialled teachers, I contend that my horse, Sixer's Comet, teaches me more about myself than anyone else.

As I scrutinize the content animal devouring his brain mash, I see signs of the thin and ungainly bay horse who first entered my life. The under-muscled


lepline and undisguised hip bones remind me of what we have been through. I recall our beginnings: both had little muscle in the way of experience and ample, plainly visible naivety. In retrospect, I see that my flaw lay in a child's storybook perception of a maiden taming the wild beast.

I smile wryly at our first encounter and remember my unexpected visit to the ground. Either stubbornly or stupidly, I persevered through bumps and bruises, aching muscles, vet bills for colic, as well as parental concerns. I shudder as I recollect the frustration when Comet began to buck me off again. I believed the only thing he would teach me was how to fly through the air. Sighing, I gaze at him fondly, thankful that, with the help of my trainer, we subdued the cur-shyness, the bucks and the illness.

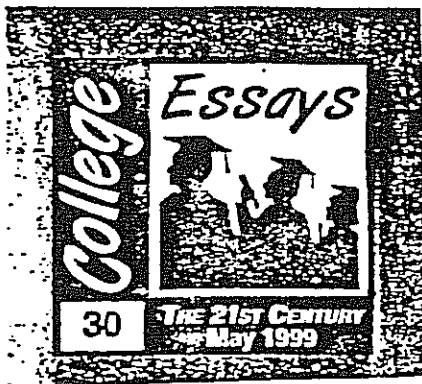
Comet reluctantly removes his snout from the bran bucket long enough to peer at me. His look

suggests my reluctance to cast aside the dream of the devoted horse, as opposed to his pride in having demonstrated that wild beasts prefer their maidens in the dirt rather than on their backs for a perfect jumping course. Relieved that I am not a fair maid-en nor he a wild beast, we work as a balanced team. On our most focused days, we can jump a course with one mind dictating our actions while a united body obeys the impulses. Even on bad days, glimpses of excellence emerge despite the unnecessary dismounts or awkward fences. We converse without saying anything, listen without hearing and understand each other's subtle movements. He repeatedly teaches me to get down from my high horse, yet he cannot escape my commands by unseating me.

He snorts as if to say we have not worked through everything, forgetting that patience defines our success and underlies all human relationships as well. I remind him we have worked through his uncontrollable energy by changing his diet - less sugar. But colic, a potentially fatal intestinal condition, continues to plague us.

Comet cranes his neck toward me in an attempt to procure more carrots. I offer my empty hands and he turns away dejectedly, but not without first leaving a slobber of bran mash on the sleeve of my jacket. I absurdly envision Comet at a blackboard. A teacher? Sure. In our arena he teaches me to master my fear, stay on a bucking horse by soundly believing I can, feel the exhilaration of winged flight in unison and sometimes to take myself less seriously and accept imperfections. 

# The 21ST Century



## Childhood Books

by Maia Newell-Large, Spokane, WA


In my room, I have a shelf with only one purpose: to hold books. Not just any books — here I house my collection of Brambly Hedge and Winnie-the-Pooh. In a tote bag on my floor are Nancy Drew books, always and forever favorites. These books make up an important part of me; they are the child that I never really was. When people ask my age, I answer "17 going on 27." But when I sit down with *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *Sea Story* or *The Clue in the Jewel Box*, I am 17 going on seven. I love children's books, love everything about them, an attribute rarely associated with me. They are my refuge. When I feel swamped with Dostoevsky, Chaucer, Machiavelli and Locke, I can escape for a while into a magical world, the realm of a child. People do not guess this about me, and sometimes I hate to tell them. I do not want my tiny island of Milne invaded by the almighty wind of Shakespeare, so I keep the two separate, turning to the one only when the other threatens to blow me over.

I try to read one or two Nancy Drews on a Saturday just because it is the weekend, just because I

ended a week of school, just because. I love them not only for their escapism,

but also for the predictability. No matter what, Pooh solves the problem; no matter what, the mice of Brambly Hedge fall sound asleep; no matter what, Nancy Drew captures the bad guys and everyone laughs happily.

This stability is something for which I am thankful. In a world of AIDS, schoolyard shootings, terrorism, impeachment, poverty and nuclear power, when the balance seems to hang precariously and even Eris is falling off her perch, it is wonderful to know I can still count on something to turn out right in the end. I read my books seriously. If I can't laugh at myself for that, what else can I do?

Children's books often receive their classification because they teach are geared for the intellect of children. But my children's books help me understand how to enjoy life, to laugh at myself, to cherish friendship, to relish simple things like saying "Happy Thursday." And these things, things I didn't learn in school, but instead from the wisdom of industrious mice, a teen detective and a silly old bear. I will never forget. 

# Three Real Essays

Two That Work, and One that Doesn't

## 1. An essay about your choice of subject

Adults tend to label adolescence as a difficult stage in development, but adults often have trouble knowing just how to help teenagers with their problems. Some of my friends realized that we were the ones best suited to helping one another with our growing pains. We would sit informally and discuss problems that seemed monstrous to us, but when we analyzed them we discovered that they were not so unusual or upsetting. Based on that realization,

we decided to formalize our discussions and open a peer counseling center

where any student could come to discuss any problem. My experience in peer counseling has helped me to mature and develop new interpersonal skills, and I have gained confidence in my ability to handle my problems more successfully in the future.

When I first became involved in peer counseling, I was the one receiving help. When my brother, John, had informed me and my parents that he was not going to attend college, I felt an increased burden to achieve to compensate for my brother's lack of motivation. As a result, I became depressed. I discussed my problem with other students in the peer-counseling center, and realized that I was placing an unnecessary burden on myself because, in reality, my parents never asked me to work harder. I simply felt guilty about my brother's decision, and that caused my depression.

By working through this problem, I realized the value of sharing my concerns and decided to help the

other students feel better about themselves. When my friend told me about the problems she had at home with her mother and her stepfather, I asked her to come to the center. At first she was reluctant to reveal herself because she was afraid others would not understand, but her need to share was more compelling. The example of my own success helped me to persuade my friend that by discussing her problems she could deal with her situation at home more effectively and also feel better about herself. As one of her peer counselors, I was able to understand her needs. As a result, I could help her formulate a plan of action to overcome her difficulties.

I know that the experience I have gained through peer counseling will be of use to me in whatever career I pursue. The ability to listen, analyze, and develop a plan of action is essential to everyday problem solving. I am confident that when I go away to school I will be able to deal with my problems and share my strength with others.

### What Works

This writer knows what she wants to tell us. She participated in a meaningful activity, which helped her grow up. She provides concrete examples, and frames her ideas in a straightforward and organized way.

### What Could Be Better

Perhaps because of length requirements, the writer doesn't include details that may help the reader understand the depth of her experience. Instead of telling us a story, and letting us draw the conclusion that she has matured, she spells it out for us in a way that makes this essay a dry read.

## Essay Editing Checklist

Make sure the following statements are true for your essay.

- You can clearly state the point of your essay.
- Your writing stays focused on this point.
- You answered the question you were asked.
- Your first two sentences are engaging; they make you want to continue reading.
- Your conclusion sums up the essay.
- The words you use came from your heart, not a thesaurus.
- You avoided the passive voice.
- You carefully proofread for grammar and spelling.
- Two other people have read and critiqued your essay.
- Every sentence has a reason for being there.
- Anyone who reads your essay will know it's about you and by you.
- The essay sounds like you, not someone you think you should be.

## Web Surfing for Essay Help

These two sites offer excellent, ethical help with your essay:

<http://www.ivyessays.com/undergrad/index.html>

E-mail in your essay and get a substantial letter back offering criticism and suggestions. The site charges \$75 for one critique, up to \$400 for a former admissions officer to guide you through the whole process.

<http://www.northfork.com/essaywiz/> The Essay Wizard is a former teacher who "won't write it for you." You first click through about 10 pages of advice. Then the Wizard can critique your essay—\$50 for a one-time critique, \$75 for the whole process.

## 2. An Essay About a Childhood Experience

A creek is no place for shoes. I think it's unreasonable to ask children to keep their shoes on in such a place. My bare feet were always covered with calluses from walking down the rough pavement of Peardale Street and around the corner, past the weeping willows, but not as far as the Lindsays' squeaky old swing set. It was hard to see from the road, and as far as I could tell, nobody ever went there—except for me. Large pines nearby stood tall and erect, looking down at the ripples and currents that nudged each other playfully, like the children in the back seat of a car on a long drive. Stones and pebbles lined the shallow bottom and allowed the water to glide in creative patterns over their smooth surfaces. Larger, moss-covered rocks dotted the bank and provided ideal spots for a child to sit and watch and wonder.

The creek taught me things; it was my mentor. Once I discovered tadpoles in the eddies and pools that lined the small rivulet. A cupped hand and a cleaned-out mayonnaise jar aided me in scooping up some of the more slothful individuals. With muddy hands and knees, I set them on the kitchen counter, and watched them daily as they developed into tiny frogs. I was fascinated by what was taking place before my eyes, but new questions puzzled me. Dad was usually responsible for assuaging these curiosities. He told me about different kinds of metamorphosis and how other tiny creatures lived in the water that I couldn't see without a fancy magnifying glass.

By the creek, my mind was free to wander. I remember sitting on a mossy rock and watching the birds; I used to pretend I was one. As my body lay still, my imagination would take flight. High above, looking down on the stream from the heavens, the wind whistled over my face and the sun warmed my body. When my eyes flickered open, it was usually time to go home. Sometimes I even did.

I was always up for a challenge. My

sister and I used to jump from rock to rock, in a kind of improvised hopscotch obstacle course that tested our balance and agility against one another. She was four years older, and I had to practice every morning when she was at school in order to keep up. On the rare occasions that I outdid her, I wore a goofy smirk for the rest of the day.

The creek was frontier. The stream extended far into the depths of the woods. I thought that if I wandered too far into its darkness, I might be consumed and never heard from again.

**"What's most important is for you to write about something you care about."**

—Chris Ellertson, Director of Admissions,  
Trinity University, Texas

Gradually overcoming my fear, I embarked on expeditions and drafted extensive maps, using my father's old compass, a sheet of paper, and a few colored pencils. As my body grew in height and weight, my boundaries grew in extent and breadth.

Years later, I happened to be walking to a friend's house by way of the creek. It occurred to me that what was once an expedition was now merely a shortcut. Although I had left this stream behind, I found others: new questions and freedoms, new challenges and places to explore. But this creek would remain foremost in my memory, whatever stream, river, or ocean I might wade.

### What Works

This essay is intricately detailed, which allows the reader to experience vicariously what the writer is describing. Each paragraph starts with a straightforward sentence, letting us know what the writer has gained from her connection to this special place.

### What Could Be Better

What are the "new questions and freedoms, new challenges and places to explore"? A few choice details extending this last section would round out this essay.

CP English  
Personal Essay

*This article appeared in Harper's Magazine August 1990 issue.*

*This essay, by Hugh Gallagher, won first prize in the humor category of the 1990 Scholastic Writing Awards. It appeared in the May issue of Literary Cavalade, a magazine of contemporary fiction and student writing published by Scholastic in New York City. Gallagher, who is eighteen, grew up in Newtown Square, Pennsylvania, and will attend New York University this fall.*

In order for the admissions staff of our college to get to know you, the applicant, better, we ask that you answer the following question: Are there any significant experiences you have had, or accomplishments you have realized, that have helped to define you as a person?

I am a dynamic figure, often seen scaling walls and crushing ice. I have been known to remodel train stations on my lunch breaks, making them more efficient in the area of heat retention. I translate ethnic slurs for Cuban refugees. I write award-winning operas. I manage time efficiently. Occasionally, I tread water for three days in a row.

I woo women with my sensuous and godlike trombone playing. I can pilot bicycles up severe inclines with unflagging speed, and I cook Thirty-minute brownies in twenty minutes. I am an expert in stucco, a veteran in love, and an outlaw in Peru.

Using only a hoc and a large glass of water, I once single-handedly defended a small village in the Amazon Basin from a horde of ferocious army ants. I play bluegrass cello. I was scouted by the Mets. I am the subject of numerous documentaries. When I am bored, I build large suspension bridges in my yard. I enjoy urban hang gliding. On Wednesdays, after school, I repair electrical appliances free of charge.

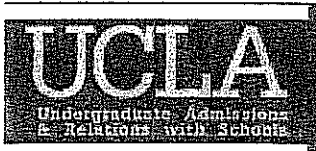
I am an abstract artist, a concrete analyst, and a ruthless bookie. Critics worldwide swoon over my original line of corduroy evening wear. I don't perspire. I am a private citizen, yet I receive fan mail. I have been caller number nine and have won the weekend passes. Last summer I toured New Jersey with a traveling centrifugal force demonstration. I bat .400. My deft floral arrangements have earned me fame in international botany circles. Children trust me.

I can hurl tennis rackets at small moving objects with deadly accuracy. I once read *Paradise Lost*, *Moby-Dick*, and *David Copperfield* in one day and still had time to refurbish an entire dining room that evening. I know the exact

location of every food item in the supermarket. I have performed covert operations for the CIA. I sleep once a week; when I do sleep, I sleep in a chair. While on vacation in Canada, I successfully negotiated with a group of terrorists who had seized a small bakery. The laws of physics do not apply to me.

I balance. I weave. I dodge. I frolic, and my bills are all paid. On weekends, to let of steam, I participate in full-contact origami. Years ago I discovered the meaning of life but forgot to write it down. I have made extraordinary four-course meals using only a Mouli and a toaster oven. I bred prize-winning clams. I have won bullfights in San Juan, cliff-diving competitions in Sri Lanka, and spelling bees at the Kremlin. I have played Hamlet. I have performed open-heart surgery, and I have spoken with Elvis.

But I have not yet gone to college.



E D U C A T I O N T R A N S F O R M E D



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Prospective Students

## How to dazzle and amaze us with your personal statement

### What is the personal statement?

The personal statement is autobiographical in nature and should offer an understanding of you as a unique individual within the context of family, school, community, and the world at large. The personal statement provides a forum for you to explain how factors outside of your school environment have either enhanced or impeded your ability to maximize available academic and intellectual opportunities.

The topic addressed and the style employed are up to you. The personal statement should reflect your personal perspective: Consider the personal statement your opportunity to "meet" us. The viewpoints you would share if we were to meet with you should make up your personal statement.

### So what does that mean?

Remember that we are using your application to discover you as an individual. In your application--including your personal statement--we are looking for evidence of your intellectual curiosity and your interest in personal development. UCLA is a challenging and dynamic environment that is largely made possible by the involvement of our equally dynamic students. We want to make sure that the applicants we admit are ready to thrive in this atmosphere.

The personal statement goes a long way in giving us an idea of what drives, inspires, motivates our applicants. The most compelling personal statements we read give a clear sense of personal qualities like: intellectual vitality and curiosity, creativity, self-discipline and determination, leadership, commitment to others, self- and cultural-awareness, maturity, depth of achievement, and commitment to goals.

### How do I write a compelling personal statement?

Here is some advice we can offer you to help you put together a strong personal statement. Of course, the advice doesn't just pertain to application essays; it can actually be applied to all of your writing--both in and out of the classroom. We assembled these tips from our top recruiters and evaluators. [The directors even pitched in a few.] And while a lot of the advice might seem pretty obvious, you'll be surprised at how easy it is to forget the simple stuff when you are in the middle of the college-application season.

The first few pieces of advice fall under the category of "There's-No-Such-Thing-As-Good-Writing-There-Is-Only-Good-REwriting."

### Start on your essay early!

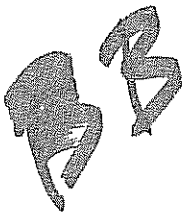
Give yourself time to think about what you have written, read it to others, and revise. This is easier said than done, but you will be thankful that you gave yourself extra time so that you aren't harried and panicked just before the application deadline.

### Proofread!

And proofreading means more than just using spell-check! Pay attention to rules of correct grammar and punctuation. A couple of proofreading tricks: Read your essay aloud to someone else. You can also silently read your essay backwards [which, even though it sounds strange, helps to locate missing punctuation or missing words/phrases].

### Be neat and be consistent

Make sure your tabs, margins, and line spacing are consistent throughout your personal



statement. Make sure you are using a font that is easy to read. If you must hand-write your essay, make sure you are using dark blue or black ink. Don't let the power of your words be weakened by a sloppy presentation.

### Be clear, be focused, be organized

Make sure your essay follows a logical structure. Try to think about how your essay will read for an audience who doesn't know you. [Again, input from someone you trust--a teacher, a friend--can help you get different perspectives on how your essay is affecting those who are reading it.]

These next few tips speak to the issues of style and voice.

### If you are a freshman applicant, try both essays.

Come up with an outline for each essay topic. You might be surprised to find that the topic that initially seemed less appealing is actually the one through which you are better able to express yourself. This can and does happen, so it is worth a shot. Of course, you can only really explore both essays if you give yourself enough time, which leads us back to the first tip listed above.

### Be careful with humor.

We have no doubt that all of our applicants possess piercing wit, but use yours with caution. What might seem funny or biting to you, might not seem that way to someone who doesn't know you. [Once again, check out the first tips we mention. Reading your essay to another person can help you identify passages that work better than others.]

### Don't manufacture hardship.

Believe it or not: you don't have to exaggerate personal hardship in order to write a compelling essay. Essays aren't effective simply because they chronicle difficult circumstances; rather your essay should be effective because it gives us, the readers, a clear sense of your personal qualities and how you have used and developed these qualities in response to the opportunities and challenges life has presented.

Okay, so on one hand we suggest that you use humor with care, and on the other hand we tell you that you don't have to present us with melodrama; some applicants might think these suggestions are contradictory. Trust us, they are not. Think about it: Often the films, plays, novels, poems that move us the most are those that provide a mixture of humor and sobriety in their storytelling. This isn't always the easiest trick to master, but we can assure you that the first step towards doing so is taken when you chose to ...

### Be genuine!

Remember the personal statement is a two-page opportunity for us to see the "real you." It is very important, therefore, that the essay be your work and your words. Don't allow clichés to speak for you; besides, so many of the clichés students rely on are the same sorts of clichés we can easily find in advertisements or greeting cards. Get the idea? Make your point in your own words.

And use specific examples to illustrate your ideas. Thousands upon thousands of essays talk about initiative. Only hundreds SHOW us initiative with concrete examples of demonstrated motivation and leadership. But examples are only one part of the equation. We also need to see how you have assigned meaning to your experiences and how you have grown as an individual from them.

We challenge you to "walk the talk" and "put your money where your mouth is"! How's that for a couple of clichés? The bottom line is that we want you to prove to us with written examples that you have a sense of who you are, where you are going, and how you are going to use your education and your experiences to accomplish your goals.

We hope these tips will help you get organized and will inspire you. Your accomplishments, your opinions, ... YOU are important. Your personal statement is the best tool you have to show us the individual gifts you have to offer to the UCLA community. Make sure that as a tool, your personal statement is sharpened and polished.

Good luck!

*Essays I did want to finish:*

"At the time, I was in tears."

"The topless beach is the first thing I remember."

"By far the most popular activity in Wichita Falls is to put on your boots and go to the Stardust Club."

"*The Amazing Transparent Man, Stolen Hours, Countdown, Lady in a Cage, and Hey, Let's Twist* are just a few of the movies I've seen at the Kamas Star Theatre since 1964."

"I was three when my sister waddled into the playground of my life on padded baby's legs, interrupting its blissful solitude forever."

"For the past four years, every Friday night I can be found in a church being degraded and harrassed. 'No, no, no!' Mr. Montoni roars, his sour coffee breath hitting me full in the face. 'Shift to first position! Use your head for more than growing hair on it!' Listening to this overused and by now not terribly funny expression of his, I am filled with an all-consuming desire to whack him over the head with my violin."

"As I pushed open the wooden door, the bell attached to it rattled and stirred the silence. Mr. Kim, the shopkeeper, slid back the curtains and slowly approached the counter. Mr. Kim had a Santa-like face, with a beard, hair, and eyebrows that were all fluffy and snow white."

"Jerome Margolis, the director of the music department at the Hayward School, is an early middle-aged man who reminds me somewhat of a photograph of Georges Bizet. He is almost never without his meerschaum, and the aroma of tobacco is something which I have come to associate with music during the time I have known him."

"Personally, I would never bury a time capsule. I buried one in the fifth grade and it seemed useless."



- Linda Shuffield  
College counselor

"People, as curious primates, dote on concrete objects that can be seen and fondled. God dwells among the details, not in the realm of pure generality. We must tackle and grasp the larger, encompassing themes of our universe, but we make our best approach through small curiosities that rivet our attention—all those pretty pebbles on the shoreline of knowledge. For the ocean of truth washes over the pebbles with every wave, and they rattle and clink with the most wonderful din."

Steven Jay Gould in *Wonderful Life*

Gould's point should be the guiding principle of every college application essay, and nowhere is it more important to make an essay "rattle and clink" than in the opening sentences. Consider, for example, the following from...

*Essays I didn't want to finish:*

"I am the sum of my experiences."

"Words are the building blocks of both written and oral communication."

"The reality of the world outside my own life is sometimes a disappointing experience."

"Art created with emotions is boundless."

"In my life there have been an incredible number of influences."

"Out of class interests have been an important aspect of my life."

"Since I was very young I have always been very competitive and career oriented."

"The biggest influence on my character has been the presence of my father in my life."

"The title Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper entitles the bearer with much power and control."

"A phrase becomes significant when it takes on a meaning beyond its literal level."

and

## ESSAY PROMPTS: Personal Statement

Berkeley:

Reflecting on your family's experiences and personal circumstances, what would you like to tell us that is not already revealed or explained sufficiently in your application?

What you do in the classroom defines only a part of who you are. How do you spend your time when you are not in class or studying? Focus on one activity—two at the most, and discuss what you have gained from your involvement.

Santa Clara:

A conversation that deeply moved you

A person who inspired you

An ethical dilemma you faced

A turning point in your life

An experience you will never forget

BR

University of San Diego

Learning happens in a variety of settings and often involves values as well as facts, relationships as well as details and wisdom as well as knowledge. At USD we strive to make learning a process which continues through one's life and range of experiences.

Please describe the time in your life in which you learned something of the greatest value to you. Tell us how that experience, the process as well as the people involved, has influenced your continued learning, your goals, and your ability to reach those goals. This event might be one which lasted only for a moment or which has extended over a lengthy period of your life.

\* Read the topic many times to get clear what it is asking.

\* Underline any word in the application that seems essential to the topic: verbs: "reflect," "describe," "examine"; nouns: "person who most influenced you," "an experience that changed you." If you cannot write on the application, make a copy of it so you can.

\* Look for those words in the application that the college is likely to use in their scoring rubric: In a one-page essay, please reflect on one person who has had a strong influence on your development." Each of the underlined words signals a different aspect of the "story" they are asking you to write.

One young woman I worked with examined the role her voice coach played in her life. The essay said what she did, but did not examine the precise ways she had "influenced" her "development." Not only this: she did not have a sense of her topic: to speak of how someone develops your voice is, frankly, not so interesting or important.

What are they really asking? Do they really want to hear about how your herzog more tone and strength to it--or are they interested in her intellectual, emotional, moral growth? Face it, a question like this is asking: what kind of person are, you and are you the kind of person we want at our university? What will you have to offer us? Schools get applications from thousands of kids with remarkable talents and grades; they prefer, in the balance, to give the nod to kids they think have character and will help create a great culture at their school. Penn State, for example, receives approximately 16,000 applications annually, 80% of whom are qualified for admission based on their numbers alone. However, only 25-30% can be admitted. The difference, according to one admissions officer, is often their essay because this is a variable "over which they have control." In other words, amidst all the statistics about their performance, the essay provides a chance for the student to really show who they are.

activities like political or church groups, Boy Scouts, or jobs.

\* is there an area in which you are, relative to your age, a "master"? This is good to show because it suggests commitment to learning and excelling; shows a passion for something which can be transferred into other areas to insure success and distinction at their school

\* the entrepreneurial spirit to the extent that it reveals a strong character who takes on projects and achieves something they set out to do (e.g., the student whose love of photography in high school leads him to start his own photography business while still in school, the money of which helped to pay for the college he will attend).

\* "Pluck" according to one admissions officer: the gumption to write about something in a way that makes it stand out but not for the sake of standing out. The classic example in recent years is the essay in which a young man lists all the things he has done, exaggerating each one to the extreme--detailing that he has raised a million dollars to help the poor and jumped over tall buildings--but admitting in the end that the one thing he had yet to do was go to college, which he was hoping they would let him do. Such spirit sells you so long as it seems intelligent and a reflection of your character not just a joke.

... ..

Another admissions officer I interviewed said, "There are three things you don't ever want to watch being made: one is sausage, one is legislation, and the other is college admissions because the process is sometimes so random given the number of kids that come across our desk. I read 1000 applications, each one of which has to have an essay, and I move give each application about 10 minutes in the first read-through. Anything that kid can do to connect with me as their reader, to make them stand out in that essay, which in many cases is the most important piece of the puzzle, helps me." "When we read them, though the scale is 1-10, we mostly calibrate it to a 2, 5, and 8: two means the essay negatively affects the student's application; 5 means it does nothing to advance their application; 8 means it moves it forward toward acceptance, though other factors are, of course, considered." And this: "Given the assumption that all kids have spell-checkers on their word-processors, we are now merciless when it comes to spelling errors: we are looking to take 25% of all the applications we receive; so even a spelling error can tip the balance against the student in such a competitive environment." Finally, colleges feel insulted and are annoyed by silly essays such as the person who writes an essay about "The Little Engine that Could," in response to the topic "Write about a fictional character that had an influence on your thinking or beliefs."

Your essay should have the following components outlined here:

\* Originality: What can you write about that others cannot? Even if you are going to write about a topic that invites predictable subjects--"Please write about the book that has had the biggest influence on you."--you must find a way to write differently about it. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a wonderful book; in fact so many kids think so that any university with such a topic is likely to receive hundreds of essays about Atticus's philosophy of "walking around in another person's shoes for a while." Turn it inside out: write about an unusual character like Dill or the judge. Better still, write about a different book, one that others are unlikely to have read: this will show you are a reader, that you are a thinker, that you don't walk the common path.

\* Correctness: your essay must be perfect. Errors are moral and intellectual checkmarks against you in this situation. Each one says you are not conscientious and take no pride in your work.

They want to know several things about your from your essay according to the articles I read:

\* what your goals are

\* how you prepared yourself for the future write in high school

\* how you interact with other people in an increasingly diverse and crowded society

\* what you will have to offer their school and its community as a person and a scholar

\* that you will succeed and survive at their school (particularly important if you would be coming there from far away, another region and climate: they don't want people leaving because they're too far from home or because it's too cold when they could give the spot to someone who won't have those troubles)

\* how will you contribute to the school's diversity and enrich its community

\* do you have any links to the college (e.g., relatives who were alumni)?

\* extracurricular activities: this includes not only clubs or athletics but non-school related

**1. If you ask what "they" are looking for, you are already on the wrong track.** What do you have to say? That's what they want to hear. Many of the applications themselves tell you to write about "anything you want." Take them at their word. If the thing that intrigues you most lately is that your seven-year-old sister is the one person in the house who can get the VCR to work, write about that, not World Peace; you have the beginnings of a good Big Issue essay.

**2. Find a reader, or readers.** Friends, brothers or sisters, pen pals, maybe a teacher you know and trust; *someone* who will respond to your writing in the right spirit. I can't emphasize this enough. You are writing for readers now, and you need to train yourself to say something worth reading. They should simply be people who like good writing and can read your work without preconceived notions about what it should say. They have to be honest, and they have to care about you. It is often mutually inspiring to have your reader(s) also applying to college. You can swap ideas and frustrations. One warning about parents, though. They may want you to "sell yourself," an approach that is dead wrong. One of my former students, now at Harvard, looks back on this experience:

Acting as my own counselor: I have a vision of my parents standing outside my bedroom door, listening for the sound of Pencil on Paper, waiting with all that bated breath for the definitive article, that damn college essay. My father tried to tell me how to write it:

"They don't even read your application, so stop wasting so much time on it!"

"How do you know? Mr. Bauld says we should treat it like our first piece of published writing."

"So fine. So give them something that will show them how terrific you are. Your mother and I think you're terrific, and you trust our opinions, so tell them how great you are."

Parents have their uses, but reading your college essay isn't usually one of them. They care too much, and often don't know quite enough.

**3. Write something only you could write.** It should have a sound as distinctive as your speaking voice. The problem with

most essays is that they could have been written by anyone. In one sense, your writing "voice" is simply a polished version of your speech; but remember how that speech changes when you're talking to different audiences, like teachers or friends. It's the same you, but your word choice, tone, sentence rhythms, and even the sound of your voice change. Just as you speak in a different "voice" to parents and friends, so you must find the one that's right for this purpose. The voice you should be aiming at is one you'd use toward an acquaintance you wanted to be better friends with. (Remember, admissions officers already know you when they read your essay.) Though it's not the voice you'd use with your *best* friend, it's not formal, either. Don't write as a kid trying to impress an adult, in what you imagine is an "educated" voice. You have two or three different voices of your own, and you should explore and use them. A good essay is like an interesting letter from someone you once met.

**4. Know what you write about.** This is a slight twist on the common writing advice, "Write about what you know." The professional writers in chapter twelve know a lot—everything from history and foreign languages to the design of playing cards. That's part of the reason their writing is good. But be comforted. Writing is discovery—writers often don't realize what they know about something until they try to discuss it in print. If you find you don't know anything well enough to write about it thoughtfully or entertainingly, you've learned something disturbing but not irreversible. And you're wrong—you know more than enough. Think of yourself as a reporter working on a story, the subject of which happens to be your own life and interests. Your memory is your file drawer, and in that file are your research materials. You're looking for *significant details*. These appear in the humblest and most ordinary things you do every day, usually in a more interesting way than they do in the Big Moments (being elected student body president, or scoring the winning water polo goal), those events in which so many college essayists try unsuccessfully to find Meaning. Instead, how about paying attention to that pigeon on your windowsill and what you eat for lunch—and why. If the unexamined life is not worth living, it's certainly not worth writing about.

5. *A college essay is an informal, or familiar, piece.* All the questions, even the Big Issues, are really asking for some kind of personal statement. Don't even think of it as school-related writing. It is not a history or English paper. Loosen up. You are after the most natural tone and style possible—a kind of inspired conversation, scrubbed clean of all its hesitations, repetitions, and vagueness. It is as personal as a phone call.

6. *Entertain.* I don't mean you have to sound like Rodney Dangerfield. But all writing entertains at some level. "Entertainment" has gotten a bad name over the years, a reputation as a lightweight; people say, "It isn't a very thought-provoking movie; it's pure entertainment." As if only things that turn your mind into fruit punch are entertaining! To truly entertain doesn't mean to open with a few lame jokes, or to sink everything to the level of TV sitcom. It means to sustain a voice worth listening to. You can be as serious or as frivolous as you like, whatever suits you. But when you write, write to give pleasure to your audience. You'll write a more impressive essay than if you set out only to impress.

## A WORD ABOUT HUMOR

You'll hear a great deal of conflicting advice about humor. Counselors, teachers, and parents often talk about humor as if it should (and could) be confined like a noisy chicken, occasionally let out for a good squawking and then locked up again in its dingy coop while we get on with really important business. "Oh, humor has its place," they may say, "but not in your college essay." Or, "If you must joke, don't try to be *too* funny," they warn. "You can't be sure admissions officers share your idea of what's funny." Wrong.

Nothing very good was ever written by someone afraid to say something funny. An enormous portion of the writing that has outlived its author—what the world calls literature—has humor in its heart. Shakespeare's darkest tragedies also include his funniest writing. Even the Bible is not above a little risqué

slapstick (Genesis 31:32–35, for instance). What your advisers may have in their own hearts is the fear that not everyone can pull it off. That's true. But here is another truth: Humor is a virtue, part of what it means to be human. (Of course, the same can be said for sincerity.) What to do? The following rule will guide you infallibly: If you think of something funny about your topic, write it down. If you don't, don't.

It's that simple. Trouble arises when an applicant thinks he *should* write something funny or clever to be "different" and then grunts out a noisy and jangling piece that doesn't communicate but calls attention to itself, like a broken toy. Trouble also arises when an applicant thinks he *should* write something solemn or serious to be "safe," and carefully extracts every trace of living tissue from an essay like some ghoulish literary surgeon. What your advisers may not understand is that funny is not the opposite of sincere. "Funny," wrote G.K. Chesterton, a very funny essayist, "is the opposite of not funny, and of nothing else." If you see things in a funny way, everything you write will be funny. You can't help it. It's part of you, of your voice.

Admissions officers, like any other readers, are suspicious of something that shows *no* sense of humor. Your essay should show the way you deal with the world every day; though writing can't let someone hear your laugh, your essay should at least hint that you have one.

## ENTERTAINMENT QUOTIENT

After you have written short sketches like the ones in chapter five and are thinking of rewriting them or expanding them into full-scale college essays, look at them with a critical eye for their Entertainment Quotient:

**1. Sense detail.** Write to help admissions officers see what you saw, hear what you heard, taste what you tasted. Rather than tell what you learned from photography, show what it looks and feels and even sounds like in a darkroom as your picture emerges—the smell of the chemicals, the red bulb glowing in the darkness. Rather than describe how disciplined you have become as a result of your music lessons, talk about your violin itself, the texture and feel of it, the smell of the rosin and the wood—no one ever thinks of the sense of smell in connection with a violin—details that put a reader through your practice routine with you. Sight, sound, smell, touch, taste. In other words, show what you know.

**2. Metaphor.** Writers continually see one thing in terms of something else; the result is metaphor, the language of comparison. Sometimes the sheer wit and power of metaphors can carry a piece of writing and make it entertaining and fresh, and learning to think metaphorically is perhaps the most “fun” part of writing. You need to have command of the two common ways of making comparisons. One simply uses “like” or “as”: *The leaves are like hands*. The other speaks directly: *The leaves are hands*; or, more subtly, *The leaves beckoned in the wind*. (The metaphor is contained in the verb; leaves don’t usually beckon—but they might if they’re like hands.) Metaphors are all around you, but through time and use some of them have lost their ability to startle: leg of a chair, face of a clock, eye of a needle. Still others are on their way to the metaphor graveyard but are not quite buried yet. Using them is not the sign of dead metaphor but of a dead mind: white as snow, big as a mountain, high as a kite, smooth as glass. There are thousands of others. To be an entertaining writer you must hammer your own metaphor out of materials you know and understand. A good rule of thumb, suggested by George Orwell, author of *1984*, is never to use a comparison you have heard before.

**3. Verbs and Nouns.** Nouns are the bones of writing; verbs are the muscles. Entertaining writing gets its structure and strength from them. Don’t load up on adjectives—a “wondrous evening,” a “multifaceted personality”—hoping to sound more “creative” or intelligent. An essay flabby with adjectives only weighs a reader down. Before you can write beautifully you must write well. Try the following:

Without adjectives (“the,” “an,” and “a” are OK), write a short paragraph or two describing something—a restaurant, a teacher, a pen, a bird, your favorite room in the house—so

that it sounds appealing. Then—again, without adjectives—make the same subject unappealing. It will seem awkward at first; remember, nothing comes out whole, and it will take a few drafts to trim and tighten the paragraph. But you'll increase your control over words and style. Here's an example:

[1]

There's nothing on the planet like chocolate. Vanilla may be the province of the purist and the test of the connoisseur, but in the kingdom of sweets, darkness rules. Among the garden of edibles, chocolate earns the status of sin—a compliment, like knowledge itself in the Garden of Eden. A silk among desserts, its flavor is like a mixture of malt and nectar and cream.

[2]

People who like chocolate must be in league with dentists, the pokers and pullers who have inherited the reins of torture from the Inquisition. Is chocolate worth the pain? I don't think so. It appeals to children who, when the temperature inches up and softens fudge, like to fingerprint Uncle Nathan's belly with it. It doesn't look like dessert then; it looks more like something the dog deposits. To adults I've seen scrambling for the Toblerone, it's like a drug. Not for nothing is the cacao, from which it is pounded, related to cocaine.

These examples are admittedly freaks. In your final essays you needn't carry adjective-bashing to this extreme, but it's fun to noodle with; this is a true literary pushup that will make your writing stronger.

When you learn to rely on verbs and nouns, they keep you thinking metaphorically, as you can see from the examples. Increasing your store of verbs and nouns opens up that world of comparison. For example, the verb "fasten" might be *pin*, *stitch*, *chain*, *paste*, *moor*, *clasp*, *clamp*, *suture*, or *belay* (from mountain climbing), depending on the comparison you wanted to suggest. One of my classes found 148 synonyms for the word "walk"—a good many more than are found in any thesaurus. Make a list of your own with a friend or two. Think metaphorically: How does a horse on parade walk? How does a thief walk? A snake? Try the same thing with the word "say."

A.P. English  
compiled by Audino

- UC recommendations for college personal statement writing process

## Personal Statement

Writing your personal statement can be one of the most satisfying--or frustrating--writing experiences you'll ever have.

The personal statement is an important part of your application package. Depending on the topic you choose, the essay you write provides additional evidence of your intellectual and creative achievement. The essay is also the only opportunity for the readers of your application to get a feel for you as a person as well as for you as a student. The essay is also the place where you can put your academic record into the context of your opportunities and obstacles.

There is no one correct way to write a personal statement, but in general those who will read your essay are looking for two important things:

- HOW the essay provides evidence of your achievements that isn't reflected in other parts of your application
- HOW and WHY the events that you describe have shaped your attitude, focus, and, most of all, your intellectual vitality.

This information will help you think about and craft a personal statement by taking you step by step through a process of brainstorming, drafting and revising. At the end, we hope that you will produce a personal statement that you are proud of and that will provide admissions officers with an accurate portrait of who you are and why a college education is important to you.

## Characteristics of a Good Personal Statement

But before you write a single word, make sure you know what is expected of a successful college essay.

A good essay ...

-Is thoughtful and honest

A strong personal statement is reflective; that is, it demonstrates that you have thought about and gained a clear perspective on your experiences and what you want in your future. It does not simply tell a reader what you think he/she wants to know. Instead, it gives the reader a vivid and compelling picture of you--in essence, telling the reader what he or she should know about you. Remember that the focus of the essay is YOU--your achievements, your obstacles, your goals, your values.

-Contains a catchy introduction that will keep the reader interested

It is important to recognize that essay readers will read hundreds, maybe even thousands, of essays during the application review period. That means that an essay with a catchy introduction, one that gets right to the point and uses precise language and vivid imagery, is going to stand out more than an essay that is predictable and conventional in its opener.

-Transforms blemishes into positives

It's okay to have flaws! The essay is your chance to show how you have transformed blemishes. For example, if your essay theme is "overcoming obstacles" and you earned a poor grade in a class, but went to a community college at night to repeat the course, it is important for your reader to know this because it is an example of your perseverance. The reader does not want to hear complaints about poor grades or circumstances, but rather wants to know how you have overcome them.

-Demonstrates your knowledge of the major/college

No one expects you to know everything about the college or university to which you are applying. However, readers will want to know that you have done your homework. For example, if you write an essay that states your interest in becoming an engineer, but the college does not have an engineering program, then you haven't done your homework.

-Exudes confidence--you will be successful no matter what

A good essay doesn't beg or brag. Colleges and universities want to admit the best students, and the best students are those who can demonstrate their ability to pursue their goals regardless of where they are admitted. Think of this as quiet confidence--the kind that reveals itself through your description of lifelong interests, sustained commitment, and/or perseverance in the face of adversity.

Keep these characteristics of a good essay in mind as you compose. And be sure to avoid the typical college essay blunders.

## COLLEGE ESSAY BLUNDERS!

Just as you should know what to do, you should also know what NOT to do! Here are some of the biggest blunders students make in their essays:

**-Strives for depth, not breadth**

A good essay is not a list of your accomplishments. Remember when your mom told you that it's quality, not quantity, that counts? Well, the same adage applies for your college essay. A reader will be much more interested in how your experience demonstrates the theme of your essay, not the number of accomplishments you can list. What is NOT interesting: an essay that devotes one paragraph each to a variety of different topics. This type of approach denies you the ability to give depth to your essay.

**-Follows the conventions of good writing**

A good essay uses appropriate grammar and syntax, uses precise and vivid language, and does not contain any spelling errors.

**-Conforms to guidelines**

If the essay instructions tell you that the essay should be two pages long, on white 8.5x11 inch paper, then the essay should be two pages long, on white 8.5x11 inch paper. Less is not more, and more is not better, either.

**-Answers the question!**

A good essay is the result of a writer who has examined the essay question and written an essay that explicitly addresses that question. For example, if you are asked to describe your greatest accomplishment or any unusual circumstances or challenges you have faced, then your reader will expect you to use vivid language that will enable the reader to visualize your accomplishment and share your sense of success.

**-Benefits from several drafts and feedback from others**

Revision allows an essay to grow. Revising is not editing; revising is the act of "re-seeing" and of looking for those parts of the essay that would benefit from more explication, more (or less) vivid language, or even deleting parts that simply don't work to move your primary theme forward. Similarly, feedback from others can help you identify those parts of the essay that work well--and those that don't.

**The essay repeats information contained elsewhere in the application**

Sometimes students, to be on the safe side, simply repeat in the essay the same information that is in the application itself. This strategy results in the reader gaining no more insight into what drives you than he/she discerned from the rest of the application packet. Remember, your reader already knows from your application, for example, that you are in the California Scholarship Federation and a member of the Ethnic Studies Club. What the reader doesn't know is why you chose to participate in these activities and how your involvement in these activities is evidence of your particular interests and talents--your essay's theme. If one of these experiences is a good example of your essay's theme, then by all means include it. If you're just including it because you think that you'll impress the reader with everything you've ever done, think again.

. . . . .

Here's an example of this blunder:

In my junior year I was a cheerleader for my school. I worked really hard at it, and found it to be fun and challenging. I was also part of my school's Kids in the Kitchen program, which helped to make food available to poor people in my community. Cheerleading and volunteer work kept me very busy. I spent approximately twenty hours each week cheering and another five hours volunteering. I learned a lot from this experience and can manage my time effectively and maintain a positive attitude in the face of adversity.

. . . . .

**The writer complains about his/her circumstances rather than explains them.**

Remember that admissions officers want to know how resilient you are. While it is certainly okay to write about obstacles you've faced, what is important to your reader is how you overcame the obstacle, not what a terrible obstacle it was.

. . . . .

Here's an example of this blunder:

Because my mother is a single parent, she has had to make a lot of sacrifices to keep me and my brother in a private school. It means that we have to go without a lot of things, which is sometimes embarrassing. But even though



everyone in my school knows that we are poor, no one is willing to give me a break. This is especially true of my English teacher, Sister Magdalena. Because she didn't like me, and she is not comfortable with poor people, she gave me a C in English when I really should have gotten a B.

. . . . .

*The writer discusses money or a college's ranking as a motivating factor for applying to a particular major/college.*

Yes, we all want to attend college to earn more money. And we all want to attend the most prestigious colleges. But college faculty who read your essay want to know that you are motivated by a love of learning. So, even though money or a school's ranking may be important to you, keep this information out of your essay.

. . . . .

Here's an example of this blunder:

I want to study engineering because a recent US News and World Report article said that engineering is the fastest-growing industry in the nation and the best place to study engineering is UCLA. With a degree in engineering, I will be able to buy a house for my mom.

. . . . .

*The essay relies on gimmicks rather than substance.*

A "gimmicky" essay is one in which the reader tries to get the reader's attention through unconventional means. This does not mean that your essay has to follow one set format; what it means is that gimmicks can't replace substance.

. . . . .

Here's an example of this blunder:

College, oh college/How much I want thee/for college, oh college/will strengthen me/and with a degree in hand/I will change this land/and make a better life for you and me. (This is supposed to be a poem.)

. . . . .

*The writer makes claims in the essay that are not backed up by the application.*

The essay is a component of the application and is read within the context of the application. A description of yourself as the top student in the school should be supported by your grades. Similarly, claims made about your extracurricular experiences should be backed up by the application. For example, a student who claims that her lifelong ambition is to save the environment would want this claim supported by examples of involvement in environment-related hobbies, clubs and classes.

*The essay contains the wrong school name*

Oops! In these days of computerized cutting and pasting, this is an easy blunder to make. Proofread carefully!

*The essay contains mechanical errors or errors of usage, clichés, or meaningless prose*

Although your reader is not grading your essay or scrutinizing your grammar, a poorly written essay signals a reader that you are unfamiliar with conventions of good writing or simply did not put enough time into composing your essay. Either way, there will be other applications whose essays are very polished, so don't disadvantage yourself.

. . . . .

Here are some examples of this blunder:

My father always told me that there is nothing to fear but fear itself. (A cliché)

A feeling of indescribable disbelief overcame me. (Wordy prose)

. . . . .

*The essay is too long or too short*

Show that you know how to follow directions. An essay that is too short may indicate carelessness; one that is too long may signal arrogance. Remember that your readers have many other applications to read, so be sure that the limited time available to peruse yours will be spent reading an essay that is the appropriate length.

## Brainstorming For Your Personal Statement

Brainstorming is the first stage of writing, often called "prewriting." Brainstorming is the process of gathering all of your ideas and getting them on paper without editing them.

The brainstorming stage does not involve editing, so don't censor your ideas. There will be enough time to edit later; right now you want to get all of your ideas down so that you don't forget anything. Brainstorming is NOT an outline, NOT a draft and certainly NOT an essay. The purpose of brainstorming is to write out ideas, thoughts, pieces of thoughts, without regard for their connections with each other. Structure and form are not important at this point. What is important is to get everything out of your head and onto paper.

.....

Begin by creating a brainstorm sheet. Be totally honest! Ask yourself the following questions, and write out your answers.

- What are my strengths?
- What are my weaknesses?
- What is special about me?
- What kind of person am I?
- What do I care about?
- Why is (BLANK) more important to me than (BLANK)? (Fill in the blanks.)
- What is it like growing up in (BLANK)?
- What is it like going to school at (BLANK)?

## Gathering Information and Developing a Theme

After you've completed your brainstorming, you'll want to filter the fruits of your brainstorming and identify ONE area you wish to pursue in more detail. Look for areas that might seem interesting or different to a reader. A good way to do this is to group similar ideas together to highlight patterns; these patterns can then uncover a potential theme for your essay. (Your essay's theme is its controlling idea.)

For example, if after brainstorming and grouping your ideas, you find that your talent for writing shows up in your hobby as a budding novelist, your

community service as a teacher of creative writing to youngsters, your extracurricular work as a writer for the school newspaper, and your award for outstanding history essay, then you should consider focusing your essay around this talent and how this interest in writing shapes your place in the world and your goals.

Remember--it is the quality of your experience as you describe it that matters, not the number of experiences.

.....

## STEP ONE

Begin to focus your thoughts by examining your actual experiences. Use the information you've uncovered through brainstorming to address the following topics.

- An achievement that made me feel terrific...
- Something I have struggled to overcome or change about myself or my life...
- An event or experience that taught me something special...
- A "real drag" of an experience that I had to get past...
- Someone's act of strength or courage that affected me...
- A family experience that influenced me in some powerful way...
- A lesson, class project, activity or job that had an impact on my academic or career goals...
- A time I blew it, failed, made bad choices, and how I got past it...
- Some memorable event or advice involving an older person...
- An event that helps to define me, in terms of my background...

## STEP TWO

Choose one or two of your favorite responses from the list above (or combine a couple that evoked similar responses). Check to make sure your written description addresses the following three questions. If it doesn't, add details so that the experience you describe will be vivid to a reader who doesn't know you.

1. What were the key moments and details of the event?
2. What did I learn from this event?
3. What aspect of this event stays with me most?

### STEP THREE

Decide on a theme for your essay. Taking the experience you wrote about in Step Two, answer the following questions:

- What does this event reveal about me?
- What makes it special or significant?
- How does this event make me special or make me stand out?
- What truth about me is revealed through this event?

Your answers will reveal your theme.

### Structuring Your Personal Statement

A typical two-page personal statement will consist of the following:

- 1. An introductory paragraph that provides your essay's controlling theme
- 2-4 body paragraphs that develop your theme through examples and detailed experiences and build upon each other. The final body paragraph will contain your most poignant information
- 3. A conclusion that widens the lens and wraps up your essay without summarizing or repeating what has already been written

### Structuring Your Personal Statement: The Introductory Paragraph

Your introduction is where you establish the tone of your personal statement and set the scene, define its theme, and generally hook your reader by

sparkling interest with details and quotes. It's important that you avoid meaningless prose and get right to the point. Be sure, too, that your language is clear and specific--avoid filler words and clichés. Most importantly, be sure that the introductory paragraph captures the main idea of your essay.

Sometimes the introduction is the last portion of the essay to be completed, and that's okay. The introduction should provide a snapshot of what the rest of the essay will develop and expand upon, so if you don't know where the rest of the essay is headed, the introduction is impossible to write. Therefore, it is important to outline your essay so that you know how each of your examples will build upon one another and can better draft your introduction to reflect this.

Here are some sample introductory paragraphs. You're the judge--which one is strongest?

1. On September 16, 1990 I experienced the worst feeling of my life the feeling of incompetence. It was a feeling of indescribable disbelief. My mother, my only parent, fell down the stairs of our home. It was then that I knew that I had to become a doctor to help people who were suffering like my mother. By attending your college, I will be able to fulfill my dream and to give back to my community through medicine.

• Although this writer attempts to be specific in his introduction through the use of the date ("September 16, 1990"), overall this introduction is vague and bloated with words that don't convey an image. The writer says that he felt "indescribable disbelief" when his mother fell down the stairs, but we don't know what "indescribable disbelief" actually means: was he stunned into inaction? did he scream? Without the details, the writer's attempt to hook the reader fails. The opener also contains errors in punctuation ("On September 16, 1990 I experienced the worst feeling of my life the feeling of incompetence.") and uses the same word ("feeling") too many times.

2. My father divorced us when I was in seventh grade. At that time, I was going through what my mother called my "difficult stage" because my world revolved around school, friends and boys, and "family" was often put on the back burner. I was unprepared for the resulting family crisis; my father, the man who nurtured my passion for art, literature and my love of languages, would no longer be a part of my life. At the time, I thought that I could not go on. Now I realize that my father's rejection, while extremely painful, gave me a resiliency and strength of character that I did not previously know I possessed.

• This opener is quite strong. The writer's description of her father's action as a "divorce" is very vivid, and much more descriptive than if she had written that

he "left" her. The writer also exudes a quiet confidence; she shows us she is smart by describing how her father helped instill her passion for "art, literature and...languages." We also know that she is by no means a perfect person; her honesty in describing her own failure to give her family a priority in her life is poignant, and the reader wants to learn more about her, how she resolved her crisis, and what she has learned from it.

3. It was once said that "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," and that is a motto that I have lived by for all of my seventeen years on this earth. It is a motto that I have based all of my academic endeavors on. It literally came into effect one Wednesday morning earlier this year. I got called into the House One Principal's office at our school. I walked towards the office a little pondered. I had never been called into that office before, because that principal only handled the math and science departments of the entire school. I doubted that the principal even knew me. When I entered the office I was greeted by a group of familiar faces that I knew from my physics class. Our principal told us to have a seat and relax. The reason that we were called in was that there was going to be a Science Competition happening that Saturday and the school really wanted us to enter into it. The principal said that she knew it was short notice, but based on our performances in all our science classes she knew that we could pull it off. She stated that we were some of the only high school juniors and seniors who had completed and gone beyond the required science courses. (I personally had already taken a semester of both Physics and Physiology that year, and two of the other girls that were in there with me had already completed AP Biology.)

\* This writer is going to describe her greatest accomplishment, but she takes much too long to make her point. The opening sentence relies on a cliché ("We have nothing to fear but fear itself") to make its point, and the essay relies on the vague word "it" much too often. In addition, some of the writer's word choices are inappropriate ("I walked towards the office a little pondered"--"confused" or "worried" would have been more appropriate) and indicate a tendency to rely on big words when simpler ones will do. The writer is also a bit wordy ("all of my seventeen years on this earth"; "It literally came into effect"). The introduction also contains irrelevant information ("that principal only handled the math and science departments of the entire school.") and does not provide the reader with a sense that the writer has reflected on her experience and extracted its larger meaning. We are not quite sure, for example, how the statement about fear connects to the rest of the paragraph or what the main idea or thesis is.

## The Writing Process

Writing a good college essay requires a significant investment of personal reflection, thought and time. There are no right or wrong answers--you are who you are, after all. The best way to get in touch with who you are through writing is to undertake a process of self-exploration and writing that will culminate in an essay that will reveal how unique and interesting you are.

Using all the stages of the writing process will help you to

- Understand your essay's theme--its controlling idea
- Analyze and reflect upon your experiences as they relate to your theme
- Craft a polished essay

## Drafting, Revising and Proofreading Your Personal Statement

### Drafting and Revising

A draft is a work in progress. A good essay undergoes several revisions--don't assume that your first draft is your best draft! Composing often involves going back and forth among planning the essay, generating ideas, organizing the contents, and editing the results. Drafting allow you to get the most out of these composing stages.

Through the brainstorming and gathering information stages, you have generated the raw material to compose effectively. Now you will begin the process of creating your essay.

### Your First Draft

In a first draft, you are attempting to capture your essay's meaning and get it down on paper. In this way, you are attempting to draw out the essay's concept.

Use your first draft to:

- formulate a working introduction
- organize your ideas

A first draft is often the skeleton of the paper; it contains the overall structure, but may lack a clear theme, vivid language, fully developed paragraphs, and strong transition words and phrases.

## Revising Your Draft

The key to revising your essay is to determine how it seems not just to you, but to your reader. So--think like an admissions officer! Remember that readers need a sense of your essay's structure and a clear idea of why they should read your essay in the first place. To revise your essay:

**Step One:** Concentrate on the whole by examining your essay's frame: the introduction, the conclusion, and a sentence in each that states your main theme. Ask the following questions

Will my reader know where my introduction ends and where the body of my essay begins?

Will my reader know where the body of my essay ends and where my conclusion begins?

Will my reader know which sentence is the main sentence in my introduction, and which is the main sentence in my conclusion?

**Step Two:** Examine your essay for continuity

Make sure that your points work together conceptually--that is, that key points are unified by your essay's theme.

**Step Three:** Revise for focus, clarity and depth. Make sure that the skeleton of your personal statement is fleshed out with sufficient examples, fully developed paragraphs, and meaningful prose.

## Style Tips

- 1. Examine the personal statement for word accuracy; whenever possible, use a simpler word in place of a longer or more obscure word.
- 2. Make sure that every word you use means what you think it means.
- 3. Be yourself!
- 4. Avoid empty words and phrases like "basically," "really," "goals and dreams."
- 5. Use active verbs whenever possible. Go through your essay and circle every form of "to be" that you find ("is," "are," "were", etc). Substitute more active verbs. For example:
  - Instead of: My love of science was *fostered* by my second grade teacher
  - Write: My second grade teacher *fostered* my love of science
- 6. Avoid predictable (and stereotypical college essay phrases) such as "I learned a lot," "I learned to work with others," "It was a fun and challenging experience" "I learned that everyone is different," etc.
- 7. Avoid using clichés and proverbs, or other over-used phrases from literary

sources. They detract from the freshness of your essay.

- 8. Use a normal, 10-12 point font to type your essay. Don't type in all italics, or in bold, or in an unusual font size. Standard fonts that look nice are Times, Palatino, New York, and Courier. Avoid fancy font types--they are difficult to read.

## Proofreading

Leave plenty of time to proofread. If you can, put your essay aside for a few days, and then come back and look at it with fresh eyes.

Some proofreading tips:

- Try reading your essay backwards (last sentence first) to catch fragments or other glaring errors.
- Have another pair of eyes read it as well to catch errors in spelling and grammar--your eyes, because they are used to the words on the page, can easily miss errors that another reader will easily spot.

Avoid these common errors

Fragments

Run-on sentences (comma splices)

Redundancy ("The reason...is because")

Spelling errors

Slang or colloquial language

## Getting Feedback on Your Personal Statement

Getting feedback from others is a critical part of writing your essay. If your teachers, peers, or parents have suggestions, listen carefully. You don't have to take every suggestion, but try them out and find out which ones work. You'll want to be very specific in asking for feedback; if there are sections of your essay that you are particularly concerned about, ask your readers to pay special attention to those parts.

It is very important that your essay be your own creation and be conveyed in your own words, but it is okay (and even encouraged) to get feedback from others.

When soliciting feedback, steel yourself to criticism. Not everyone will see your essay the way you do. After receiving feedback, and before revising, write down the comments you receive and look for patterns. Use these patterns to decide how to proceed. If every one of your readers thinks that your essay is too wordy, then you can be pretty sure that your essay is too wordy, and revising for a simpler, more natural style should be a top priority.

Help your readers by providing a structure for them to respond. Ask your readers to comment first on larger issues, and lastly on grammar or syntax (problems with which often disappear in a second draft, so commenting extensively on grammar in the first draft is often a waste of your reader's time, particularly if the ideas you wish to convey are still unclear).

Use the following questions as a guide for your readers.

#### *Overall Impression*

1. After reading my essay, what three words would you use to describe me?
2. After reading the essay, what do you think its overall theme is?
3. In what way (or where) is the essay most persuasive?
4. In what way (or where) is it least persuasive?

#### *Structure and Organization*

5. Is the essay organized in a logical fashion?
6. Are the transitions between paragraphs fluid and logical?
7. Do the paragraphs build upon one another, and move from smaller issues to more significant ones?

#### *Grammar and Syntax*

8. Are there grammar errors? If so, what are they?
9. Are the words used appropriate?
10. What other comments/suggestions do you have that will strengthen my essay?