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SUCCESSFUL
HARVARD
APPLICATION
ESSAYS

**What Worked for Them Can
Help You Get into the College
of Your Choice**

2ND EDITION

*With Analysis by the Staff
of The Harvard Crimson*

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Good luck!

—Erica K. Jalli

President, 131st guard of *The Harvard Crimson*

Fifteen Steps to Success—That May or May Not Prove to Be Surefire

So you want to write a college admissions essay.

By now you have undoubtedly received a wide range of advice from a wide range of sources: guidance counselors urging you to start early, parents worried about your vocabulary level, English teachers stressing the importance of proper grammar.

At this point you have also probably come to the realization that there is no one foolproof method for writing a winning admissions essay. In fact, much of the advice you have probably been given—and which you will read in this book—will probably contradict itself. Example: “Take a risk. Write about something that will make your essay stand out,” versus “Don’t take any chances. The admissions committee is looking for a well-written, well-argued essay. You can do that without coloring outside the lines.” Another example: “The personal statement is only one part of your application. Don’t stress,” versus “Revise. Revise. Revise. Proofread. Proofread. Proofread. Draft multiple versions. This is the most important piece of writing you will ever produce.”

As you can already see, the whole process can be very confusing. Don’t let this discourage you. The most truthful advice that can be offered is that there is no one way to write a successful admissions essay. The essay—in terms of both its content and the manner in which it is written—is like you: unique. You can write about your family trip to Niagara Falls or you can write about meeting the Dalai Lama. You can talk about what a perfect student, brother, friend, or all-around good guy you are, or you can write about the day you threw a temper tantrum after losing the state tennis finals. The beauty of the personal statement is that it is completely personal.

Still, we have pledged to help you, and help you we will, by way of the following steps to writing a good, solid, impressive admissions es-

say. Many of these tips resemble advice your high school English teacher would offer. Others are advice that you may have heard from sisters, brothers, and friends. Some of it might even sound like nagging. It's still worth it for us to repeat them and for you to listen to them.

Here goes:

1. *Think strategically.* Your essay is an opportunity to show a part of yourself that neither your test scores nor your grades can convey. There are many ways to go about doing this. You can emphasize your creative talent, or you can play up an extracurricular activity or hobby that is particularly important to you. You can discuss a formative moment or an aspect of your life that you feel has shaped you. If you devote the essay to rehashing what is already apparent in the rest of the application, you lose a valuable space for self-expression.
2. *Be reflective.* Speak from the heart. Explain what the experience means to you, rather than simply recounting the experience as it happened. This is what gives your application a human component and differentiates you from everyone else. It's important to show how you have changed and developed into the person you are today.
3. *Start early.* Give yourself enough time to brainstorm and then let drafts sit so you have more time to proofread. The more time you have, the more you can make the essay truly reflect who you are.
4. *Brainstorm ideas* with friends, family members, and teachers. While the personal statement is one of the most intimate parts of the application, it certainly can benefit from constructive criticism. Don't rule out any essay topic because it's not impressive enough, exciting enough, or unique enough. You may not realize just how important it was for you to hit the game's

- winning shot, or how much your support helped a family member get through a life-threatening illness. Those who know you best can give you very effective feedback.
5. *Avoid clichés* in your writing and be original in your ideas. This rule applies for images within your writing as well as for the topic of the essay itself. Be aware that some ideas—winning the state football/soccer/gymnastics championship—have been done at least a thousand times before you. There's nothing inherently wrong with addressing the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat, but try to be more original. Be memorable.
 6. *Steer away from gimmicks.* People have pulled them off, but to do it, you have to do it well. If you're a great cartoonist, send in those comic strips. Or if you are a wonderful poet, go for it. Don't attempt to invent something just to make your essay stand out. Be subtle and tactful, using an authentic voice and wit. Remember, execution is everything and mediocrity doesn't win.
 7. *If you don't know what a word means, don't use it.* Remember the "K.I.S.S." rule: keep it simple, stupid. Make two or three points and finish up. Don't overwhelm your reader with extraneous details. Even if you do know what a long word means, a short word might just as well express what you're trying to say. The SATs are your chance to flex those verbal muscles, and there is nothing worse than misusing a word in an essay.
 8. *Stay "on message."* Admissions officers will read your essay in less than a few minutes, so keep the scale of the story manageable. Use relevant and specific anecdotes to prove your point. Every word should say something new. Read through the essay several times and trim repetitive or nonfunctional sentences. Don't expect to express all the nuances and complexities of what the death of a loved one meant in less than five hundred words. Keep the scope of your essay appropriate to the length.

9. *Start strong.* As any good essayist will tell you, it's the beginning that counts most. Remember that your reader is trying to glean a sense of who you are, so try and grab the reader's attention from the beginning. Make it easy for them, make them want to read on, and you will be rewarded.
10. *Conclusions are important.* Many times, a beautifully written essay is weakened with a moral at the end of the story. Don't ruin a perfectly good essay by launching into broad, sweeping generalizations. If you find yourself thinking that a platitude is necessary to prove your point, start revising. Returning to your opening line in your ending sentence is a good way to tie it all together. Just as the introduction will set the tone for the essay, the conclusion must resonate with the reader.
11. *Don't take yourself too seriously.* Don't be afraid to be yourself. Use humor if you are a funny person. As long as it's tasteful, it can't hurt you to make your reader smile.
12. *Relax.*
13. *Proofread.*
14. *Proofread.*
15. *Proofread.*

MEMORABLE MOMENTS
