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APPLICATION
ESSAYS

SECOND EDITION

COMPILED AND EDITED BY
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Advice from the Inside

Someone once calculated that I have read around two hundred thousand applications for admission, give or take a couple thousand, since becoming an admissions dean. Does that make me an expert on the subject of admissions essays? Nope. Does it qualify me to offer a few observations about such essays, based on my experience? Maybe. The editors apparently think so. I promised I'd give it a try.

The essay is the main life-support system of the application. Let's face it, most of a college application is a matter of filling in the blank spaces, listing things. Listing your accomplishments and interests, neatly listing them, sometimes even imaginatively listing them, but listing them nevertheless. Takes about a half hour at the outside. The essay is the applicant's opportunity to breathe some life into the folder, to remind the reader that all of those numbers and letter grades and adjectives and test scores and lists of activities represent, for better or for worse, yet another and different person out there.

When I was an admissions dean and faced the task early each January of reading through some fifteen thousand or so applications, I must confess that I was not thrilled at the prospect of seeing just how many different ways in which the number of varsity letters, or the number of years in the orchestra, or the number of offices held could be expressed. Even the recommendations from teachers and counselors, which, when well done, can bring a candidate to life, frequently fall short of doing so, resorting as they almost invariably must to a rather limited set of adjectives (even the superlatives become routine) to limn the students about whom they are

writing. It was the essays I looked forward to, not to give a thumbs up or thumbs down to an applicant, but rather simply to help give a particular shape or outline to the person who garnered the grades and test scores and awards and superlative adjectives I read about in the rest of the folder.

In an age of McRankings and media hype about “hot colleges,” there is unfortunately a lemming-like tendency of students with similar abilities and accomplishments to cluster their applications at an unreasonably (or so it seems to me) limited number of particular colleges and universities. The result, alas, is that the range among applicants along any one of these numerical/adjectival dimensions above is, at many colleges, often very narrow. A reader of applications at such colleges can become positively glassy-eyed after the first five hundred or so. More often than not, it is the more personal nature of the essays that breaks the monotony and engages the reader.

Keep in mind that a college application is a set of six or seven hooks, on four or five of which most candidates for admissions are going to hang their hats. The essay is only one such hook. Save for those few instances in which candidates wrote essays so completely lacking in taste as to make us marvel at the fact that they even had bothered to apply, in my experience no one was ever admitted *solely* on the basis of a great essay and no one was ever denied admission *solely* on the basis of a poor essay. (See below on “fit.”)

Also keep in mind that good essay topics or questions are often as difficult for the colleges to think up as they are for the applicants to respond to. (Not much solace there, I admit.) Unlike “test” questions, they’re not set to elicit (or even to imply) right or wrong answers. Ideally, they simply provide some fertile ground to be plowed by applicants from all sorts of backgrounds and with quite different interests and experiences, while at the same time keeping the area sufficiently fenced in so as to allow for comparability. In some instances, essay topics simply reflect the preferences of those who have to read them. My own preference, for instance, was for questions that I hoped would be fun to answer and that I also hoped would

elicit answers fun to read. These are some of the reasons why essay topics not only vary enormously from college to college, but even year to year at the same college. The essay is the one part of the application that allows a student to think out loud. Indeed, when you stop to think about it, it’s the only part of the application that usually requires any thinking at all!

Since most readers of application essays (myself included) are not by any stretch of the imagination experts in that particular art form, and indeed frequently disagree among themselves over the merits of one or another essay, my first piece of advice is to write your essays, *not* for some imaginary admissions officer or faculty member at the other end, but for yourselves, or for a favorite avuncular relative, or roommate. Write it for anyone *other* than that admissions person whom you’ve come to convince yourself holds your life in his or her hands. (I read somewhere that the term “short shrift” originally referred to a brief respite for confession before execution. Don’t consider your essay “short shrift.” Relax.)

That brings me to my second piece of advice. When you write your essay, consider simply telling a story. I can think of few college application essay topics, including the weightiest, that don’t provide the student with an opportunity to tell a story. I’m convinced that storytelling comes more naturally to most of us, and also more accurately expresses our nature, than does essay writing. Ask me to tell a story, no problem. Ask me to write an essay and I break out in a sweat. But I long ago figured out that some of the best essays I’ve ever read are simply stories well told.

Besides, stories need not be long to be effective, a not inconsequential virtue, given that colleges frequently require that an essay be no longer than a single page. Don’t consider brevity a limitation. You should be able to tell a story in just one page. It has always struck me that a poem is a really *short* “short story.” The art of poetry is in knowing what to leave out. What is left out is often precisely what draws the reader in. That’s as true for storytellers as for poets. And what you want to do is draw in the reader of your appli-

cation. Don't hesitate to risk leaving something to the reader's imagination. (Here I must confess that no matter what kind of writing I'm doing, I try to discipline myself to go back over it and remove the unnecessary baggage that always creeps in, an exercise delightfully taught in William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*.)

My third piece of advice is to invest some time in reading some good writing before sitting down to write your own essay. I find I *have* to do that. I think most of us have a passive vocabulary and even ways of expressing ourselves that are far more intricate and colorful and imaginative than that we're normally required to draw upon to get through an average day. Reading a good book or a good essay can sometimes ignite the same skills in the reader. You probably have your own favorites. Mine include people like E. B. White, Robertson Davies, Stephen Jay Gould, Russell Baker, John McPhee, Joseph Epstein, Garrison Keillor, and Red Smith, to name a few. Good writing is contagious. It can also put you in an appropriate frame of mind for embarking on your essay. Observe how they tell a story. Observe how they tell a story in order to make a point. Observe how they draw the reader in, often from the first sentence. Keep in mind also that there's nothing wrong with imitating a good writer. That is how many writers we now consider "good" started out.

My fourth piece of advice is to be sure that your essay reflects you, and not some idealized version of yourself that you have come to imagine is precisely the kind of person an admissions office will be most favorably disposed toward. In my most plaintive moments as an admissions dean, I could be heard stalking the office corridors shouting, "Where in the hell are the Huckleberry Finns?" Such explosions normally took place after I'd made my way through a long string of applications that left me convinced we had cornered the market on saints and scholars, none of whom had ever stumbled, faltered, or failed at anything, and few of whom seemed real. To a certain extent, the entire admissions process invites that. Applicants are constantly advised to "put their best foot forward." But I must

confess that I always liked the ones who put *both* feet forward. Whatever number of feet you plan to put forward or to stand on, make sure that your essay "fits" your application.

An application where the various pieces don't appear to "fit" together stands out like a sore thumb. As with admissions officers, students come in all shapes and sizes, with different personalities and ways of approaching the world. Some are gregarious, some are shy. Some are athletically inclined, and some are more sedentary. Some are more mature in some aspects of their lives than in others. The freshman class at any college in the country will be made up of students who exhibit a mix of all of these traits and many more. What throws off a reader of an application is a sharp and inexplicable contrast between a student's essay and everything that that reader has learned about the student throughout the rest of the application. For instance, an essay that is so highly polished that even a tenured professor would be proud to submit it for publication, from an applicant whom a reader otherwise finds attractive precisely because the evidence throughout the rest of the folder depicts a diamond in the rough, naturally raises questions in the reader's mind about whether the essay is really the work of the student. How does one square this brilliantly put essay, not only with comments from the applicant's teachers that poor writing skills constitute his only major weakness, but also with the student's rather modest writing skills that are all too evident throughout the rest of the application?

This is not to say that, if you need to, you should not have someone else whose judgment you value take a look at your essay in order to point out typos, grammatical errors, or even, ahem, incomprehensibility. But I can't emphasize enough (well, maybe I can) that the style, flavor, and substance of your essay needs to *be* your own and to *look* your own and to *sound* like you. In a word, your essay (in fact, your entire application) should *smell* authentic.

I guess what I am saying here is that essays that appear contrived, either in style or substance, often stand out and can end up working against an otherwise attractive applicant. My hunch is that many

students tend to underestimate their attractiveness compared with other applicants, come to imagine (erroneously) that colleges have some single, ideal admissions candidate in mind, and in the course of trying to come off as this imagined “ideal” candidate actually do themselves a disservice in the process. (With only a slight amount of exaggeration involved, the applicant I remember most quickly putting in the “admit” pile was one who wrote: “As you will notice, my test scores are quite low. They are accurate.”)

My fifth piece of advice is not to ask of your essay that it carry too heavy a load. Don’t use the essay to drop names, or to remind the reader that your parents are alumni of the college, or to rationalize a low grade or a low test score or a lost election of yearbook editor. Essays that are used to tell a college everything you think they should know about you but didn’t ask elsewhere in the application come to resemble junk sculptures. Just give the essay question or topic itself your best shot. (If there *is* additional information or an explanation you think is useful for the college to have in considering your application, simply add an extra sheet and attach it to your application papers.)

Also, resist the temptation to write the *all-purpose* essay, to which you then make small adjustments in order to use it for all of your college applications no matter how different the essay questions or topics they set before you. Such essays are painfully obvious, and more often than not engender a negative reaction. Just as applicants want to be treated as individuals by each of the colleges to which they are applying, so, too, do the colleges desire that their applications be treated individually by the applicants. At least that’s the way we feel.

My last piece of advice is to tell you to sort and sift any advice you receive (including my own) and to settle only on that which intuitively makes sense to you. As crazy and as varied as the admissions process seems when you are going through it, it’s always struck me that one of the virtues of admission to American colleges and universities is precisely the lack of a consensus among even the most se-

lective colleges on what the “perfect” application looks like or who the most desirable applicants are. The observations I’ve made here are based upon my particular experience in reading the applications at one college and one university over a twenty-year period. They’re not offered from on high, but rather simply on the off chance that one or another of them just might ring a bell with you. Whatever, good luck.

—FRED A. HARGADON
Dean of Admission,
Princeton University

(Fred A. Hargadon was Dean of Admissions at Swarthmore College from 1964 to 1969, and Dean of Admission at Stanford University from 1969 to 1984.)

The Question of the Essay

Should it be catchy or trendy? How about something straightforward yet really specific? Or maybe one should cover broad topics and wander freely in any direction. . . . What would be the most pleasing? What would give them what they really want? Why does it seem that all the good ideas have been taken?

The time had come to change the Haverford College application essay question. We knew that we were dissatisfied—tired of reading the same old answers to the same old question. Students found our essay boring and restrictive. We did, too. Ours was a plain and unadorned question: *Why do you want to go to college; and why do you particularly want to go to Haverford?* Although it fit the honest, direct style of the College, it elicited deadly dull answers and a plethora of “additional essays” that students thought allowed them more creativity. They were right.

What we needed, then, was a straightforward question that was a bit more exciting. How could we expect varied and interesting essays if we insisted on being so restrictive? At the same time, we liked the notion that the question should somehow reflect the style of the College. The challenge was to ask a candid question that would still allow originality and variation in the answers.

What exactly do admissions officers want to know when they ask you to write the college essay? No matter which question, we are asking what is really important to you, who you are, and how you arrived where you are. The whole college application process is really a self-exploration, and the essay is a way to put your personal ad-

venture into words. It is a summing-up, maybe a catharsis. You need not expose all of your innermost thoughts, but you must share some part of yourself.

We want you to be honest, genuine, and forthright. You could also be witty or clever, if you are skilled at humor. We want you to give a piece of yourself to the project; and we want you to grow in the process. The best essays shine with the personality of the writer and give depth and credibility to the person described in the application. This may be the first time you thought critically about your high school accomplishments, your motivation for a career, or the difficulty you experience with math. Perhaps you have never before articulated your feelings about the pain of leaving home, the love of a grandparent, or the joy of a religious experience. You need not cover every detail or aspect of your life; just a piece of your philosophy or a moment of your experience will do.

What if the question asks you to address something specific? What if you despise being any vegetable, or have no favorite person in the nineteenth century? How can you show your true self if the essay question seems to limit your expression? Keep in mind that the form of the question does not alter the fundamental challenge; we still want to know what is of real importance to you. The metaphor really makes little difference. Some will be easier than others for you, but none should be impossible. Do answer the question that is asked, but gently take it in the direction you want it to go. We would like all essays to be as entertaining and enlightening as the ones in this book, but we are happy to have your best effort, no matter what your writing talent may be.

Finally, we who sit on admissions committees expect that you will have several issues or experiences that are important to you. Sometimes you are able to touch upon most or all in your essay; but other questions will limit your answer and force you to choose just one. Be assured that we know the limits of our own essay questions; our universal expectation is that you will do your best, in both form and content. If you have done self-exploration during the process of

choosing colleges to which you will apply, then you should be able to generate a list of topics and ideas that are important to you. As you consider each college's essay question, apply it to the ideas on your list and see which ones fit best.

Getting back to the question of *The Question*, we knew that we wanted to encourage genuine and honest responses about important matters in students' lives. Like the students, we wanted our "personality" to manifest itself. Like *Jeopardy!* we needed the question after we found the answer. Although the solution eluded us far too long, the question, like the best essays, is simple and direct: *We want to know you better. Please write a description of what you are like as a person.* What could be easier? Or more difficult?

—DELSIE Z. PHILLIPS
*Director of Admission,
 Haverford College*

What *Not* to Do . . . and Why

I Yam what I Yam.
 —Popeye

I urged the *Harvard Independent* not to do this book. I told them that the last thing most high school seniors needed was a collection of superb college essays, exquisitely crafted and boldly imaginative. Most seniors are not going to write great essays, at least not ones that will by themselves get the reader admitted. In fact, I know of college studies in which 3 percent of the essays helped the applicant, 2 percent hurt the applicant, and 95 percent, while perfectly respectable, had no effect whatsoever on the admissions decision. Yet I have seen even good writers crippled by the pressure they put on themselves to write a great essay, one that will get them admitted. I was worried that this book would contribute to the already high anxiety level of most seniors seeking admission to the kinds of colleges that ask for and read the essay.

I suggested that the *Harvard Independent* compile a book of bad essays, examples of the kinds of writing to avoid. They agreed that the book would not contain all faultless examples of essays, and they asked me to write an introduction. Following my advice, I would like to mention some of the more common mistakes seniors make in deciding upon an essay topic and in writing the essay.

First, don't write an essay that any one of a thousand other seniors could write, because they probably will. By the nine-hundred and forty-second time a college person reads about how bad you felt after

losing the big game, that essay has lost its emotional impact. You can write about losing the big game, but when you have finished, read it and ask yourself if anyone else could have written the same essay. If you think the college might receive even one other essay like yours, rewrite it. The fact that you cried after losing the big game doesn't distinguish you from all the others who might write this essay. On the other hand, the details—where you cried, who talked to you, exactly what you were thinking—probably will set you apart.

I think you should avoid writing an essay that will embarrass the reader. While you definitely must risk something personally in order to write an effective essay, the risk should not place a burden on the reader. The reader is not your therapist, not your confessor, and not your close friend. If you place the reader in any such role, he or she will be uncomfortable. You certainly want your essay to stand out from the crowd, but it is probably better to be forgotten than to be remembered in a negative manner.

Don't try to sell yourself. The college will exercise its quality-control function using the grades and scores, not the essay. They use the essay to flesh out the numbers, to try to see and hear the person in the application. Rather than persuading the college that you are great, just show them who you are, what you care about, what moves you to anger, what the pivotal points in your life have been so far.

Also don't try to write an important essay . . . the definitive statement on the Middle East crisis or on race relations in America. These essays tend to come across as much more pompous than their authors intend, I suppose, because it is unlikely that a high school senior is going to make the definitive statement on a major topic. More to the point, these essays tend to be written from a detached, objective point of view, exactly the opposite of what most college people are looking for in an applicant's essay. They read your essay to find out who you are. When they want an informed opinion, they will go to the editorial pages, not their files of college essays.

Don't set out to write the perfect essay, the one with a huge impact, the one that will blow the doors to the college open for you. It

just doesn't happen very often. It is largely a fantasy, and you will be putting enormous pressure on the still-developing writing skills of an eighteen-year-old. Think instead of giving the reader a sample of yourself, a slice of the real you, a snapshot in words. It doesn't have to be an award-winning photograph, it just needs to be really you and reasonable well focused. Imagine that if you wrote the essay next month, it might well be completely different, because you would be different by then. I find regularly that the best essays I read are the result of a concentrated forty-five minutes, not the result of hours and hours of agonizing.

I will give one caveat on the writing itself. Don't have others edit and correct it until you cannot hear your own voice any more. Certainly, you should correct the spelling. Of course, you should rewrite the essay, probably several times. My favorite writer on the subject of writing, William Zinsser, has convinced me that there is no such thing as good writing, only good rewriting. Rewrite to make sure that your words are saying what you intend them to say. That is all. That is the primary goal of rewriting. Word choice and word order must remain yours; even if a more experienced writer might suggest the more precise word, it will not be your word and you will begin to disappear from the essay. And remember that the only reason this essay has for existing is to show the reader who you are.

Finally, relax. Your chances of writing an essay that gets you admitted when you otherwise would not have been are unbelievably remote. Pick something you feel strongly about, for that will give the reader a window into your heart, and just write it. Think of the choice of subject and the first writing as simply sharing some part of yourself with a new friend. This is not unusually painful. The work should come in the rewriting stage.

Good luck.

—WILLIAM K. POIROT
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