

# THE WRITER'S CRAFT

## OR, HOW I STOPPED WORRYING AND LEARNED TO WRITE THE PERFECT COLLEGE ADMISSIONS ESSAY

BY IAN BASSIN

**Forget for a second that you have to write your college application essay.**

Instead, imagine that you have to read **7,000** essays written by seniors just like you all over the country. And you thought writing one essay seemed daunting. At the other end of your college application are real people, who actually have to read all those essays.

Understanding their job is understanding your audience. That is the secret to writing a good college application essay.

**Here are the top five secrets to writing killer essays.**

### 1. REVEAL YOUR SELF

Make sure your essay gives the reader an insight into who you are—what you're like as a person, and whether you can express yourself in a clear, organized, and compelling style. Put that way, you already have the tools you need for writing the essay. One of the most common mistakes that seniors make is trying too hard. The result: overblown writing containing profound revelations about the world instead of a straightforward, interesting essay which says something honest about themselves. Remember, these admissions officers are reading essays by high school seniors; they don't expect you to be wiser than your years or more skilled than you actually are. Using verbose prose is not the point. The colleges are confident that they can teach you how to write once you get there—in the meantime, they want to learn something about you without getting bored or confused. So what about you is relevant?

### 2. THERE IS NO LIST OF GOOD THINGS TO WRITE ABOUT, BUT THERE IS A LIST OF BAD ONES

Admissions officers tend to use the essay to figure out what makes you an individual, what sets you apart from the other 6,999 applicants. Thinking about what you have in common with those other applicants is a good way to figure out what to *avoid* writing about. Every year, thousands of high school students go abroad, win a football game, or climb a mountain at Outward Bound. As a result, many of them chose to write about these events as defining experiences. Big mistake. Think about how annoyed you'd be if you were the officer reading his or her 2,000th essay about how a guy's bite of a croissant taught him about himself and the world. Pick a topic that is unique to you, something that you think is unlikely to have happened to anyone else.

## THE TYPES OF ESSAYS

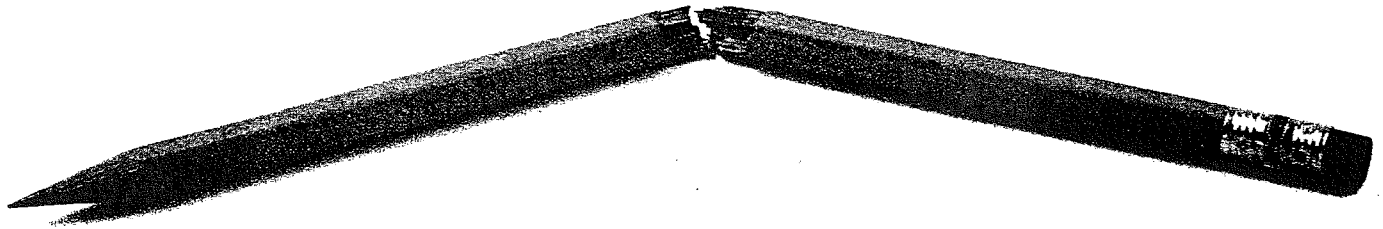
### THE PERSONAL TRAGIC EXPERIENCE

These can be very powerful, but don't try to escalate or invent an experience just to make the essay work.

### THE "MY COACH..." OR

### "MY PARENTS / GRANDPARENTS..." ESSAY

These are very common, and the danger is that they want to know about *you*. If a story about your coach or your parents sheds light on you, then this can work.



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**3. USE THE ESSAY AS A CHANCE TO EXPLAIN ANY BAD NEWS OR GLITCHES THAT APPEAR IN THE OTHER PARTS OF YOUR APPLICATION**

One good place to start looking for topics is to think about what the admissions officers already know about you. They've seen your transcript, teacher recommendations, SAT or ACT scores, and a list of your extracurriculars. Is there anything in that information that would mislead them about you? Did you have a semester in which your grades were far worse than your average? Did you drop a class in the middle of the year as a freshman? These are the kinds of things that might make the admissions office curious. If there is a good explanation, write about it. You don't have to defend yourself, so don't think of it as a trial, but being able to provide a context for what the officers have already seen on your transcript will help them to know you better.

**4. LIMIT YOURSELF TO ONE STRONG POINT AND HAMMER IT HOME BY USING CLEAR AND DETAILED EXAMPLES**

Bad essays tend to fail because they are either scattered, vague, or fail to lend adequate support to the central thesis. Picking the right thesis is crucial to avoiding the slush pile. You're not going to be able to tell your life story or provide a penetrating and comprehensive look at every facet of your personality in a five-paragraph essay, so don't try. Focus on one aspect of who you are that is specific. Once you've figured that out, compile a list of stories from your life that best exemplify that trait in you. Use the criteria we've already covered to eliminate stories from that list that are too common and try to pick between one and three examples that are colorful, unique, and support the claim you are making about who you are.

**5. DON'T PUT THE READER TO SLEEP**

Generally, a writer who is revealing something truthful is fascinating to read. Writers who try too hard to be clever can end up just being painful. The best writing is direct and to the point. Impressing a college-admissions dean with your vast vocabulary and your intricate sentence construction is not going to tell him or her anything that wasn't already revealed in your SAT scores. It's fine to use big words, but don't use more than you would in an average conversation. Most important, keep it organized. You know well enough by now to start out with an outline, and to make sure that each point you make transitions smoothly into the next and supports your main argument. If you've picked an interesting and unique topic and you probe into the topic and yourself, your essay will be as engrossing as it needs to be.

**THE HUMOROUS ESSAY**

These are rare and risky, but if the student is an excellent writer and the essay is funny and entertaining, it can mark the candidate as a talented individual.

**THE "SITTING UNDER A TREE" ESSAY**

These are essays that describe a moment of profound realization. The key here is not to fall into cliché (sunsets, rainstorms, stary nights, etc.) and to be highly specific with your thesis.

**THE TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE**

These are the "I went to France and grew as a person" essays. While they are common, they can succeed if they are specific and well written.

This is about the author's goal, NOT the author

# BAD ESSAY SAMPLE

but who is behind the goals?  
remember secret no. 1

In determining my career goals and aspirations, I must first know what stirs true passion in me. Professionally speaking, I know where my main interest lies: international business. I am, more specifically, determined to attain a series of goals leading to the ultimate objective of owning my own business. On the way, I will develop both as an individual and as a leader. I am a clear and strategic thinker, but it is passion that drives me to forge ahead. Likewise, it is my dedication that will enable me to surmount the greatest challenges in achieving my career goals: making sure that I choose the right opportunities and learn from my mistakes. Looking down the road, I see myself creating opportunities for myself and for others. I can think of no better way to build a full, satisfying career.

SHOW, don't TELL

WHERE IS THE THESIS OF THIS ESSAY?

Great, but what experiences & qualities will help the author achieve his goal?

Immediately after graduation, I plan to accumulate experience by obtaining a position with an international electronic commerce company. Such a position will allow me to manage a project team and be responsible for all phases of project delivery as well as revenue recognition. Five years hence, I envision myself rising to the position of vice president of an entire division, and drawing on that experience to start my own company.

who are you NOW?

Ten years after graduation, I hope to be the president of my own company. Like my other targets, this objective is ambitious, yet feasible. I have, over the course of my career, developed an adaptability and concentration that allows me to set goals and attain them one by one, always with a clear vision of what overall direction I plan to follow. My keen interest in international business, combined with the broad experience I will have under my belt by then, will allow me to launch and shape a company with the analytical yet creative thinking required to thrive in today's dynamic marketplace.

OVER-WRITTEN remember secret no. 5

Didn't the essay START like this?

In attempting to determine what aspects of my personality or background might present the greatest obstacles to achieving my career goals, I can think of no trait that my determination and dedication will not overcome.

Far from flinching from challenges, I embrace every opportunity to solve new kinds of problems and thereby acquire new forms of knowledge and skills. I have faced every difficulty I have encountered in my life through determination, hard work, and confidence, and I have no doubt that these are the qualities that will permit me to blaze my own trail into the future.

what are the difficulties? Please tell us!

cliché

( NO REAL CONCLUSION, but then again, there was NO REAL THESIS )

Be yourself. A college application essay should let the reader meet the real you--apart from the list of grades, test scores, and achievements that make up the rest of your application. William Poirot, a college counselor, says, "Don't write an essay that any one of a thousand other seniors could write, because they probably will."

Try the following:

1. Read the college application essay question and set aside forty-five minutes or so to answer it. (Hours of agonizing are not apt to get across the real you.)
2. Write quickly and freely, including unique details of your experiences, emotions, and thoughts. Describe actual scenes and tell a personal story if you can.
3. Reread your essay and ask yourself--and perhaps a trusted friend--if the real you comes through.
4. Now, with a critical eye, look at the order of your ideas. Since the college will expect you to write in a logical way, reorder your essay, if necessary, to reflect your ability to do this.
5. Eliminate anything that does not carry weight. Aim for a single page of clear, light, readable prose.
6. Check mechanics. Check to see that your writing has rhythm and balance. Be satisfied that your essay reveals your special way of looking at the world.
7. Write a final draft and type it neatly.

### **Assignment:**

ALL APPLICANTS: A written essay on one of the following three topics is required of all applicants. This is your opportunity to help the admissions committee know you better as a student and as an individual. It is a significant component of the application process and should demonstrate your ability to organize and communicate your thoughts in writing, so it should be prepared carefully.

**Essay #1:** Because transcripts, test scores and awards lists provide only a partial picture of an applicant, we want to know more! Please provide us with an original piece of written work to give us more than the facts and figures. Feel free to focus on an experience, a philosophy or a significant event (or invent a topic of your own). Our hope is to get to know you better. How you help us do that is up to you!

**Essay #2:** Describe how a movie, play, book, or piece of music has challenged your way of thinking about yourself or the world.

**Essay #3:** What factors have led you to consider \_\_\_\_\_ college? Why do you believe it may be a good match and what do you believe you can add to the \_\_\_\_\_ community, academically and personally? Feel free to draw on past experiences to support your perspective.