

Advice from three College Admissions Officers and from a former college applicant

I Andrew K. Strickler, Dean of Admission and Financial Aid, Connecticut College

Over the years, students who tell me they absolutely love to write have said they struggle with the application essay. So if you've been biting your nails or tearing your hair out even a little, you're not alone.

The good news is, I can help. I've been in the admission business long enough to have gleaned a few tips that I think are worth passing along. I also want to recommend you take a look at our Essays that Worked: real essays submitted by real students who have since matriculated at Connecticut College. These essays are terrific, and you can find them listed on the right side of this page.

Now for my tips.

1. Allow yourself plenty of time to write the essay. Do not wait until the last minute. I know this sounds absurdly simple, but it really does make a difference to be as relaxed as possible when you sit down to write.
2. Choose the prompt that comes closest to something you'd like to write about. The purpose of the prompt is to help you reflect on something that matters to you. Your application will be full of information that illuminates dimensions of you and your abilities, but only the essay gives you a vehicle to speak, in your own voice, about something personally significant. Choose something you care about and it will flow more naturally.
 - (a) Fallacy: If you haven't experienced a life-changing event, you have nothing to write about. Wrong. You care about things now. Write about one of them and show us why it matters to you.
 - (b) Fallacy: If you haven't had a major international service experience, you're sunk. Wrong again. If you've had such an experience and you feel it says something important about you, great. If you haven't, just choose something that says something important about you. That's all.
3. When you've written a first draft, let it sit. Then go back to it another day. Ask people you trust for their feedback, but don't let anyone else tell you how you should write it. This is your story, or some small but significant part of it, as told or reflected upon by you.
4. When you've revised it to your heart's content, proofread with care. Spellcheck isn't always the most reliable friend, as I have learned on occasion with a quickly typed email that gets sent before it was proofread!

5. Submit it, and treat yourself to something nice — like your favorite film, a run, quality time with your dog or whatever it is that you enjoy.

That's it for tips. Now you should read the Essays that Worked, and be inspired by their example!

II Chris Peterson, Assistant Director, MIT Admissions

Listen: writing well is hard.

It is hard for a lot of different reasons. Sometimes it is hard because you don't know your audience and have to guess. Sometimes it is hard because you have a lot of stories tripping over each other to get onto the page. Sometimes it is hard because, no matter how smoothly you try to form your sentences, they invariably tumble out of you, all stiff and angular like a box of bent pipes.

But being able to write well is important. You will never encounter a situation in which obfuscation is to your advantage. You will frequently encounter situations where crisp, compelling writing can express your feelings, make your case, even save lives: Edward Tufte [argues](#) that the *Challenger* disaster could have been prevented if only the case against launching had been made more clearly.

While (hopefully) no lives are riding on your college application essays, this is a great time to [revisit](#) some of the rules of writing well.

George Orwell's [Politics and the English Language](#) is my personal guide to thinking about writing. The theoretical foundation he lays in this piece – about the importance of language, including writing, in shaping how we are capable of thinking – he later built upon in *1984*.

Read this essay. Read it closely, read it carefully. It will change the way you think about writing. I keep Orwell's rules for writing next to my desk always:

1. *Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.*
2. *Never use a long word where a short one will do.*
3. *If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.*
4. *Never use the passive where you can use the active.*
5. *Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.*
6. *Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.*

Now, in this essay Orwell took issue primarily with contemporary political propaganda. As he wrote:

In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions and not a "party line." Orthodoxy, of whatever color, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style.

But the same is true for college essays, as Orwell doubtlessly would have realized if he were reanimated and handed him a sheaf of Common Applications. The sad truth is that most college application essays are not very good. When I say they are "not very good", I mean they are either boring, impenetrable, melodramatic, or all of the above.

The single greatest scourge of college application essays is the advice dispensed by books with names like “*50 Winning College Essays from Ivy League Students*.” Everything about these books, from the titles on down, is so suffused with self-congratulation that it should be no surprise the essays themselves stink like bad perfume. Hint: These books exist because people at name-brand schools realized they could sell aspiring applicants drafts of their essays. They do not, as a rule, provide actual good advice. If anything, they simply reproduce the “lifeless, imitative style” of orthodoxy against which Orwell railed.

Orthodoxy runs deep. Last year I was traveling with a colleague from Yale. He had recently spent a week on a reservation helping Native American students navigate the college process, and he had been shocked by the degree to which the clichés and tropes of college essays had penetrated into their world. As he told me, the essays his students – who had lived vastly different lives than most mainstream applicants – were writing were indistinguishable from those written by applicants in southeastern Connecticut. They were composed of billowing clouds of “my global perspective” and “future potential as a leader” and “desire to leverage my education” to *bllllllaurhfhasklafsfafghfalkasf*.

Do not do this. Do not allow your essays to descend into an impenetrable bulk of buzzwords and banality. You are an interesting person. Your essays should be **yours**. This is best described in [How to Write a Great Statement of Purpose](#), by Vince Gotera of the University of Northern Iowa, which was my guide to writing my essays when I applied to graduate school.

Consider, for example, Gotera’s comparison of two hypothetical introductory paragraphs for a master’s program in library science:

I am honored to apply for the Master of Library Science program at the University of Okoboji because as long as I can remember I have had a love affair with books. Since I was eleven I have known I wanted to be a librarian.

vs.

When I was eleven, my great-aunt Gretchen passed away and left me something that changed my life: a library of about five thousand books. Some of my best days were spent arranging and reading her books. Since then, I have wanted to be a librarian.

As Gotera says: each graf was 45 words long and contained substantively the same information (applicant has wanted to be a librarian since she was a young girl). But they are extraordinarily different essays, most strikingly because the former is generic where the latter is specific. It was a real thing, which happened to a real person, told simply. There is nothing better than that.

So let me save you the trouble of buying any of those books and close by quoting Kurt Vonnegut’s seven rules for writing well, which are as applicable to college applications as they are to writing everything else:

1. *Find a subject you care about.*
2. *Do not ramble, though.*
3. *Keep it simple.*
4. *Have the guts to cut.*
5. *Sound like yourself.*
6. *Say what you mean to say.*
7. *Pity the readers.*

Specificity, clarity, and brevity are your keys. Use them to unlock the writer inside you.

III Anne Paik, Immaculate Heart High School, Los Angeles, Class of 2012 (accepted to UCLA, UC Irvine Honors College, UC San Diego)

In this post, I will connect the transformative quality of writing with the searing fearlessness of college essays, or college essays as they should be.

My peers often misread the opportunity of college essays as a one-time chance to glorify their accomplishments and present themselves in the best light possible. This is only true to the extent that students shouldn't strive to portray themselves in an unfavorable light.

But it's incorrect to assume that college essays reflect conventional perfection. Since we are not perfect, we shouldn't concern ourselves with trying to justify our imperfections by excusing them.

I'm not trying to impress upon the public that I'm a fantastic writer or that I have an exclusive knowledge about college essays. My comments are drawn from my experience in struggling to formulate my own essay — in striving to achieve that correct balance between confidence and humility, achievement and growth.

For me, writing is all about discovering myself. I could expound on the revelatory quality of writing for hours and hours, but I can only keep your attention span for so long, so I'll be as succinct as possible.

The old adage "write what you know" still rings true for many writers out there, and especially for young students who will attempt to craft the perfect college essay.

You can't write about Keynesian economics or the evolutionary history of the mole rat if you don't know anything about it, so there's no use in trying to impress your readers with your nonexistent expertise. You certainly don't get any redemption points in your favor for attempting to tackle an insurmountable topic, and the readers end up assuming that you are either pretentious or pompous.

In the sensitive and nuanced hands of a well-versed writer, just about any topic can be rife with enticing possibilities and complexities. But since most people don't have the assiduity required to accomplish such a feat, it's easier to stick with what you know to be fascinating and compelling.

I have a friend who wrote about the reasons why the Kenmore washer-dryer was his favorite piece of machinery. Another friend humorously poked fun at her first great directorial failure.

I wrote about my Saturdays with my grandfather, teaching him how to wink and losing spectacularly at Mahjong.

You don't have to comb through your memory bank for the most outrageous and hilarious events that mark the great turning points of your life. Just write about what is important to you, and why

it is important. That's really what colleges look for anyway, past the accolades and accomplishments.

Admissions offices brush away names and grade-point averages to reveal the person beneath, and what that person can personally contribute to the campus as a whole. In this light, college essays become fearless and intrepid: they shine brilliantly and shamelessly, and, combined with the transformative quality of writing, stand to distract the admissions board from your otherwise less-than-perfect aspects.

Writing is an exacting and tireless process for it forces the writer to truly consider the weight of his words, to assure himself that this is what he understands to be true. Writing is about belief and faith, and surprisingly so, for so many people manipulate its rhetoric for malignant purposes.

But, truly and deeply so, writing is an act of faith, a holy and sanctified transaction of thought and emotions. It's beautiful, it's revelatory, and it's darn difficult because it's so beautiful and revelatory.

This is why college essays remain one of the more challenging obstacles of student life because the actual process demands faith and critical self-introspection, two things that have continually evaded the grasps of many students. But the great college essays grapple with this predicament and incorporate it, creating something that not only illuminates the darkness but reads a bit like poetry.

IV Martha Merrill, Retired Dean of Admission and Financial Aid, Connecticut College

The college application process takes time, preparation and creativity, which is a lot for any active senior to handle. Summer, however, typically offers about 10 weeks free of classes and homework and many of the other stresses that come with high school. The pressure of the looming college application deadline is still months away, which allows students the freedom to play around with different ideas, test different angles and solicit feedback from friends and family.

- **Write about yourself.** A great history paper on the Civil War might be very well written, but it doesn't tell me anything about the writer. Regardless of the topic, make sure you shine through your essay.
- **Use your own voice.** I can tell the difference between the voice of a 40-year-old and a high school senior.
- **Focus on one aspect of yourself.** If you try to cover too many topics in your essay, you'll end up with a resume of activities and attributes that doesn't tell me as much about you as an in-depth look at one project or passion.
- **Be genuine.** Don't try to impress me, because I've heard it all. Just tell me what is important to you.
- **Consider a mundane topic.** Sometimes it's the simple things in life that make the best essays. Some of my favorites have included essays that reflect on the daily subway ride to

school, or what the family goldfish observed from the fishbowl perched on the family kitchen table. It doesn't have to be a life-changing event to be interesting and informative.

- **Don't rely on "how to" books.** Use them to get your creative juices flowing, but don't adhere too rigidly to their formulas, and definitely don't use their example topics. While there are always exceptions, the "what my room says about me" essay is way overdone.
- **Share your opinions, but avoid anything too risky or controversial.** Your essay will be read by a diverse group of individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, so try to appeal to the broadest audience possible.
- **Tell a good story.** Show me why you are compassionate; don't tell me you are. Show me that you have overcome great difficulty; don't start your essay with "I have overcome great difficulties."
- **Don't repeat what is already in your application.** If you go to a performing arts school and all of your extracurricular activities and awards relate to dance, don't write about how much you love dancing. Tell me something I couldn't know just from reading the other parts of your application.
- **Finally, don't forget about the supplements.** The supplement questions are very important – you should plan to spend as much time on them as you do on your essay. A well-written essay won't help if your supplement essays