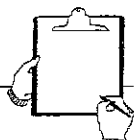


The College Application Essay



Marylyn E. Calabrese, Ph.D.
Writing Specialist

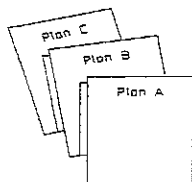
Topics



- How important
- Basic guidelines
- Your* topics
- What to avoid
- Sample student essays
- Evaluating your essay
- Additional help

How important is the essay?

- Yes**
- Maybe**
- No**



What the colleges are looking for



- Authenticity
 - A real person
 - Creativity
 - Introduction to the admissions committee
 - Your* contribution to the college community
-

Basic guidelines

- Follow directions
 - Write in your own voice
 - Keep it short
 - Use an upbeat tone
 - Try a different approach
 - Write an essay, not a story
-

Possible topics

- Anything that reveals *YOU*
 - Sports, music, travel, volunteer activities, family experiences, academic courses or projects, part-time jobs
 - Examples of *your* personal growth
-

How to approach your topic

- Take an ordinary event...
 - Select an incident to...
 - Use examples to *show*, not *tell*
 - Explain, interpret
 - Avoid a shallow, bland piece
-

What to avoid

- Sample 1
 - Sample 2
 - Sample 3

 - The most common mistake in college application essays
-



How to evaluate your draft

- Have you answered the question?
 - Does the essay present *YOU*?
 - Does the opening get the reader's attention?
 - Does your essay *show*, not *tell*?
 - Do you have a title?
 - Is your essay free from errors?
 - Have you spoken in your own voice?
-

Review of Sample Student Essays

Original

I would like to receive a Bachelor of Science in Economics at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Then I would like to go on and work for an MBA at either Penn or another reputable institution. I have chosen Penn as my undergraduate university for many reasons. First, I know it has a prominent program of studies in Economics at Wharton. Next, it has a good balance between social life and school work (I had heard this from a student at your university). A third reason is that I have heard many positive remarks about the school. Last, it is close to my house, so I have the option to come home on weekends.

Revision

I have always been interested in money, not just making it, but also managing it. Thinking back to when I was young, I remember many lemonade stands and car washes. These were my sources of income, and I took them rather seriously. I always was thinking of more efficient ways to make lemonade or car wash soap, and I had the best corners and streets identified for future sales. Later an interest in business efficiency led to my creation of a computer system for paying bills that was far superior to my father's disorganized method. All of my life I have viewed the financial aspect of ideas and proposals; now I am looking forward to building theoretical and quantitative foundations for my interest. I would like to do this in the Economics Department at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.

**What are the major differences between these two essays?
What image of the writer does each essay present?**

Sample Essay

The Game is Not Over

Three summers ago, my tennis coach told me I was the worst player on the team. That began a personal battle of finding out if I was a quitter or a fighter.

When it happened, I withheld my strong urge to speak up. I could either decide to not deal with her harsh pessimism or continue with the sport I love, despite my coach's disbelief in my ability.

Currently, I have been on the varsity tennis team for two years and extremely happy that I decided not to quit that summer day. In the end, you are your own person whose choices can make a world of difference. If I did not continue with the XYZ girls' tennis team, I would never have the sharp competitive edge I have today. Tennis has not only taught me the significance of teamwork and responsibility, but most importantly, how to find out who I am and the inner strength that lay inside me.

From this incident, I have learned that I have the ability to get where I want to go whether it is improving a grade, trying to satisfy a customer in my job, or defeating my opponents. I now know I have the confidence to always pursue my goals. I look forward to meeting this challenge at Penn State.

Many colleges ask you to explain how an experience or person has influenced you. Identify the sentences in this essay where the writer has answered that question.

Original (Draft 1)

During the summer between eighth and ninth grade, I moved to my present school district. I was leaving all my friends behind and coming into a unknown, unfriendly place. I do not make friends easily, so this was a hard loss for me. I hadn't met anyone likeable that was going out for a sport, so I didn't go out for any sports either, but then I have always preferred to read a book instead of throwing a football. Time passed, and by the middle of the year, my healthy appetite and my lack of exercise produced a natural result—I was quite overweight. And I hated it. I realized the only way to get rid of the fat was to cut down my eating and exercise. I had enough self control to cut down on high calorie food. As for exercise, I realized that the best way to make sure I stuck with a exercise program was to join a sport. I had, throughout my life, tried soccer, football, baseball, softball, and hockey, and not enjoyed any of them very much. So, I joined the track team. It began one of the hardest times of my life. At first the pain was immense, and I woke up sore and stiff every morning, but I persevered. As time passed, I grew better at running, and the fat started to disappear. At long last I began to enjoy running. It renewed my confidence, and I began to make friends, first on the team, and then in school. I had conquered my greatest enemy, myself. And I had integrated myself in a new place, and was much happier for it.

Revision (Draft 4)

The Ultimate Enemy

The most difficult opponent to overcome is yourself. You know your every dislike, excuse and every single skeleton buried in every deep, dark closet. When it is time to accomplish an impossible task that must be done, the greatest enemy is not fear; it is your own body and mind.

Three years ago, when I moved to my present school district, I had to fight myself. I have always preferred reading a book instead of throwing a football, so I did not go out for a sport. Since I had a fair amount of free time on my hands and I do not make friends easily or quickly, it wasn't surprising that by the middle of the year, I had gained weight. I hated being fat and I hated myself for getting fat. I knew I had to get rid of the extra weight; at least my mind did. So I joined the track team, beginning one of the hardest times of my life.

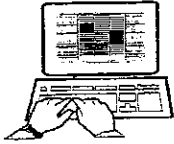
The pain was immense, and I woke up stiff and sore every day. Each morning I broke records with the endless reasons to quit track and have another cookie. Every afternoon I thought of all the things I could be doing instead of two hours of running after school. Every step around the track was accompanied by a little voice saying, "Quit Stop Quit Stop." Although the fight to run faster was part of my struggle, inside me the true battle raged. But even as I acknowledged all the good reasons not to run, I forced myself to take another tired step. And another step. Each time I got up in the morning, I ignored the pain and the little voice telling me to quit. I knew that I was winning. My body was changing for the better, so I kept on going.

At long last I began to enjoy running, and the fat began to melt away. My confidence and pride soared to new heights. I was much happier; I had done the impossible! I began to make friends, first on the team, and then in school. I had conquered my greatest enemy. Me.

What are the major differences between these two essays?

The Real You: Be Authentic in Your College Application Essay

Marylyn E. Calabrese, Ph.D., Writing Coach



“Describe a significant experience and tell why it was important.”

“Who has influenced your life and why?”

“Select one of your out-of-school activities and explain what role it plays in your life.”

These are only a few of the questions facing high school seniors as they sit down to write their college application essays. But no matter what the question is, the approach should always be the same.

Be genuine, be real, be yourself.

The college application essay is a window through which the admissions committee can see you as a person, apart from your grades and test scores, separate from your resume and lists of extra curricular activities.

This format is unfamiliar to most high school seniors. In fact, it's a format that would challenge many adult writers. It's part *story*, but it's so much more than a story. It may seem to be a *memoir*, but it really isn't a memoir.

The college application essay should be an honest and authentic portrayal of you, the applicant. Most of all, this picture should reveal a real individual.

Don't be misled into thinking that this kind of writing is easy, it's not. But it is possible.

In fact, after working with thousands of students as a writing coach, I can say that most students—with the proper time and effort—can write a successful essay.

How can you make sure that your college application essay shows the *real you*? Here are several guidelines.

Content

The topic is important. It can focus on a real-life experience, a favorite activity, or an important goal—something that's vital to you. If you follow your heart, your passion will come through, and that's even more important than how well you write. Don't try to select a topic that you think will simply please the admissions committee. What's important to *you*?

Select your topic carefully. In fact, be open to the possibility that the right topic—with accompanying examples—may actually choose you. You have many areas to consider: school projects, both curricular and extra-curricular; out-of-school activities, including Scouts and volunteer assignments; paid jobs, music and sports, your future college major and career, and family experiences. Don't be discouraged if your first topic selection doesn't work out. That means that it wasn't the best choice. Try again and be open to obvious, but perhaps 'off-beat' options, like being the youngest in your family, or how many times you've moved, or why Halloween is a special holiday for you.

Use examples with care. Well-chosen specifics are the flesh and blood of any good piece of writing. Don't just describe the example or story; more importantly, show what it means. Explain how your examples reveal you to be an attractive candidate.

Once I worked with a student who wrote an essay about the death of her grandmother. Contrary to what you might think, topics

about personal loss are not off limits as long as they have an upbeat perspective to them and that you use them to show an important side of you. This student's essay focused on the girl's love for her grandmother and how much she meant to her. After we finished reading it together, I asked the student what the admissions committee had learned about her. She saw that her essay told too much about her grandmother and not enough about her. Upon further discussion, she revealed that through the death of her grandmother, she learned more about her grandfather and their relationship. In a telling moment, she said that she now saw what love was all about from a totally different perspective. Ultimately, her revised essay revealed her to be an insightful, mature, young woman who was able to reflect on her experiences.

Organization

After you have selected the experience or group of examples you'll use, then you need to think about organizing your essay. Although every essay is unique, the following organizational pattern seems to work well for many students. Consider if it would be good for you, but feel free to depart from it.

Create a picture and then put a frame around it. Your story, or group of examples, is the picture; how you present it to the reader is the frame. Don't make the mistake of just telling a story, or describing an important experience in your life. Make certain that you explain what that story means to you and how it reveals you.

For instance, let's say you worked hard to make the soccer team but at first didn't succeed. Tell what you learned from that experience and how it affected, if it did, other areas of your life. Or, suppose you want to tell about the summer you spent in Norway. Don't just describe a travelogue of the places you went and the people you met. Tell what the trip meant to you; i.e., explain

your perspective about _____, or what you learned about _____.

Here's a possible outline for your essay:

1st paragraph: introduction, short, 2-4 sentences max, gets the reader's attention and **introduces the essay topic, not simply the story. This is the first part of the frame for your picture.**

2nd, 3rd, 4th paragraphs, etc. develop the topic of your **essay**, not just the topic of your **story**this is **your picture**. Don't just describe what happened; show how the events portray you. Interpret, analyze.

last paragraph...wraps up the story and the essay, **the rest of the frame**

Voice

What makes an essay authentic? In addition to your topic and how you present it, an authentic essay has **your** language. Imagine that you are actually speaking to the admissions committee. What would you say, and how would you say it? Don't be tempted to use others' wording.

Don't try to impress. No formal, stilted language. Although your essay should reflect your very best writing, it should still sound like a teenager. Don't write—as one student did in his essay—"he was incapable of speech." Instead, say, "he couldn't talk!"

Once I worked with a student who after revising his essay several times proudly showed it to me. Although it was somewhat unpolished, it was interesting, alive, and an excellent picture of this particular student. I congratulated him on his hard work. Then something happened. The next time I met with this student to work on a different essay, he showed me the first one, which I

had assumed was finished. It wasn't. His father had rewritten it, *in his own language*, thinking he was improving it, but actually removing his son's authentic voice from the essay. Now it sounded like an adult's poor retelling of a teenager's story. It was a fake. I called the father and urged him to restore the essay to its unsophisticated, but successful, original.

A caution for parents. Of course, many of you will guide your students as they prepare their essays, but resist the temptation to write the essays for them. Students: trust your own voice, and please make it your very best voice.

Guard against negatives and fakery

The steps listed above should help you be yourself in your writing. Don't be discouraged by the difficulty of this task. As you are working hard to present your very best self, resist any pull in the opposite direction.

No bragging. Your whole application should brag for you. Never, ever say how great or smart or accomplished you are. What you want to have happen is for the admissions committee—after reviewing your application and reading your essays—to say, “Wow, who is this kid! He/she would be a good candidate for our school.”

Avoid whining. If your goal is to present yourself in the best possible light, that means no whining. In my experience, I see lots of whining in college application essays. How does it appear? By making excuses for poor grades, missed opportunities, overlooked awards you didn't get but feel you should have.

“The reason I got a ‘D’ in Algebra II was because the teacher didn't like me.”

“I never got a chance to try out for the orchestra because our family moved in the middle of the year.”

Even though these sentences may be totally true, you can't make these statements. What you can do, however, is write a very successful essay on how you learned to cope with setbacks. If you show that you don't feel sorry for yourself but that you know how to deal with disappointment, that will be worth writing about.

Evaluation

After you've produced your best efforts, look at your draft for the following:

- ***Title:*** If your essay is at least one page, you should have a title; it should be informative and attention-getting. Of course, you will never use, “my most significant experience” as your title.
- ***Essay, not story:*** Remember: a story is not an essay. Have you interpreted what your story or example means? Don't wait until the last paragraph to do so. A story tells what happened; an essay asks, “so what?” and then answers the question. You should be interpreting your story throughout your essay. In other words, make sure your picture has a frame around it.
- ***How you appear to the admissions committee.*** Most importantly, what do you want the admissions committee to know about you? Decide on several adjectives, if you can. Would a reader think of these words after reading your essay?
- ***You, you, you!*** The most important way your essay can be authentic is to make sure that you are in it.

Could anyone else have written it?
You want to avoid a shallow, bland
piece that can be interchanged with
other students' essays.

Finally...

After working with high school seniors for many years, I have had the pleasure of reading many memorable college application essays: I will never forget the boy who wrote about his dream of becoming a firefighter and how he dealt with his parents' reluctance. I still remember the girl who volunteered in nursing homes as a tribute to her deceased grandmother. I can vividly recall the boy who on his trip to West Virginia with a church group realized what he wanted to do with his life.

Why do these essays still come to my mind?
Because they reflected the real students who wrote them. All were authentic.

*Copyright, 2012, Marylyn E. Calabrese,
Ph.D. All rights reserved.*

If you want to learn more about college application essays, you're invited to attend a presentation at the Tredyffrin Public Library in Strafford at 7:30 pm on October 2, 2012. The program is free, but reservations are requested; call 610-688-7092, ext. 206.

Marylyn E. Calabrese, Ph.D., is a retired English Department Chairperson of Conestoga High School in Berwyn. She can be reached directly at

writedrme@aol.com

Additional Help

Essay conferences. On September 19 and on September 27, from 3-6 p.m., come to the counseling office to ask questions about your draft and to get feedback from Dr. Calabrese. If you intend to do this, please sign the list with Mrs. Kim McDonnell in the counseling office to reserve your place. All are welcome. If you do reserve a place but later find that you cannot keep your appointment, please let Mr. Harvey or Mrs. McDonnell know so that someone else can take your place. *Pick up the handout explaining how to e-mail me your draft in preparation for our conference.*

Articles on college application essays. Read the attachments and see how they apply to you. Look at the sample "before" and "after" essays and note the changes the student writers made in their revisions. What can you learn from these samples?

Get feedback from others. Ask others to read your writing. Be specific in your requests. Don't say, "What do you think of my essay?" Instead, ask, "What image of me is presented in this writing? If you didn't know me, what adjectives would you use to describe me?" Then check to see if these words describe you correctly. Don't forget that *you're in charge of how other people help you*. Suggestion: ask parents, teachers, and friends.

Private help sessions. If you wish to schedule an individual conference with writing specialist Marylyn Calabrese, please complete the following information and leave the slip on the front table. Cost is \$65 per hour, in person—at a mutually convenient location—or by telephone. Call 610-647-4230 or e-mail writedrme@aol.com. If you ever need to cancel or reschedule a session, please give at least 24 hours notice.

Main Line Times, 10/7/2010

A story is not an essay!

By Marylyn E. Calabrese, Ph.D.
Writing Coach

Do you know the difference between a story and an essay?

If you're a high-school senior sitting down to write essays for your college applications, you need to understand this important distinction.

In my work as a writing coach – I've read thousands of essays – the failure to use stories properly is perhaps the single greatest weakness I've encountered. That's why I'm devoting an entire article to this topic as the college-application season begins.

In the typical college-application essay – describe a significant experience and tell why it was important – a good story, or incident, can be very important. Usually, students select examples wisely: they choose real-life experiences that have genuinely affected their lives. In my experience, however, most students do not use these stories to their full effectiveness.

How are a story and an essay different?

A story answers the question, "what happened?" An essay responds, "so what?" A story describes, an essay interprets. A story explains, an essay analyzes.

A successful essay takes a story or incident and tells what that story means, especially what it means to the writer and how it reveals him or her as an attractive candidate to the admissions committee.

One of the primary purposes

of any college-application essay is to provide a picture of the student to the admissions committee. Would he or she be a "good fit" for their college community; what does the student have to offer; do they fit the college's profile? An essay can convey personal characteristics that do not come out in grades or test scores. So the essay can be important, perhaps even very important, to the admissions committee. The essay can introduce an authentic individual with interests, values and goals in full view.

But, as many seniors learn when they sit down to write, the college-application essay is not an easy task. How should a story best be presented? First, I'll explain what to avoid, and then I'll discuss some guidelines for effective storytelling.

Avoid this kind of 'storytelling'

■ A story told for its own sake and never interpreted. The student describes what happened, often at great length and sometimes written very well. But the admissions committee may learn very little about the student beyond the story itself. The student writer assumes that the reader will "fill in the blanks" and figure out what the story means, its connection to the student's life and, more important, its connection to the student's candidacy.

For example I worked with a student once who showed me a

detailed and very well-written story about a cross-country race. Before she read it aloud to me, I asked her to imagine that we were both on the admissions committee and reading the piece for the first time.

After she finished reading, I asked, "What have we learned about this girl?"

She was silent for quite a while. Finally, she replied, "This girl likes to run."

"Yes," I added, "and she's also an excellent writer. But is that enough? Is that all you want the admissions committee to know about you? Can you connect this story to anything else about yourself?"

Because she could not, she decided to select a new topic that she could use to reveal more of herself.

■ A story interpreted briefly at the very end of the essay. A line or two of analysis is preferable to no analysis at all, but usually is still not enough. Here the reader has to wade through a long piece of writing, sometimes very interesting, but still prompting the question, "Why am I being told all of this? So what?"

I can recall an essay in which a student told of her attempts to become the drum major of her high-school band. She described in great detail her efforts and her practices. The story went on for several pages. Finally, at the end, she recounted how she didn't succeed, but that through this experience she learned how to deal with failure. Her analysis at

the end showed her to be a very mature, thoughtful individual. I just hoped that the admissions committee – faced with thousands of essays to read – had actually read to the end.

Follow these guidelines for effective storytelling

■ Go behind the story and show – not tell – what it means. Many students don't do this because, quite frankly, they don't know what the story means until they've pushed to think about it. They've never asked themselves the question. But during the process of writing the essay, they often find out because they're pressed to do so.

■ Use the story as a picture and then put a frame around it. The key is to interpret. Don't wait for the end of the essay to do this. Use the title and opening paragraph to set up your story and then refer to your topic throughout, if you can, but definitely use the last paragraph to pull it all together.

I met with a student whose tennis coach had told her that she was the worst player on the team. This girl had a powerful story, but what should she do with it? At first, she just told it as it happened. But then, in answer to the question, "So what?" she decided she had a lot more to say: that she was not a quitter and that she had the know-how and confidence to pursue her goals. The final picture she presented was that of a hardworking, resilient young

Learn to fill in college applications

woman. Although the student never used these exact words to describe herself, she showed the reader – through her examples – how strong she was.

■ Use only those parts of the story that relate to your life. Edit and select the key aspects that reveal you. That soccer coach who became your mentor: no need to mention that he no longer works at your school.

■ Must you have a story? No. You can have a good essay without one dominating story. Many questions – e.g., discussion of a quote – don't lend themselves to storytelling. Even if you're writing about a "significant experience," you can fudge a little and use a series of examples or incidents that – together – are significant and form a picture of you. In general, an effective essay always has well-chosen examples and specifics that show who you are and what you value.

■ Look at your essay from the admissions committee's point of view. Ask yourself, "What have they learned about me from reading this essay?" Put that response into adjectives, if you can. Did they find out you're hardworking, or caring, or is the picture you've created vague and fuzzy? When you ask other people to read your work, ask them for adjectives, rather than asking what they think of your writing. Tell them to pretend they don't know you and come up with adjectives that describe the pic-

ture you present. Then check yourself on those words. Do they describe you correctly and adequately?

Put it all together: A summary

■ Decide what you want the admissions committee to know about you.

■ Select a story or collection of examples that illustrate your main points.

■ Interpret what these examples mean in how they reveal your key qualifications as a candidate.

■ Organize your essay so that the reader finds it easy to follow: an interesting and informative title, a clear introduction that sets up the main points of your essay, a full interpretation of any stories or examples, and a logical organization of your key concepts.

Finally, although a story in itself is not an essay – if used appropriately, it can be a powerful tool in presenting an authentic picture of you as a prospective candidate.

Copyright, 2010, Marylyn E. Calabrese, Ph.D. All rights reserved.

Marylyn E. Calabrese, writing coach, is a retired Conestoga High School English Department chairperson. She can be contacted directly at writedrmecc@aol.com.

