

Telling Your Story: Admissions Essays

BY CAROLYN Z. LAWRENCE of AdmissionsAdvice.com

I've been asked to read and edit many college admissions over the past few years. Several in particular stand out in my memory, including one written by a girl named Mandy to answer a question about diversity. Her essay vividly described how she discovered during a visit to her grandfather's house in China, that he was a life-long communist, and how she came to terms with the emotions this knowledge evoked in her. It was short, sweet, and extremely well-written. A few grammatical touch ups and I knew Mandy had a winner. Later, Mandy wrote to thank me for my editing help and confided that the admissions representatives at both Harvard and Yale had told her that it was one of the best essays they had ever read. I agreed. (By the way, Mandy is heading off to Harvard in the fall.)

Then there was the essay sent to me that began, "The motivating force which is coaxing me to get admitted into a renowned academic institute is the tenuous and adamant desire to acquire my goals, to augment the pace and standard of my life, in order to fuse my life with felicity and alacrity..." I kid you not: this is the beginning of an actual admissions essay I was asked to review. My advice to this student: start by throwing away your dictionary of words you think will impress an admissions committee, and then find a real story about your life to tell.

That really is what college admissions essays are all about: telling a true story that gives the admissions committee a glimpse of who YOU are. It should be a story that no one else can tell because you are unique. Find that story, write it in an interesting and focused manner, and your application comes alive as something more than a list of courses taken, test scores and grades, and extracurriculars. In short, a well-written essay puts a *human face* on your application.

However, here's the catch: the English curriculums in most schools aren't focused on teaching students how to write in this personal way. Instead, they're focused on academic writing, on standardized formats, and on keeping the "I" word out of school papers. There's nothing wrong with that --- in college, good academic writing is a strength. But, many students find they freeze up when they are finally asked to write about themselves in a way that looks deep into who they are, and how they became that person.

So, the first step most students need to take before they sit down to tackle the admissions essay is simple: Write in your own voice, not the academic voice that your English teacher has demanded all these years. It may take several starts and stops to find that voice, but it is in there, so let it out!

As a writer myself, I know that finding the story to tell is often the hardest part. When I'm tackling an assignment, I often end up with literally hundreds of pages of notes about the people I've interviewed, background information on the topic, facts and figures that may or may not make it into the final story, and my own reactions to what I've learned. I read through this pile of words asking myself one question: "What is the most important thing I want my readers to learn from this story?" Often, the answer surprises me -- and my editors!

Over the years, I've learned that the times I struggle most with getting started is when I immediately jump into writing, when I don't allow time to gather and review all of the relevant material, when I rush to start writing without really answering the question of what I want my readers to know.

It's the same with writing the college admissions essay: if you simply look at the essay prompt and then dive into writing you will often find yourself stymied because you haven't yet decided where you want to take readers (in this case the admissions committee). For this reason, when students ask me how they should answer a particular essay question, I tell them: gather your material first, then mull it over, and finally ask yourself: "What is the most important thing I want my readers (the admissions committee in this case) to learn from this story (essay)?"

So, how do you start gathering material? Brainstorm. Here's one way: Write down five adjectives, positive and negative, that describe who you are. Ask your best friend, a parent, even a sibling to do the same. Take those adjectives and think of events in your life that demonstrate their truth - or their falsehood. But don't stop there. Make a list of the ways you have changed or been challenged in the past four years. What events or personal encounters illustrates that change? How? What defines who you are as a person? What experiences have shaped you? Don't worry how this brainstorming will work for a specific essay question at this point, just spend some time thinking about who you are and why. If you're looking for more brainstorming ideas for essay material, I recommend [College Admissions Essays for Dummies](#). The appendix of this book is filled with memory-jogging prompts to help get you started.

With your "material" in hand, you'll be set to sort through the stories that define your life...And answer the question "What is the most important thing I want my readers to learn from my story?"

TOMORROW: Ten best tips for essay writing.

Telling Your Story: Admissions Essays Part II

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As I said yesterday, the secret to an effective admissions essay is simple: tell a story that no one else but you can tell. Today, I'll focus on ten tips to help you make your essay sing.

1. Focus. Don't try to do too much or tell too many stories in your essay. You have limited space and time to catch the interest of the admissions committee so zoom in on the core story that conveys the most important thing you want them to know about you that they can not find elsewhere in your application.
2. Answer the essay prompt. There are literally hundreds of different essay prompts used by different colleges. Don't try to squeeze an essay that you wrote for one college's essay prompt into a different prompt for a different college. By the same token, pay attention to any limitations on length. While it's Okay to go a few words over the limit, ignoring the word limit entirely is a bad idea. Yes, it's hard to say everything you want to say in 500 words, or 1,000 words...But admissions reps are busy people. Respect their time constraints.
3. Use your own voice. You may have been told in English class not to use the "I" word in your writing. That's true for academic papers, but not for the very personal college essay. Keep this excellent advice from the [Carleton College admissions office](#) in mind when you're writing: "Be yourself. If you are funny, write a funny essay; if you are serious, write a serious essay. Don't start reinventing yourself with the essay."
4. Tell your own story. A big problem I see in many essays is that students aren't telling their own stories; rather, they're talking about something that happened to someone else. A good example: a student sent me an essay about tutoring a mentally disabled peer. The problem? About 90% of the essay was spent describing the problems and challenges faced by the peer. By the time I got to the end of the essay, I felt like I knew a lot about him --- but absolutely NOTHING about the person who wrote the essay. I suggested that the writer start at the beginning again, focusing in on what he personally experienced and felt while helping his peer and how he grew or changed in the process.
5. Show, don't tell. This goes back to what I said yesterday about gathering your material. Don't just give us facts: Pull us into the event, experience or emotion you are trying to convey by using story-telling techniques instead of bland statements. If you need help doing this, I highly recommend the excellent chapter on just this topic in [College Admissions Essays for Dummies](#). The author, a high school English teacher does a great job of explaining the differences between telling a story and showing a story.
6. Look for the real beginning. Time and time again, I've read essays where the real beginning lay buried deep in the body of the essay. Start your essay with the kernel of the story - the sentence or example that best captures the story you're trying to tell. Remember, you have limited time to catch the attention of your reader. So, after you've written your first draft, ask yourself which sentence in the essay is the one you most want the admissions committee to read. If it's not at or near the top, move it.
7. Give yourself enough time. Good essays need time to percolate; they shouldn't be written at the last minute. "Some of my friends' kids labor over their AP English assignments and whip off the college essay as if it's not going to be graded," Mike Sexton, Dean of Admissions at Lewis & Clark College told the [Princeton Review](#) article about how admissions committees look at essays. "We read your essays with a pen in hand; it's our job to point out the good, the bad, and the ugly for the next reader."
8. Don't use a dollar word when a nickel one will do. Don't try to impress the admissions committee by pulling out your dictionary and peppering your essay with huge words. Use words appropriately, not to impress. And, while you're at it, avoid using cliches to tell your story. Remember - your essay should sound like you, not someone you think the admissions committee wants you to be.
9. Proofread, proofread, proofread. Then ask someone else to proof your essay again. There is simply no excuse for poor grammar, typographical errors, or spelling mistakes. They will be noted by the admissions reader.
10. Get help if you need it, but choose wisely. I've put this tip last because I honestly believe that only YOU can tell your story. While it may be tempting to use essay writing services (or essay editing services that do more writing than editing!), or ask everyone you know to comment on your essay and suggest changes, the danger is that YOU and your story will get lost in the process. So, don't hesitate to ask for help if you're truly stymied, but do so only after you've taken a solid stab at writing the essay yourself, and choose someone you know and trust. Anyone who offers help should not re-write the essay entirely or make substantial changes but instead should gently lead you to make corrections and revisions on your own in your own voice.

Want to know more? Here are some excellent resources to help you write your essays.

As I've already mentioned, an excellent book on writing college essays is the unfortunately-named [College Admissions Essays for Dummies](#). Written by Geraldine Woods, a high school English teacher, this book starts with an excellent section on the prep work necessary to figure out the story you want to tell. It also has an excellent and

thorough discussion about how to understand what different essay prompts are really asking for. Finally, the tips on structure, writing style, and grammar are worth the price.

I also like Harry Bauld's [On Writing the College Admissions Essay](#). Bauld devotes a good section to the importance of knowing and understanding your audience, and also has many good suggestions for how to find your own unique voice and story. Bauld includes more actual essays than the Woods' book.

If you're looking for a shorter and more concise guide to writing college essays, check out [Essays that will get you into College](#) by Dan Kaufman, Chris Dowhan, and Adrienne Dowhan. This book covers the highlights of effective essay writing and provides many sample essays.

[100 Successful College Application Essays](#) is just that: 100 actual college essays with brief comments from college counselors and admissions officers. Seeing how other students have tackled the college essay can be useful BUT remember, your essay must be YOUR story. The best use for this book is to expose you to a wide variety of essay writing styles to help you uncover what works for you.

Good luck!