

19 Common Mistakes in College Application Essays

Many students trip over common obstacles in their college application essays. For example, many students can't see beyond the superficial prompt to construct an essay that positively communicates their personality and passion. Some students rehash their activities and achievements without adding the personal flavor, perspective and substance that admissions officers look for. Learn how to avoid these and other damaging traps.

As an independent college admissions consultant, I read many application essays and see a lot of blunders. Here's some helpful advice:

1. **Select the Best Topic and Subject.** The Common Application, as well as many individual college applications and supplements, give students the choice of essay topics. Resist the temptation to quickly make a selection. Instead make an inventory of your key experiences and achievements, adjectives that describe you, anything significant in your background, as well as what you can potentially "offer" (e.g. athletics, music, dance) a college. Then read the options carefully and decide which topic(s) provides the best opportunity to portray your self in a desirable manner. If the application requires more than one essay, select distinct topics and subject areas so the admissions people get a broader, and more complete, picture of you. If you are an athlete, for example, try not to write more than one essay about sports.
2. **Answer the Question.** Read the prompt carefully and pay particular attention to two part questions. For example, if you choose to "evaluate a significant experience, achievement or risk you have taken and its impact on you", make sure you thoughtfully and critically analyze both the situation and its impact. If you choose to "discuss an issue and its importance to you" make sure you focus on its importance to you. The admissions people are looking for a window into your character, passion and reasoning.
3. **Be Personable and Specific.** Colleges don't learn much from a generic essay. If you are asked to describe your reasons for your interest in a particular school that you are applying to, make sure your essay addresses the particular features of that school that appeal to you and explain why. Brainstorm with others. Don't be afraid to think creatively. Don't be afraid to reject ideas! Most strong essays have more "show" than "tell".
4. **Make Your Essay The Right Length.** Many prompts specify a desired number of words or a range. If it's 200 to 250 words, don't insert your 500 word essay. In fact, many on-line applications will not even accept more than the stated limit. If there is only an upper limit, don't stress if your essay appears too short. Lincoln got his points across succinctly in the Gettysburg address -- in less than 275 words. Be concise. Omit irrelevant details, clichés, and poorly developed ideas. Do not distract the reader with unnecessary words and repetition.

5. **Watch Your Tone.** If you come across as a spoiled child, a stuck-up rich kid, lazy, sarcastic or a cynic, the admissions team might decide that you are not the right fit for their school. A bit of well placed humor is fine, but don't try to be a comedian.
6. **Don't Appear Self-Interested or Materialistic.** While few applicants are genuinely altruistic, most colleges are turned off by students who appear more focused on what the school can do for them, rather than how they can benefit from the education and at the same time be a contributing member of the campus community. If you are applying to a business program, the average starting salary of recent graduates should not be your stated motivation for seeking admission!
7. **Don't Rely on Your Computer's Spell Checker.** Applicants who rely solely on their computer's spell check program may find themselves submitting applications with poor grammar and word choice. Just because everything is spelled properly doesn't mean it is correct. A good way to catch mistakes is to read your essay very slowly and out loud.
8. **Don't Overlook the Mundane.** Some of the best and most memorable essays are based on a simple conversation between people. The impressions and takeaways from such a conversation can be extremely engaging and provide a valuable window into the personality and values of the writer. Some essays of this type center on a moment of enlightenment or illumination when the writer views life from a new perspective and/or gains new confidence.
9. **Skip the Volunteer Trip.** Dedicated community service over a period of time can be a strong topic for an application essay. Volunteer day at the local park, or two weeks of school building in Africa, will probably not impress the admissions committee. They see many essays of this type. Not only is it difficult to stand out from the pack, but these experiences are often more about the experience than about you, or convey that money buys opportunity.
10. **Don't Rehash the Resume.** The admissions committee relies on essays to learn additional things about you such as your initiative, curiosity about the world, personal growth, willingness to take risks, ability to be self directed, motivation and ability to make the most of a situation. They are interested in your personal qualities such as leadership, confidence, ability to work in a team, strength of character, resilience, sense of humor, ability to get along with others and what you might add to the campus community. In short, use your essays to showcase a side of you not visible from other parts of the application.
11. **Peruse the Entire Application.** Many applications, especially for some of the more competitive schools, are complex and require multiple essays and short answers. Don't look at each question in a vacuum, but rather view the application holistically when deciding how to best portray yourself through responding to the various prompts. For example, if you have five key areas you wish to cover, and there are five essays, try to strategically focus on one area in each essay.
12. **Don't Fall in Love with the Thesaurus.** Resist the temptation to be a sesquipedalian or come across as a pedantic fop! There's no need to use a big word in every sentence. Use caution when showing off your extensive vocabulary. You risk using language improperly and may appear insecure or overly eager to impress. Admissions people

aren't keen about picking up a dictionary to understand your essay. Worse yet, if your essay vocabulary is at a much higher level than what would be expected from your English grades and SAT/ACT scores, it may appear that your essay is not your own work. Most teenagers don't use myriad and plethora in their daily vernacular.

13. **Check Your Ego at the Door.** Even if you are impressed with yourself, most admissions officers don't respond favorably to students who brag, put down classmates, or wax eloquent about their amazing achievements. While self doubt is generally undesirable, a bit of humility can be well received, especially in an essay about overcoming adversity.
14. **Accentuate the Positive.** Few students have a perfect resume, which is apparent in the application. Drawing attention to weakness in an essay is generally not a good idea, unless you were able to overcome a weakness, and make it a strong suit.
15. **Proofread Carefully.** Don't let your eagerness to submit an application cause you to overlook careless mistakes. Errors can doom your otherwise excellent application. Make sure you schedule sufficient time for a thorough review. When possible, have at least one other person proofread your essay. They may catch something important that you missed. For example, you don't want to tell Ohio State that you really want to be a Wolverine! Again, read your essay out loud.
16. **Organize Your Essay.** An impressive essay generally contains a strong opening, well organized content, and a powerful closing. If your essay lacks structure and seems to ramble, chances are it won't impress the reader. Start with an outline and design your essay paragraph by paragraph. Make sure you include enough background information about whatever topic you are writing about so that the reader can put it into context. For example, one student wrote an excellent essay about a horrible first day of school, but forgot to include that he had just move to town, from halfway around the world, and was struggling with English. Resist the temptation to run off and start writing. Experts will tell you that up-front planning of your essays is well worth the time invested. Not only will the quality of your essays be much higher, you'll probably end up saving time in the long run!
17. **Research the College Before Writing the Essay.** Almost every school has its own identity and mission. Some universities even have a slogan. Others have niche areas of study that they like to promote. Pay attention to what is important to the particular school and, when appropriate, consider including it in some manner in your essay.
18. **Invest in a Strong Introduction.** Admissions people read a lot of essays and may not be energetic and fresh when yours reaches the top of their pile. That's why it's essential to attract their attention up front. It is critical that the first few sentences capture their interest. A boring opening may cause the reader to not pay close attention to the remainder of the essay. Design the introduction to draw them into your essay. A well-planned essay may omit some key details in the opening forcing the reader to pay close attention to the rest of the story.
19. **Start Early and Take Your Time.** Don't wait until the last minute. Application essays almost always take longer than you anticipate. Invest the time necessary to do it right. It should be your best work. Ask others to review your drafts and offer comments and suggestions. Take comments and suggestions seriously – behind every good writer is usually at least one good editor!