

"Insider's Quick Guide: Writing the Best College Essays"

I. Coming from an application essay evaluator, the single best thing you can do is ...

Personify! The college essay should help the readers know you as a *person*. They know you as a *student* by using measuring sticks for grades, activities, and awards. They get to know you as a *person* by interacting and observing. Interacting with you. Observing your actions. Don't explain; engage. Don't tell; show.

II. Behind closed doors in evaluation committee, it'll never officially be said ...

1. If I really connect with what you're sharing – and not just being drawn in by a good hook – then sometimes, I've already decided on your essay rating before finishing it.
2. If you don't answer the question upfront, I'll either jump to the end, skim the rest, or stop right there.
3. If you have a cliché topic, the first paragraph determines if I jump to the end, skim the rest, or stop right there.
4. I love those tiny, specific, vivid, details that just stick in your mind.
5. You don't need great grammar, punctuation, and MLA style, but if you make too many mistakes especially careless ones like spelling, then it goes from distracting to annoying to "I don't care" in a hurry.
6. When a student, often a foreign or ESL student, uses someone else's writing, it's not only obvious and wrong, it's the fastest way to the "cease evaluation" pile – and you better hope no one remembers your name.
7. English teachers, lawyers, and journalists may be good writers and proof readers, but what they think makes a good essay usually differs from what we think, because hey – we're admissions people, not English teachers, lawyers, and journalists.
8. ... and that goes for former deans and the like. (Ask why!)
9. I'm exhausted and we still have another pile to go through, but this essay was great! It was simple, clear, descriptive, thoughtful, and readable.
10. Woa, that kid has some growing up to do!

III. Corners you can cut (and some you can't) along with other tips ...

1. Casual, informal readability is good; slang and colloquialisms are bad.
2. Diction matters, but don't write like you ran it through a word-swapper or e-thesaurus.
3. Don't exaggerate your contribution.
4. Be confident, not arrogant.
5. Mischievous and free-spirited actions are fine; unethical or illegal ones are not.
6. Be imaginative and analytical, not controversial.
7. Be clever but avoid gimmicks. No rap lyrics, single-word answers, drawings, comic strips, allusions to tabloid news, emoticons.
8. Be introspective, open, and sincere, not a basket case.
9. Write in descriptive, vivid, sensory detail.
10. Use dialogue if not contrived.

IV. "The single biggest mistake in all of college essay writing history that has led to strategic complacency, immeasurable loss of time, money, and effort, and the creation of false hope and unfounded expectation": Assuming the essay of someone who got in is a good one. (Ask why!)