



WHAT TO PUT IN YOUR COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY

by Ed Weathers

These days, most colleges require that your application essay be no more than 500 words. In that essay, colleges expect you to reveal your writing ability and, just as important, the real You, with a capital Y. Who are You? What makes You tick? What are Your hopes, expectations, fears, joys, tastes, desires, foibles, sins, and virtues? That's a lot to expect of 500 words.

Of course, you can't say everything about yourself in 500 words. Forget that list two sentences ago; you can't fit all that in 500 words. You must narrow the focus of your essay. So what do you write?

Some experts suggest that you start your application essay with a brief personal story and then draw a "moral" from it that expresses your values. There's nothing wrong with that advice, but if I were a college admissions officer, I'd be sick by now of essays that begin with a touching little tale about a wise grandfather, a handicapped sibling, or a South American orphan the applicant met on a summer good-works trip. I'd prefer hearing about why you still drink only chocolate milk at the age of 17, or how Bonnie Sue McKay broke your heart at the age of twelve (and how you got over it by learning to quilt), or why table tennis is your favorite sport, or how you, with your tin ear, wept the first time you heard Schumann's Piano Concerto.

If I'm your college admissions officer, forget "touching." Give me honest and accurate, instead. Give me "tough" before "touching." Give me clear observations—in your own words, please, not stock phrases. Give me concrete images: a chocolate milk stain on a white hospital gown, a quilting needle stuck in your index finger, a cracked ping-pong ball behind the basement furnace, a scratchy old recording coming out of a friend's iPod. Give me wit, if you've got it, but don't strain for something that doesn't come naturally. Give me honest feeling, not prepackaged, Hallmark-card, tell-'em-what-they-want-to hear mush. If you now hate quilting and prefer rugby to table tennis, fine, write that.

If I'm your college admissions officer, think hard about chocolate milk or Bonnie Sue or table tennis or Schumann, and answer me this question, as accurately and honestly as you can: Why is this important to you? If you think you know the answer to that question before you start writing, then you don't know what writing is. Writing—through thinking and brainstorming and free-writing and revising and revising—is a way of searching for the answers to such a question and then writing down those answers as accurately as you can. ***A good essay would surprise the you you were before you began to write it.***

I'm not a college admissions officer, but if I were, I'd say this: The subject of your essay doesn't matter. It simply needs to be well written and about something you—you, not everybody else, and certainly not some imaginary admissions officer—honestly do care about. Think of this not as an exercise designed to impress colleges, but as a piece of writing as sincere as a love letter. Even if it's about chocolate milk.

Hmmm. All this sounds very solemn. Your college application essay does not need to be solemn. It does not need to be profound. It does not need to be heart-warming or tragic or full of marvels. It can be funny or quirky. It can be plain and simple. (I often prefer plain and simple.) It can be about something or someone you like, not necessarily something or someone you love. In other words, it can be about lap blankets or Roger Federer, not necessarily about environmental awareness or your grandfather. I once was paid good money for a little essay about the contents of my wallet. I believe that essay would have got me admitted to Harvard.

All this means your college application essay can be written only by you. Your mother can't write it. Your guidance counselor can't write it. That friend of the family who's a writing teacher can't write it. When my son applied to college, I refused to help him with his essay. I'm a professional writer and college writing teacher; I knew I could make his essay better. But I couldn't make it his. If colleges wanted to know what he had to say and how he said it, then the work had to be his. Otherwise, he was applying under false pretenses. (Who knows, you may want to write something you don't want to show your mother or your guidance counselor. Do you really want them to know about your crush on Bonnie Sue or your fear of white milk?)

I know that many college applicants get help—some of them get lots of help—on their application essays. Maybe I shouldn't judge them. But I do. I think they're cheating just a bit. Your essay needs to be your essay.

And of course it needs to be no more than 500 words. Why? Because that's the rule, and even if it's a narrow and arbitrary rule, you need to prove you can color inside the lines. In my next post to this site, I'll give you some advice about how to write concisely and make the most of those, or any other, 500 words.

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