

Get It Written, Get It Right - Teacher's Manual

Helping teachers talk to students about the college admissions essay

Key Points to Discuss with Your Students

1. The essay is the student's chance to set himself or herself apart from the crowd. There are a lot of 3.5s with 1200 SATs out there (and every other combination of grades and scores). The essay gives the admissions officer a reason to fight for YOU!
2. The essay proves the student's writing skills. There is no more important skill in college than the ability to express one's ideas clearly.
3. Most applications require the student to write on one of several common essay topics. While this may seem restrictive at first, it really gives the student the chance to take a simple, single idea into a unique and personal statement.

Where Do We Start?

That depends. There are a few questions that every student is likely to run into no matter where he applies. The Common Application features some old stand-bys every year. You may be asked to write about the person who influenced you the most. Or, the time you faced a great challenge and how you got through it. Or, about the accomplishment of which you are the most proud. They could ask you a lot of things, but the important thing to remember is that all of these questions and suggested topics are about YOU.

EXAMPLE. They might ask about the issue in the world that concerns you the most, but that does not mean you need to send them an essay about global warming. If that is what concerns you the most, then you need to write about your concern for global warming, not about global warming itself. Write about how you first found out about the issue, how you became interested in the issue, what you are doing about it, and what you hope to do about it in the future. (If this fits into your extracurricular activities, your future academic and career goals, and your teacher recs, so much the better!) You may need to define a term or two, but you do not need to educate the reader about global warming. You need to educate the reader about YOU.

Telling the Story of YOU...

...with brainstorming. You can do one of these, all of these, all at once, over several days, in class, as homework, etc. These will get the student thinking about his/her life in ways that will lend the exercises to a wide variety of topics.

Brainstorming Exercise #1: Ten Things Nobody Knows About Me

These could be serious, sad, silly, funny, embarrassing, or anything else you want. If you already know the topic of the essay you are going to write, you could try to center these ten (or more!) things around that. Say you want to be a doctor and the person who influenced you the most was a next-door neighbor who died of cancer. One of your 'ten secret things' could be that you used to rake the sick neighbor's leaves when she was in the hospital. (You see that the brainstorming exercise doesn't have to lead directly to essay topics. You just want to get thinking about things, people, events, skills, moments, etc., in your life that have been important to you.)

Exercise #2: Ten Things I Am Good At / Ten Things I Am Not Good At

This is pretty straightforward, but note how you can adapt this brainstorming to any essay topic. Say the essay topic asks you to write about why you want to study at College X. It could be that you are 'good at' science, having won the local science fair. Maybe you've been obsessed with your chemistry set or your computer since second grade. By thinking about what you are good at and how you have demonstrated that skill or talent over the years, you can answer a question about what you want to study.

Maybe you want to study astronomy, but you have some mental block against remembering the constellations. You might have a humorous essay about how you have always loved studying outer space, but you could never tell the Big Dipper from the Little Dipper. Maybe you were always bad at math, until a cashier rang up your grocery bill incorrectly. Maybe that was the first time you thought about math as a part of your daily life and ever since you have loved math, can't get enough. Maybe you want to be a math teacher now, all thanks to that cashier at the grocery store who made a simple mistake. That would be an interesting and original approach to the 'person who influenced me the most' essay, all based on something you are good at (bonus here since it is something you used to be bad at).

Exercise #3: 10 things I want to get out of college

Try to think beyond the obvious. Sure you want a good education, a job, new friends, etc. Can you think of things more specific to you, your character, your interests?

Maybe you want to use the electron microscope at College X's new Johnson Laboratory for the Study of Very Small Things. Talking about specific facilities, resources, and opportunities on a given campus shows that you have really done your homework on the particular school. It also lets the reader know that you have written the essay with their school in mind. (Try to mention at least one thing specific to each

school in every essay. You may have to modify the essay 5 times if you are applying to 5 schools, but it's worth it!)

This exercise could lead to essay topics like "Why do you want to study at College X?" or "Describe your career goals and how College X will help you achieve them."

After the Topic: What's my point?

Okay, you've got your topic. Now what? Now your job is to turn that into the best essay you can possibly write. First you need to figure out the main point your essay will be making. This is called the 'thesis' and is the most important part of any essay. Usually the last sentence your introduction paragraph, the thesis is the real response to the question raised by the topic. It is usually not, though, a simple answer to a question.

If the essay asks, 'Who is the person who has had the greatest influence on your life?', then your thesis might be something like, "Though I could never meet Wang Lung in person, Pearl Buck's character is as alive to me as any person I have ever met. The strength this fictional character exhibits and the artistic achievement she represents has given me the strength to pursue my own ambition of becoming a writer, an ambition I look forward to pursuing next year at College X." That is a two-sentence thesis, the basis for an entire essay about how a fictional character (the heroine of Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*) is the 'person' who influenced you the most.

What next?

The Introduction. Start with an engaging opening line, something that really grabs the reader's attention. Continuing with the example of Wang Lung, you might start with something like 'You might say that the person who influenced me the most never really lived.' Then you could go on to describe how she lived in your imagination. Use the introduction to set up your thesis, before getting into the body of your essay.

The Body

A typical essay is about 500 words, so the body of your essay is going to be 1-3 paragraphs. Keep the paragraphs tight and focused, each with its own introduction and conclusion sentence. Make sure too that there is a logical transition from one paragraph to the next. When you start a new paragraph, it should be because you are starting a new point, but one clearly related to the previous paragraph.

For example, with the thesis suggested above, the first body paragraph (the second overall) might begin by addressing the doubts you once had about your ability to become a writer. The third paragraph could be about how you read *The Good Earth* and what you got out of it. The fourth paragraph could then be about how you have tried to create your own Wang Lung, developing your own writing skills. Once you have covered your points, and used most of your word limit, it's time to wrap things up in...

The Conclusion

A common mistake is using the conclusion to summarize and ‘recap’ an essay. Many write ‘In conclusion...’ and then proceed to make all the points again. Instead, use the conclusion to show the reader how this essay is relevant to them. It should be a very brief paragraph, giving the implication, the ‘moral of the story,’ for your essay. You can tell the reader how you will take the goals, strengths, lessons learned, hopes, dreams, regrets, etc. (anything you talked about in the essay), and thrive at College X.

The conclusion should be brief, probably your shortest paragraph. Don’t raise new points or arguments in support of your thesis in the conclusion. Just leave them anxious to tell the other admissions officers all about you, making sure that you get an A for ‘Admit’ on your file when they’re through.

One Final Note: A few common mistakes to look out for

1. **Poor proofreading.** Spellin mistakes, incorrect punctuation; and other silly mistakes make your work appear sloppy. DO NOT depend on your computer’s spell-checker to correct all your errors. For example, you may use the wrong version of a word as in “your” instead of “you’re.”
2. **A quote for quote’s sake.** A lot of people think they can make their essays weightier by sticking a high-minded quote at the beginning. The admissions committee doesn’t care what Benjamin Franklin thought or what John Lennon sang. Unless you are going to use some quotation as the basis for your essay overall, it’s best to put down your Bartlett’s and stick with your own words.
3. **Too many big words.** Write in correct, but conversational, English. If there is some big SAT word that is perfect for your essay, then use it by all means. But don’t use a thesaurus to add weight to your writing. If you want to describe some crotchety old Dickens character as ‘parsimonious,’ then do so. But your big brother who won’t give you a couple bucks for ice cream is just plain ‘greedy.’
4. **Failing to adapt essay to College X.** Whichever application essay you are writing right now, that’s your #1 school. It can’t hurt you to get accepted, so write every essay with a particular school in mind, noting some resource, facility, class, professor, or some other opportunity that only College X can give you.