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## A Crash Course in the College Admissions Essay



by Ross Blankenship

The college admissions essay: even for expert writers, this essential part of the college application process can be excruciating. For less than rockstar writers, it can seem downright impossible. But by exploring the ins and outs of the essay, teens can not only become comfortable with writing about themselves: they can also learn a lot about who they are, and what they want out of the next four years of their lives. Here's an engaging writing activity that will get your teen ready to tackle the task!

**Step 1 Topic** Choosing a topic is the Trojan Horse of the admissions essay: it sounds simple, but once you get started all sorts of ideas will come flooding out to confuse you. Should it be serious or quirky? Should it recount a story or read more like a letter? How do I sum up all the things that I am in one short essay? In short, you can't. And there are dozens of great admissions essays for each person. But you have to choose. To get started, try answering these questions about yourself:

1. What is the weirdest thing about you?
2. What is something no one knows about you?
3. How do you think the outside world perceives you? Are they right, or wrong?
4. What gets you up in the morning (yes, your answer can be "Mom")?
5. Describe a strong memory you have. Why do you think that moment stuck with you?
6. Choose five words to describe your high school experience (be honest).

**Step 2 Voice** Now that you have six topics to work with, you can start to think about the voice you will be using. Often, it depends on your topic. For instance, if the weirdest thing about you is that you like the smell of dirty socks, a casual, funny tone would be most appropriate. If you are writing about a sad memory, a more serious tone might be more appropriate (but not necessarily).

1. Look at your list of topics and ask yourself which ones have the most potential as essay topics: which ones say something about you that you could relate to your future? For instance, if you like smelly socks, is it because it reminds you of a long soccer practice and your love of sports? If so, it

could be a good topic to illustrate your potential as a college athlete.

2. Choose three topics that you feel have the most potential to build an essay around. Now, write one paragraph for each. It doesn't have to be polished or perfect – no one is going to see it! Just go with the flow, and trust your instincts. Don't spend more than ten minutes on each one.
3. Now look at your writing. What tone and style did you use? Did you joke around, use a story from your past, or speak directly to the admissions officer? Do you think that the tone and the topic support each other, or do you need to rethink your approach?

**Step 3 Takeaway** No matter what your topic is, it is essential that the essay contains a message about who you are and why you are a great college applicant. That means that your topic needs to lead towards some sort of conclusion that sums up your “argument.”

1. Choose the topic paragraph that you like the best, and think will frame you as an applicant the best. Now think about what your takeaway is. Did you recount a funny memory about getting back at a bully? Tie it up by talking about your commitment to social justice. Did you write about being labeled a “dork” in school? Let it be known that you're proud of your deep interest in science or books.
2. Now write it out! Figure out a transition from your first paragraph to your takeaway idea. Don't spend more than ten minutes in doing so. After you're done, read over what you've written. Presto! You have an awesome start to a great essay. That doesn't mean you have to stick with that topic, but it does mean you have some writing under your belt, and a strategy for approaching your essay.

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