



Unraveling the college essay

by KAREN PRICE

Writing the personal essay can be a nerve-wracking part of the college admissions process, and with good reason.

It isn't easy.

Writing is hard for many people, and writing about oneself is even harder.

There's the pressure to stand out, but to do so because you've demonstrated you can be an asset to the school and not because you misspelled its name. You want to show that you can formulate ideas and put them on paper in a way that proves your grasp of the English language, but you don't want it to sound dry or forced. You want the admissions counselor reading it to go from a "maybe" to a "yes" by the end, and not the other way around.

So what makes a good essay and how does one rise to the top from a pile of applicants? Here are some tips from the people who know.

Carlow University director of undergraduate admissions Wivina Chmura, who has worked in admissions at Carlow for 19 years, said that a really impressive essay speaks to a student's passion. This is the opportunity for the student to illustrate what defines him or her and what unique skills and talents the student possesses, particularly related to his or her goals.

If there are no essay prompts, Chmura suggested the following as good topics to explore:

Use the essay to explain special circumstances. For instance, why you didn't do so well as a freshman or sophomore but improved in junior and senior year. How did you overcome the obstacles set in front of you? What did you do to improve your grades? What was your motivation?

What or who has influenced you to choose your academic area of interest?

Good essays are often related to character development, particularly at schools where this is important. Give an example of a life experience that shaped who you are today.

Some essays offer commentary or views on world issues with supporting facts. Give the institution insight into how you think.

What is the mission of the university and how would you adopt that mission as a student?

"One of the words of advice that I use is to be real," Chmura said. "Describe what describes you, so that if your essay is dropped in the middle of the cafeteria at your high school and people read it, they will know that it is about you."

Kellie Kane, an admissions counselor at the University of Pittsburgh, said that the essay should teach the readers something about the student that can't be gleaned from transcripts, applications or letters of recommendation. They also want to know why Pitt is one of the student's choices, and not by quoting information about the campus or the school that they already know. They want to know something more personal.

"I have read essay and short answer questions that have made me laugh, cry and simply be amazed," she said. "These students told me a story and I knew it was personal and it really helped me to better understand who this applicant was and what they wanted to do."

Pitt receives over 30,000 freshman applications for the fall terms and reading an essay that doesn't sound just like the last three is always a pleasant change, Kane said.

However, essays and written answers don't always stand out for the reasons students hope.

Although everyone knows — or should — to use spell check, proofread and have at least one parent or other adult proofread an essay, mistakes still happen.

"My biggest advice when writing your short answer questions for the University of Pittsburgh are please make sure if you want to mention the university, you actually are talking about Pitt and not another school, and that you spell Pittsburgh correctly," she said. "I know students are told to proofread but it surprises and disappoints me every time I see one of those two mistakes."

Chmura had similar advice.

"It would behoove a student to have several other people read the essay," she said. "And don't use another college's name in your essay. This happens more often than one would think."

Here are some additional tips for writing a good college essay:

Don't wait until the last minute. Allow yourself time to rewrite. Once you think it's perfect, put it down and walk away for a day then come back and read it one more time. You'd be surprised what you catch and/or realize could be better when reading with a fresh pair of eyes.

Be honest. You may be tempted to over-exaggerate, but don't. If you're tempted to "borrow" an essay you saw online, or even one line of an essay you saw online, absolutely don't.

Finally, don't get caught up in trying to blow people away with big words. Use your own voice.

"Describe what describes you, so that if your essay is dropped in the middle of the cafeteria at your high school and people read it, they know that it is about you."

WIVINA CHMURA

Carlow University Director
of undergraduate admissions