

Considerations for Writing your College Application Essays

**Presented by:
Leah Greenspoon**

**Academic Advising Specialist
University of Pennsylvania
English Language Programs**

Topics

- Role of the essay in the application and evaluation
- Your admissions audience and their expectations
- Writing an effective personal narrative
- Tips and strategies
- Sample

Role of the essay

You *are* your application...



Your Application

You *are* your application...



- ✓ **Application Form**
- ✓ **Activities List**
- ✓ **Academic Documents**
- ✓ **School Forms**
- ✓ **Test Scores**
- ✓ **Letters of Recommendation**
- ✓ **Essay and supplements**
- ✓ **Other: Portfolio, Interview, etc.**

The 8 pieces

- Used **HOLISTICALLY**
- Two key questions:
 1. Will you be academically successful in our school or program?
 2. Are you a good fit for our school or program?

Q1: Will you be academically successful in our school or program?

- Key Pieces:
- How important is this question?

Q1: Will you be academically successful in our school or program?

- Key Pieces: *Quantitative*
 - *transcripts, test scores, strength of curriculum*
- How important is this question?
 - It depends...
 - **Size** of the school
 - **Selectivity** of the school

A look at Penn

For Freshman applying for Fall 2016 admission

Applicants: 35,000

Accepted: 3,500

Acceptance rate: about 10%

Academically qualified?

*according to the former Dean of Undergraduate Admissions

A look at Penn

For Freshman applying Fall 2015

Applicants: 35,000

Accepted: 3,500

Acceptance rate: about 10%

Academically qualified?

Academically qualified: 85%*

*according to the former Dean of Undergraduate Admissions

What matters?

- How do you move from the 85% of academically qualified applicants to the 10% of accepted ones?
- How do admissions committees decide who gets in?

What matters?

- How do you move from the 85% of academically qualified applicants to the 10% of accepted ones?
- How do admissions committees decide who gets in?

They ask the 2nd key question...

Q2: Are you a good fit?

What is fit?

Who you are rather than what you've done:

- Would you be a good roommate?
- Would you be a good person to have in class?
- Would you be a good person to work with on a project?
- What might you do on campus?
- How will you get involved?
- What kind of conversations will you start and contribute to?
- How will you expand knowledge in and out of the classroom?

Are you a good fit?

- Key Pieces:
- How important is this question?

Are you a good fit?

- Key Pieces: *Qualitative*
 - **Activities list, letters of recommendation, essays**
- How important is this question?
 - **It depends...**
 - Size
 - Selectivity

A look at Penn State

First-Year Application Evaluation

*The high school record, particularly **your grade-point average (GPA)** and **class rank** (if applicable), accounts for approximately **two-thirds of the decision**. Class rank is also considered for students with honors or Advanced Placement courses whose schools do not supply a weighted GPA. The **remaining one-third** is based on other factors, including **standardized test scores**, the personal statement, and activities list. The **optional personal statement and activities list are sometimes considered for students whose applications require additional review**.*

Importance of the Essay

- **It depends!**
 - Size and Selectivity
- For small schools and selective schools:
 - the essay becomes an important tool to move you from *qualified* to *accepted*

Importance of the Essay

- First step in writing a good one!
- Next step...

Understand your Audience

We can think about audience in 2 ways:

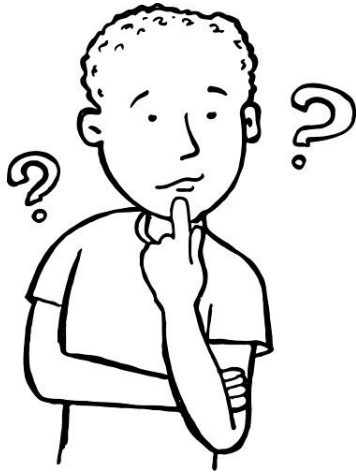
- **Real Audience**
- **Intended Audience**

Understand your Audience

- **Real audience** is the real people who are reading your essay and interpreting your message
- **Intended audience** is the audience you *imagine* when you write

Understand your audience

Who do you imagine is reading your essay?



Intended Audience:



Real Audience



[Inside Tufts Admissions](#) (4:34)

Real Audience

Who they are:

- People persons
- Often young recent graduates
- Eager to get to know you!



What are they looking for?

- To learn *who you are*
 - Different from *what you've done*
- To hear *your voice*
- To find what makes you unique and original
- To evaluate your writing, thinking & communication skills
- A good reason to accept you!

Importance of the Essay

- To show that something about you, or some way that you think or experience life makes you unique, likeable, interesting, and different from the other applicants
- To show that you'd be a good classmate, a good roommate, and productive member of the campus community

Writing an Effective Essay

- How do you show something like this to an admissions committee?
- How do you make them **know** you, **like** you, and **want** you on their campus?



Show them...

You're not just going to write in your essay:

this is why you should admit me...

You're going to **show** them why through your essay

Writing across your application

What is the writing requirement?



Writing across your application

What is the writing requirement?

Like most things... **It depends!**



Writing across your application

What is the writing requirement?

Like most things... **It depends!**

Main Essay

- Personal narrative
- 500-650 words
- Can be used for multiple applications

Supplements

- Shorter responses
- 100-300 words
- Unique to each school



How to write your essay

- Main Essay
- Supplements

Different requirements with different strategies!

Today: Main Essay!

Personal Narrative

Personal Narrative

A true story about something
that happened to you that
makes a larger *point* for the
reader.

Personal Narrative

- Tell a story
- Make a point

Personal Narrative

Two Layers:

- Plot
- Perspective



Personal Narrative

Plot: actions and events of the story

- “What happened”

Perspective:

- Your thoughts and insights about what happened

Plot vs. Perspective

Which part of the narrative teaches your audience more about you?

- **Plot:** what happened
- **Perspective:** your thoughts on what happened

Tip:

- Don't waste your time trying to think of a unique "story" to tell in your essay (there aren't any).
- Instead share a unique **perspective!**
- Admissions committees are only minorly interested in **what happened** to you (plot), but majorly interested in **how** and **why** it happened (perspective)!

Weaving plot & perspective

- The way you weave together **plot** and **perspective** is a *creative process* and can be done in many ways when you choose a structure for your essay

Structure

- How should you structure a narrative?
- What should it look like?
- What shouldn't it look like?

Structure:

- NOT a pre-set form
- NOT an academic structure (5 paragraphs)
 - Remember: This is a *creative* process
- Structure = shape and pattern of your essay

Narrative Shapes & Patterns

1. *Chronological*
2. *Flashback*
3. *Compare/contrast*
4. *Cause/Effect*
5. *Extended Metaphor*
6. *Descriptive*
7. *Hybrid*

Creating good substance

Good substance means:

- The topic you choose is important to you
- You have learned something from the topic
- The admissions committee can learn something about you from the topic
- Topic is not one-dimensional--it connects to **themes** the audience can relate to
 - Ex: Not just about volunteering; also about friendship, humility and compassion

Creating a unique perspective

- Choose *specific* details
- Reveal *specific* insights

Key advice: Be specific!

Strategy: Be Specific

Specific Details

Question: What makes your story unique to you?

- Ex: A walk to school
 - Many students walk to school--not a good “story”
 - But, I can learn a lot about you from *your* walk to school.
 - Only you walk to school down your street, in your brown boots, with your brother and your neighbor, listening to your favorite podcast (specific details)

Strategy: Be Specific

Specific details start with good specific thinking!

- It's not a writing thing
- It's a thinking thing



Think, think, think.

Strategy: Be Specific

- Specific insights:
 - What were you thinking?
 - What did you learn?
 - What was it like?
 - Show evidence you're a “thinking” person!

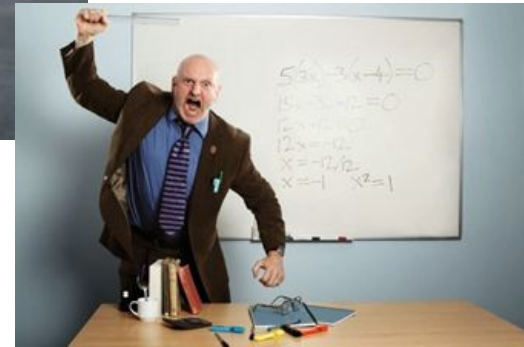
Creating good Content

- **Be specific!**
 - Specific details
 - Specific insights
- ***“Show don’t tell”***

Showing vs. Telling

Ex: The teacher was angry

The teacher was angry...



Telling

Tell the person next to you about a holiday dinner with your family (i.e. Thanksgiving)

2 minutes

Showing

Show your partner a holiday dinner with your family

What does it look like? Sound like? Taste like? Smell like?

Feel like ^



Next tip: Be aware of clichés

Be aware of clichés

- Something overused or overdone to the point of being annoying
- How are clichés an issue in the application essay?

Clichés traps!

- Cliché topics
 - Ex: Sports, family trips, volunteering, music, overcoming obstacles, etc.
- Cliché themes
 - Ex: perseverance, friendship, helping others, etc.
- Cliché points
 - Ex: I'm unique, I'm better/more unique than my peers, I want to contribute to the world, I've grown
- Cliché hooks
 - Ex: famous quotes

What to do about clichés?

Defeat Clichés

- *Be specific*
- *Show don't tell*--make your story unique to you
- Look for *uncommon* connections
- Have a good hook!

Don't be a McEssay

Fast Food. That's what I think of when I try to draw an analogy with the process of reading application essays.

The bad. Ninety percent of the applications I read contain what I call **McEssays** - usually five-paragraph essays that consist primarily of abstractions and unsupported generalization. They are technically correct in that they are organized and have the correct sentence structure and spelling, but they are boring. Sort of like a Big Mac. I have nothing against Big Macs, but the one I eat in Charlottesville is not going to be fundamentally different from the one I eat in Paris, Peoria or Palm Springs. I am not going to rave about the quality of a particular Big Mac. The same can be said about the generic essay. If an essay starts out: "I have been a member of the band and it has taught me leadership, perseverance and hard work," I can almost recite the rest of the essay without reading it. Each of the three middle paragraphs gives a bit of support to an abstraction, and the final paragraph restates what has already been said. A McEssay is not wrong, but it is not going to be a positive factor in the admission decision. It will not allow a student to stand out.

A student who uses vague abstractions poured into a preset form will end up being interpreted as a vague series of abstractions. A student who uses cliché becomes, in effect, a cliché.

If we are what we eat, we are also what we write!

Have a good hook!

Consider:

- Action
- Dialogue
- Vivid description
- Surprising statement

Avoid:

- Time expressions
- Background information
- Famous quotes
- overgeneralizations

Review:

Considerations for writing an effective essay:

- Remember your purpose: demonstrate *who you are (fit)*
- Remember your **real** audience
- Find a topic that has ***substance*** (positive, personal, and important)
- ***Show*** don't ***tell*** your story
- Choose an effective structure
- Avoid cliches
- Have a good hook

One last tip...

One last tip...

Don't take a bad selfie...



“Bad Selfie”

- You think you're demonstrating something positive about yourself but you're really demonstrating something negative

PCF's: Potential Character Flaws

- Common characteristic of weak application essays
- When you unknowingly communicate a negative quality or impression about yourself to your audience
- Examples:
 - You're very dramatic
 - You're arrogant
 - You're privileged
 - You're immature/naive
 - You're lazy or unmotivated
 - Many, many, other negative qualities
- Look for PCF's in the sample essays

PCS: Potential Character Strengths

- Opposite of PCF
- When you demonstrate a positive quality or give a positive impression about yourself to your audience
- Examples:
 - Maturity
 - Learning from mistakes
 - Intellectual curiosity
 - Leadership
 - Compassion
 - Initiative
 - Many many others...
- PCS's are something you **SHOW** through your story not something you **TELL** your audience

Sample Essay

Prompt: Tell us about a personal quality, talent, accomplishment, contribution or experience that is important to you. What about this quality or accomplishment makes you proud, and how does it relate to the person you are?

The Pteronarcophobic

My name is *Jane*, and I am pteronarcophobic.

During my junior year in high school, I ran for student council secretary. The students running were required to address a speech to the students. I was a perfectionist, and so I practiced a thousand times before giving my speech; I was ready. As I stepped on the stage and began addressing the students, I thought the difficult part was over. I thought that stepping into the spotlight was enough to make me comfortable, but I was wrong. I was halfway through the speech, portraying all the confidence I had in me, until Pete came gushing his way towards me. No one noticed him; and so, no one was disturbed by him. However, I was terrified. Despite that, I insisted on not showing my weakness to the entire school. I moved steadily from the podium to the other side of the stage. He came for me. My eyes pleaded with my friends to come and save me from this situation. I feared him since our wrongful encounter; a flashback of my seventh birthday barbecue party. I was happily and peacefully eating my burger, and all of a sudden I consumed a piece of him.

As he started closing in, my voice became high and I dashed to leave the stage. I started crying hysterically as my friends embraced me. After a while, our school's director spoke to me and said exactly the things I wanted to hear. I cannot let him control me. I will not let him control me. I stood up straight, determined to finish what I had started. I headed back to the stage with puffy eyes and continued the speech as if nothing had happened. The students' laughter filled the auditorium, and there was Pete ready for me. I was neither scared nor afraid. I was confident. I was ready for him. As he began dashing towards me, I shooed him off. He was persistent but I had it in me to stop this. I continued my speech until the end, batting him away when necessary. I was pleased that I was able to defy my greatest tangible fear - the fear of flies. Having any kind of fear will enslave a person's mind. Pete did not only resemble the fly; he resembled my fear of losing. I did lose the elections, but I gained my freedom. As from now, I am no longer afraid of losing.

My name is Jane, and I *was* pteronarcophobic.

Discussion Questions

- Is this an effective application essay? (Scale of 1-10)
- Did it follow the tips given in the presentation?
 - What did the author do well?
 - What weaknesses did you notice??
- Any PCF's or PCS's?

Sample feedback

- This is a *terrible* essay 👎
- Not a real story--created for an “intended” audience.
 - “It’s what they want to hear”
- Maybe a cute story and some good writing but not a good application essay
- PCF’s

Questions

Leah Greenspoon
Academic Advising Specialist
University of Pennsylvania
English Language Programs
University Connection Program
leahgr@sas.upenn.edu