

Considerations for Writing your University Application Essays

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Topics

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

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?

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- How do you move from the 85% of academically qualified applicants to the 10% of accepted ones?
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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? 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

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 connects to **themes** the audience can relate to
 - Ex: Not just about volunteering; also about friendship, humility and compassion

Creating good substance

- Specific Details
- Specific Insights

#1 Strategy: Be Specific! It makes your story unique to you!

Strategy: Be Specific

Good specific details start with good specific thinking!

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



Think, think, think.

Strategy: Be Specific

- **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 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

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, 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
- Cliché hooks
 - Ex: famous quotes

What to do about clichés?

Defeat Clichés

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

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

Homework

- Read the sample essays
- Answer the discussion questions
- Email me your responses:
 - Subject: HHS Essay Homework
 - leahgr@sas.upenn.edu
- I'll reply to you with my feedback on the essay

Essay Pack

[Link to Sample Essay Pack](#)

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 advice do you have to improve the essay?
- What do you notice about the structure? Is it effective?
- Any PCF's or PCS's?

Questions

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