# Considerations for Writing your University Application Essays

Presented by: Leah Greenspoon

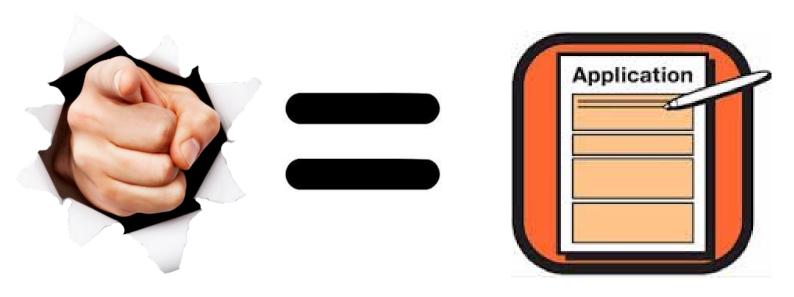
Academic Advising Specialist University of Pennsylvania English Language Programs

#### Topics

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

<sup>\*</sup>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%\*

<sup>\*</sup>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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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:

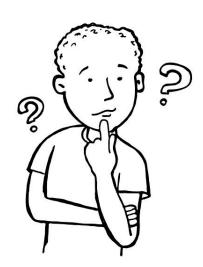
- Real Audience
- Intended Audience

#### 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

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

- Tell a story
- Make a point

#### Two Layers:

- Plot
- Perspective



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



## 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:
  - O What were you thinking?
  - Owner or with the owner of the owner owner of the owner of the owner of the owner o

  - 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?



## 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
- Examles:
  - 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 <u>not</u> 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

Leah Greenspoon
Academic Advising Specialist
University of Pennsylvania
English Language Programs
University Connection Program
<a href="mailto:leahgr@sas.upenn.edu">leahgr@sas.upenn.edu</a>