

ESSENTIALS OF A COLLEGE ESSAY

By Dodge Johnson

This article tells you what you need to know when writing your college essay.

ESSAYS

Of all the jobs involved in applying to colleges, writing essays turns more students to jelly than any other.

A sterling essay probably won't catapult you in a college your record doesn't justify. But if you're a 'possible admit'—one of the 'maybes' of whom the college will take some, but not all, it can thrust you ahead of the pack.

College essays aren't English themes. They must be well written, but good writing is not the object—nor is proving you 'read the book' or even, believe it or not, psyching out what colleges want and giving it to them. Colleges look to the essay to make your folder human. **You want an admission committee to feel somehow that losing you would take the edge off their freshman class.**

You'll hear rumors that admissions look for certain kinds of subjects in 'free choice' essays and you'll be tempted to second-guess. Don't. By and large, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' subjects, only essays that convey 'you' effectively or badly. But since some topics are shopworn, pick up the phone so we can talk them through before you put pencil to paper—or finger to keyboard.

When admissions officers curl up to read, they have no preconception of what your essay should say—any more than they know exactly what they're looking for when they shop for a dress or sports jacket. As with clothes, they seek good design, expert tailoring, attention to detail, colors that work. **But they 'buy' because an essay reflects a thoughtful person of promise they'd love to make part of their college.**

Magic? Not really. **The secrets are imagination and craftsmanship.**

Here's a question from the Common Application, accepted by more than 150 colleges nationwide: Evaluate a significant experience or achievement with special meaning to you.

How do you work the magic? You look for the best in yourself. You choose an incident which displays things about you a college will find desirable. Then you let the narrative carry your message and your insights reveal your quality.

If admissions committees think you're in love with yourself, they will not love you. So no self-congratulatory essays about the thrill of making the honors society or how you pitched a no-hitter with a broken arm. If you're a straight A student, your transcript will say so. If you make Cal Ripkin look like a rookie, ask your baseball coach to go to bat.

You don't need to toot your horn. **Instead, tell your story in a way that your specialness—your feelings, perceptions, values, commitments, abiding interests—seeps through of its own accord.**

The trick is to be mindful not only of what you 'say' but also of what you want colleges to 'hear.' You must not lie, you cannot brag, you should not beg. But you are entitled to show yourself at your absolute finest—best foot forward, smile in place.

Language and tone should feel comfortable. Choose words as surgeons would a scalpel—the right one for the job. Never use a big word if a little word will do yet never settle for the little word if the big one is what you really mean.

Humor, irony, and satire are powerful tools and can do wonders to make you special. But they can also backfire powerfully if your touch is not deft and sure.

Typos, grammar, spelling, and diction problems give readers an easy out for doing you in, so ask someone with a clerk's mind to proofread.

Finally, essays that win hearts seem to have two things in common. Somewhere they include a story because stories disarm readers and invite them in. And somewhere they show growth so colleges will see 'you' in motion, on your way, looking for a college to help you take wing. The best essays won't say "I grew." Instead they'll set things up so that the reader will pound her chair-arm and say, "By George, that kid really grew!"

One last tip: more promising essays are sabotaged by wordiness more than anything else. Editing is like making sauce—you have to simmer out extra liquid so that what's left in the pan is pure flavor. **Drop any words, phrases, even paragraphs that aren't pulling their weight.**

Wordiness leaves clues. One is that simple things get said in needlessly complicated ways. You don't need me to tell you what to do about that.

Another is that words get repeated for no reason. The 'fix' is not to find synonyms but to rephrase so that the 'repeat' is no longer necessary—and presto, your problem vanishes. The problem no longer needs solving because there is no problem. **Smart writers give their best draft a careful reading just for wordiness. Then they apply the first rule of refrigerators: "when in doubt, throw it out."**

Honestly, you don't have to be a genius to write good college essays. Most of us aren't. **The key ingredients are time and sweat, things anyone can provide—for thinking subjects through, for craftsmanship achieved through successive drafts, for care with details.**