

So! You're going to write a college application essay...

HELPFUL HINTS AND TIPS

DO NOT:

Write a book report.

I've read The Great Gatsby. I do not want to read a college application essay about The Great Gatsby. Harry Potter is also off limits – unless it's done really, really, really incredibly, mind-blowingly well.

POSSIBLE EXCEPTION:

If The Great Gatsby *changed your life*, tell me how it changed your life – tell me about your life and interests... Not The Great Gatsby. Or Harry Potter.

DO NOT:

Use slang or text message lingo.

The admission counselor reading your essay is *not* your buddy. Your essay is not a text message or an IM conversation.

DO:

Think about your audience!

Remember: the person reading your application is trying to determine whether or not you would be a good fit for their school. You are intelligent. You are able to write cohesively and persuasively. Do so.

DO NOT:

Write about The Big Game.

Especially if you are a recruited student athlete. Your application will reflect your abilities and dedication to your sport. The admission office will know that you are a talented athlete. But what else are you? You have so much to give! You are a multi-faceted individual who will bring much to campus – on and off the field/court/what-have-you! Don't limit yourself to one selling point.

DO:

Reference the work you have done outside of your sport. *YOU ARE GREAT!* Let them know what an asset you would be to their campus.

DO NOT:

Rewrite your resume.

Writing an essay listing your accomplishments is neither interesting nor fruitful. It does not give the admission officer any new information. You've already listed your accomplishments!

DO:

Give insights into your personality.

It's not necessarily about the things you've done – yes, you are involved in your school. Yes, you are dedicated. So are the other 9,999 other students applying College X. What makes you special? What makes your involvement any different? Why did you choose a certain activity? How did you change over the course of your involvement with said activity? Give the admission officer the opportunity to say, "I know not only the 'what' but the 'who' and 'why' as well."

DO NOT:

Get your grandmother admitted to college.

Grandmas are popular. Writing an essay about how incredible your grandmother is – the things she's done, places she's been, people she's met, sights she's seen... That would make me want to admit your grandmother. Your college application is not the moment to toot someone else's horn.

DO:

Relate the lessons you've learned from Grandma and the ways in which you utilize her philosophy in your everyday life.

If someone has had a dramatic impact on your life – that is wonderful and you should honor them in any way you can. But make sure that you are telling your own story. Talk about how you've taken their message to heart and how you honor them in your life. There's a way to be humble and still be a good advocate on your own behalf.

DO NOT:

Provide Super Simple Answers to Complex Issues.

If you find yourself writing sentences like, "Why can't we all just get along?" or "Wherever you go, there you are. And people are people wherever you are," then you should consider picking a new essay topic. Writing about super simple answers to complex issues will, at best, warm the admission officers' hearts and make them want to listen to "Imagine," but it's not going to help you in your quest to be a viable candidate for admission. You may seem sheltered or naïve – so let's just skip it!

DO:

Write about work that you have done to combat Complex Issues.

Did you start an organization to raise awareness about ovarian cancer in your school? Do you volunteer in a Humane Society and know firsthand about ways to combat animal overpopulation/abuse? Have you written your congressman or successfully lobbied for a new law to be written? Be the change you wish to see in the world (Ghandi) and write from your own experience.

DO NOT:

Write the Teen Angst Sob Story.

T.A.S.S. essays are not intellectual or engaging. They are often a turn-off and may be a *flag* for the reader. Do not bash your parents, siblings, or friends – the person reading your essay is possibly all of these things (or knows someone who is!) Do not bash your school. Who is to say that you would not bash the college you get into? It comes across as childish and immature – and your future college is looking to admit the future leaders of communities across the country.

DO:

Handle personal situations with finesse and maturity.

Remember: personal hardships occur and are valid as essays when done well – it's not all sunshine and daisies. We know this! What separates the good from the bad and the ugly is the way in which you present yourself and your position. Own up to past mistakes, but focus on the future and the ways in which you have grown or developed due to your set of circumstances. You don't have to be Suzy Sunshine, but Debby Downer is a no-no.

DO NOT:

Write The Excuse.

Having mono, breaking your leg, and/or disliking the teacher are not good reasons for the D- you got in Chemistry 101.

Blaming others or shifting responsibility for an “oopsies” on your transcript is not going to go over well as an essay. Even if Mr. Johnson has it out for you and your entire family, it will appear to your admission officer that you are just another student with an excuse.

DO:

Take responsibility.

Admit that you are not perfect, but you have come to see the light and are doing all that you can to make up for the “oopsie.” Honestly, the “oopsie” is probably a better topic for an additional letter from you or mentioned in the letter from your counselor. Not your essay.

DO NOT:

Write The Love Story.

Erich Segal already wrote it. In 1970. They made a movie about it. If you love someone and are dating them and are planning to live happily ever after forever and ever – I cannot tell you how happy I am for you. ***Do not write an essay about it.*** If you feel like there's no other essay besides this essay inside of you... Write it. Put a bow on it. Give it to that person. They may love you forever. Then! Sit down and write your college essay.

DO:

Not Write The Love Story. I'm serious.

DO NOT:

Write The Break Up.

Sorry if the bow and essay from The Love Story didn't work. My bad. Still. Don't want to hear it.

DO:

Reread the sections on The Love Story and Teen Angst Sob Story. Your college application essay is not a soap opera or your Hello Kitty diary!

DO NOT:

Write the "My Trip to a Third World Country Changed My Life" essay.

Believe me. You are not the only person writing this essay. And they all sound the same. New situations are often eye-opening – especially when you are 15-17 years old. These experiences are *wonderful* and add to your character immensely. No doubt! But a college admission officer wants to know who you are – how you live your life. The best glimpse into your life and character is not going to come from your 3 week stay in Uganda.

DO:

Write about what makes you YOU.

It does not have to be huge. One of the best essays I ever read was from a young man of Russian heritage. He wrote about wanting to be a good Russian and the ways in which he attempted to exemplify his heritage. But he couldn't grow a beard – it came in patchy. He couldn't lead a peasant revolt – there were only 3 subscribers to his website and one of them was his mother. Another was an essay from a young man who wrote about Scrabble and the games played with his mother. The importance of words and how rearranging or adding a few letters can dramatically change the meaning of a word. Your admission officer wants to hear your voice. Speak to them.